



ships

GOT REAL

a blind date romance

T.L. ANDERSON

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Ship Got Real

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SHIP GOT REAL BLURB

When my best friend cons me into going on a cruise with him as his wingwoman, I didn't expect a love at sea theme.

Add in speed dating, an insane scavenger hunt, and the sexy blind date he sets me up on and the entire trip becomes so much more than I'm ready for.

After experiencing what heartbreak can do to a person, falling in love is the last thing I want to do. Ever.

There's just one tiny problem...

Colin Turner.

Ship Got Real is a blind date romance, part of the Love at Sea multi-author series. Get ready to set sail through the Caribbean on Festival Cruises' most alluring voyage with eight of your favorite authors - happily ever after guaranteed!

Experience everything the Love at Sea series has to offer. From speed dating to masquerades, guests are sure to enjoy the hot days and steamy nights. Explore hidden waterfalls, swim with dolphins, and watch as eight couples find their forever on the open ocean.

CHAPTER ONE

AVERY



THE MOMENT I step out of the uber and see the looming ship at the dock my stomach somersaults. How the hell Theo talked me into this disaster of a trip is beyond me. I grab my suitcase from the trunk as I watch everyone milling around the area. There are so many people in one tiny section waiting to board the ship, it feels suffocating.

I trip while yanking Theo's large purple sequined suitcase from the trunk. It's way heavier than I expected. What did he pack, the entire apartment? I toss it on the ground with the rest of his atrocious baggage, the sun glaring off the offending sequins blinding me. My tiny ragged brown suitcase looks sad next to it.

An arm wraps around my shoulders, the scent of aftershave and too much alcohol hitting me square in the face. I glare at my best friend, Theo, as he grins maniacally at the chaos around us, his green eyes alight with mischief. "This is going to be the best vacay ever Aves." He's wearing a hot pink Hawaiian shirt with white flowers all over it, his board shorts matching his shirt perfectly. His dirty blond hair is ruffled from the plane ride early this morning.

I grunt, refusing to be sucked into his excitement. The minute he conned me into joining a love cruise I regretted every life decision I ever made. "Maybe for you," I mumble.

"Aww don't be so pouty." He squeezes me once then starts waving down a crew member pushing a rolling rack across the dock. "Hey! Can you please help me with these bags?"

The crew member nods and rolls the cart over to us. He glances down at the bags and looks back up at me with a cocked eyebrow. I go to defend myself when Theo cuts me off, “Isn’t it crazy? She only packed one bag for a week-long cruise! It’s ridiculous if you ask me.” He starts tossing his bags onto the cart. “I, on the other hand, came prepared for everything.”

The crew member smirks as he grabs another bag, helping Theo. “I would say you are prepared, that’s always a good thing on these voyages. You never know what can happen or who you’re going to meet.” He winks at Theo as he picks up the last bag, my ripped suitcase.

Theo’s smile pulls the dimples on his cheeks out as he places a hand on his hip. Oh great, we aren’t even on board yet and he’s already looking for a hookup. This cruise is going to be the death of me. I should have insisted we have separate cabins. “Would you mind taking these to cabin 12322A? And maybe I’ll see you on board later.” He slips the man a twenty. He nods as he pushes the cart away and onto our future doomsday voyage. Anything love related might as well be the plague.

“That man has an ass of steel. I swear if he isn’t gay, my gaydar is off and I’m officially retiring it.” He throws his arm around my shoulder and pulls me towards the ship’s boarding entrance.

Shaking my head, I pull my purse in front of me to grab our passports. “Look, I think we need to set some ground rules for this trip.”

He slows as he watches a few people near the entrance listen to a spiel from the captain. “I agree. One, we don’t go anywhere with anyone without telling the other who they are and their cabin number. You know, safety and all that shit.”

I nod. “Agreed. And two, no hookups in our cabin. It’s our safe place. Think of it as off limits for anything love at sea related.” I wave my hand at the large vessel.

“Deal.” He claps his hands. “Oh my god, I forgot to tell you Evelyn, my friend from work, is coming too. You

remember her, right?”

“The blonde who loves to torture rude customers by staring them down silently until they leave without buying anything?” I laugh at the spunky girl. She’s really sweet until you piss her off, then all bets are off.

“That’s the one.” He grabs my hand and pulls me forward as the line to enter the ship moves. “She’s looking for an adventure after her ex broke up with her. We’ll meet up with her at dinner tonight.”

The line moves again, a group of people are laughing with each other a few spaces in front of us. A small commotion catches my attention as a girl yells out, “Oh hell no. A love cruise? Nope, not happening.” Her friend rolls her eyes at the outburst.

Theo nudges my shoulder. “At least I told you it was a love cruise.” We both watch as the exasperated friend drags the frustrated woman on board with reluctance.

“You know, it makes me wonder why anyone wants to go on a love cruise. I mean come on, you know how nasty the rooms could be? All the body fluids.”

He gags. “Avery Santos, do not start with that nonsense. You know damn well they clean the ship extensively.”

Watching him turn slightly green cheers me up. If I have to go on this cruise, the least I can do is entertain myself by torturing him too. “You really think they get every nook and cranny though? I mean, unless they have a blacklight in every room, how do we know they got everything?”

He puts his hand over my mouth, his agape as he looks at me horrified. “Nope. Not happening. I’m not thinking about that and if you don’t stop, I’ll tell every single hot guy on board you’re interested in them, and I’ll make you wear the clothes I brought for you in my sixth suitcase.” His eyes narrow with the threat.

I glance down at my dress, it’s black with a floral looking pattern across it except the flowers are actually skeletons and skulls up close. “What’s wrong with my outfits?”

The line continues to move as he rolls his eyes. “Please, you dress like Wednesday Adams only your body is a hot miniature version of Sofia Vergara.”

I shrug, not seeing the problem with that. I can’t help that my dad’s side of the family gave me my Latino features of dark tan skin, brownish auburn hair, and my sassy attitude. My mom gave me my style appreciation, she was the loner in high school while my dad was prom king.

The captain waves as the group in front of us boards the ship. A large sign at the entrance catches my eye that says “Love at Sea” in bright red lettering. “Hello, my name is Eduardo Montoya! Welcome to my cruise, prepare to dance!” He makes a fast fencing gesture and everyone chuckles.

Someone in the group yells out, “Inconceivable!” We all laugh at the *Princess Bride* joke as we head inside the boarding area. I look back one last time before we turn the corner of the walkway wishing I would have told him no when he asked me to join him on a cruise for some singles fun.

CHAPTER TWO

COLIN



THE RED LIGHTING in the hallway of the cruise ship gives it an eerie glow instead of the romantic vibe I'm sure they were hoping for. I keep waiting for a man in a mask to come jumping out like an old 90's thriller as we head towards our suite. "This place is unreal," I grumble.

"Isn't it amazing!" Evelyn, my younger sister, says enthusiastically. Her blonde hair flies as she whips her head around taking everything in. Her blue eyes widen at every small detail. "Oh my god Colin, they have disco elevators!" She quickly pushes the up button and does a little dance as she waves to other random guests.

Crossing my arms, I lean against the wall taking it all in. "I wouldn't say it's amazing. It's more like an expensive petri dish floating on water." I watch as someone sneezes then touches the door handle to a room. Disgusting.

She slaps me on the arm. "Oh stop. Can you not be your brooding self for once?" The elevator doors open and she rushes inside staring at the ceiling and at the blue bubbles lighting the walls. "Look at this place. We are going to have so much fun!" She pushes the button for deck 15.

"Hmm," I grunt, refusing to even see the fun side of this trip. The only reason I agreed to come along was because her boyfriend broke up with her, leaving her with an extra non-refundable ticket. Of course though, she was sneaky enough to not tell me it was a love cruise. Why the hell she would want to bring me is beyond me. "There's no way in hell I'm going

to be okay with watching you flirt and bring guys back to our suite this entire trip.” I narrow my gaze at her.

She blows out a sigh while rolling her eyes. “Come on Colin, for once stop being the protective older brother and just let loose. Besides, maybe you’ll meet someone special here too.” She grins while rubbing her shoulder conspiratorially against mine.

“Doubtful,” I say as I exit the elevator onto deck 15. I look for our cabin 15331Z, the rooms here are larger than the below decks. I see the Fab Suite listed on the door and raise an eyebrow at her.

She waves me away. “Don’t give me that look. I have money, even if I only work at a craft store. I do save my money.” She holds her wristband up to the electronic key reader and the door unlocks. “Besides I didn’t expect to be ditched by ‘he who I will not name’ before this trip. So I wasn’t going to waste a few grand on this excursion over some hurt feelings.” She ushers me inside.

The room is gigantic. We enter through a hallway with a closet on the side for our clothes then a bathroom on the right. The entryway opens up into a large sitting room area with a television, gaming console, a guitar on the side, and a mini bar. “Damn, this had to set you back a bit of money.” I grab my phone out of my pocket and open my Venmo. With a quick punch of my fingers, I send her a chunk of money that should cover my portion of the room.

Her phone dings and her eyes narrow. “Colin Brayden Turner, you better not have done what I think you just did.”

I slide my phone back into my dress slacks and walk into the bedroom ignoring her soft curses from behind me. She’ll complain, but she’ll accept it. She never argues with me because she knows she’ll lose, I just tell her the older brother always wins and it ends the arguments. After twenty-three years, she doesn’t even try anymore.

The room is spacious, but I only see one large bed in the room. “So where exactly am I sleeping because this is not going to work for us.”

She grabs her suitcase and plops it onto the bed. “My dear brother, you get the couch.” She smirks as she flops onto the queen bed and stretches.

I glance back at the smaller looking modular couch and accept the fact that my six foot frame will not fit on it. Maybe I should have just booked a separate room. Her laughter causes me to glance her way.

“You should see your face right now.” She shakes her head while hopping off the bed. “Don’t worry big bro, the couch turns into another queen bed. The sectionals push together.”

Thank fuck. I grab my bags and drop them in the closet and start hanging up my clothes. “What’s on the agenda for tonight? I’m sure you have something planned that I just can’t wait to hear about.” Sarcasm drips from my voice.

She cackles again. “Oh, you have no idea. Get dressed for a formal dinner, we have tickets to The Wake restaurant at 6:00.”

The glint in her eyes has me wondering what exactly she’s up to. I grumble as I start to get ready, the only thing fueling me is my hunger since we haven’t eaten in ten hours. One formal dinner shouldn’t be too bad. What’s the worst that could happen?

CHAPTER THREE

AVERY



“YOU HAVE GOT to be kidding me.” I glare at Theo as we enter the formal dinner. My forest green dress with small vines dripping blood as the design on the fabric swishes around my ankles. The neckline plunges down my chest where my crystal necklaces rest between my breasts. I figure this is the only formal dinner we have to go to while we’re here so I might as well make a statement. My hair is wrapped into a curly bun at the nape of my neck with tendrils falling along my cheeks.

Theo looks stunning in his navy-blue suit and tungsten cufflinks, his blond hair styled perfectly with gel that looks almost natural against his suntanned skin. A living, breathing Ken doll. I roll my eyes as all the women and men stare at him as we enter.

“I told you we’re just meeting up with Evelyn. There’s no reason to be all pissy about it.” He grabs my hand and folds it into his elbow, escorting me to our table.

I clench my jaw to stop myself from spewing profanities at him in Spanish. “You said Evelyn, not Evelyn’s brother too.” It really shouldn’t be a big deal but I know he has something up his sleeve. Theodore Alec Branson doesn’t do anything without an endgame in place.

He pulls out a chair for me at the table and I sit, letting him pretend he’s just a gentleman and not a sneaky snake in the grass. “I’m going to grab us drinks from the bar. I’ll be right back.” He points his finger at me. “If you leave, I will hunt you down and drag you to every excursion this week. You’ll

be so exhausted from having unadulterated fun you won't even remember why you're such a pensive person."

"Fuck a duck, fine." I grab a glass of water off the table and down it. For some reason my throat is extremely dry right now. I hear a small commotion at the entrance to the dining room and glance over.

A stunning woman stands at the entrance talking to the server dressed in formal wear, she's wearing a sexy sequined dress. Only swirls of rose gold covers her chest and important parts, the rest is completely nude netting. Her face is covered with a sequined mask and rose gold feathers.

"You're the only two people dressed for a Masquerade." I hear the server say as he eyes her and the man next to her up and down. Her date is wearing a shiny blue suit with a mask on a stick in his hand.

"This makes no sense." The woman tears off her mask, looking around the room, her eyes wide and almost panicked.

My stomach flips as I feel the anxiety ebbing off of her. I take a drink of my water and try to ignore the conversation happening, but I can't help but catch bits and pieces.

The server continues speaking, "...there is, however, a Masquerade at week's end. Perhaps you were thinking of that?"

Oh shit. A masquerade? If Theo thinks I'm going to that he has lost his damn mind. Speaking of the devil he saunters over, passing by the woman in the sequined dress as she hobbles over to her table with her crutch and without her date.

He hands me a glass of amber colored liquid mixed with juice. "Amaretto sour, with extra amaretto just like you like it."

Taking the glass I take a large gulp. "Thanks," I mutter while watching the poor woman.

He sits across from me. "What was that about? I swear I thought we were going to have some fun entertainment tonight with showgirls or something."

“Apparently there’s a masquerade this week, but they had the dates wrong.” I narrow my gaze at him. “Do not for one minute think I am going to any masquerade. You dragged me on this germ infested love boat, but I’m not willingly participating in any extracurriculars.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “You’re so dramatic. It’s not like it has love juice all over the place. They do clean.”

My jaw drops open in a mix of disgust and horror. “Theodore!”

A bubbly voice cuts in from behind me. “Theo! Can you believe how amazing this place is?” The small blonde rushes up to him, hugging him with all her might, effectively cutting me off from chastising him. His Cheshire grin still planted on his face, knowing he just made me want to vomit and sanitize every surface I touch. Her hair cascades down her back in perfect waves, the deep fuck me red dress clings to her curves leaving very little to the imagination.

“Evie! You remember Avery, my BBF? You know, ‘Best Bitch Forever’.” He stands, pulling out the chair next to him for her. What. The. Fuck. The table only seats four which means...

Someone clears their throat beside me and I glance up expecting the waiter to take our order. Instead my eyes lock onto a broad chest snug in a dark gray perfectly tailored suit. My eyes travel upwards and land on a pair of emerald green eyes currently scowling at Evelyn. I raise an eyebrow as I take in the mass of muscles on the tall, dark haired man.

“Everyone’s tall compared to your tiny ass five foot three frame Aves,” Theo snorts. Oh shit, did I say that out loud? “Don’t worry, you didn’t say anything. I could just read your face. It’s expressive.” He waves his hand towards me like it explains everything.

Now, Mr. Tall and Moody is staring me down. His eyes scan over my outfit then land back on my lips. The heat from his gaze causes me to stir in my seat. Did someone turn on the heat in here?

“Colin, this is Avery, Theo’s best friend.” Evelyn takes a sip of her water, her lips turned up in a smirk. Both her and Theo have a look of mischief on their faces as they watch us. “She’s your date for this trip.”

“What?!”

“My what?” He states at the same time I sputter out my own confusion.

“Your blind date. You both have a ton in common. Avery here makes her own jewelry for a living, her business is extremely successful, and you’re an Art History professor. So, mingle and get to know each other.” She stands from the table and Theo follows, he grabs his drink and avoids eye contact with me.

“Where do you think you two are going?” Colin growls at their retreating backs.

Evelyn waves a hand in the air. “Stop being such a grump. Theo and I have other plans tonight. Enjoy dinner you two.”

“Fuck a duck,” I mutter. Grabbing my drink, I down the rest of the liquid. “This is what I was afraid of,” I tell Colin as I wave down a waiter to request more to drink.

He’s still standing, pinching the bridge of his nose like he’s fighting a migraine. He’s not bad looking at all. If I wasn’t so angry at Theo, I would be appreciative of the fact that he found someone so hot to try and hook me up with. “You might as well sit and enjoy dinner. It’s their money that bought the ticket for dinner. I’m also going to rack up a shit ton of drinks on Theo’s card.”

He watches me, his eyes alight with amusement as he sits across from me. He still seems excessively tall even when he’s sitting in a chair. The waiter appears at our side. “Are you ready to order?”

I raise my eyebrow in challenge to Colin. A grin spreads across his face. “We sure are. What’s the most expensive wine you have available for purchase?”

A laugh bubbles past my lips as I imagine the look on our matchmakers’ faces when they see the cost of the drinks at

dinner. The food's all inclusive, alcohol is not.



After an extremely filling meal of lobster with a side of king crab legs, I'm about ready to strip out of this dress and toss on some sweatpants. Colin wipes his mouth with his napkin then places it on the table next to the now empty bottle of a 2019 Chateau D'Esclans Rose white wine. It wasn't the most expensive available, these crazy bastards had one worth over five grand, but it's still a decent three hundred and fifty dollar wine.

We figured we wouldn't bankrupt our friends, just teach them a slightly expensive lesson. Besides, I'm planning on paying Theo for our drinks later after he has a small heart attack at the receipt. I'm not that big of an ass. "So Colin, what are you doing on a love at sea themed cruise ship? You don't seem the type to be interested in finding love on a gigantic floating boat."

He snorts. "My sister guilted me into it. But in my defense, I had no idea it was a love at sea cruise." He crosses his ankle over his knee and leans back comfortably, his piercing eyes watching me. "You don't appear to be the type of person that willingly goes on one of these either. Was it Theodore who dragged you?"

I nod as I take another sip of my newest glass of amaretto sour. The alcohol numbs my tongue with each drink. The room seems quieter than it did when we first entered, like it's just us in the room. "He did. Although I did know what type of cruise it was in advance, but he definitely used those stupid puppy dog eyes and the pleading best friend card to guilt me into it."

His lip quirks up. "He has perfected that technique pretty well. He uses it frequently in my class when he forgets his assignments."

My drink slides down my throat wrong causing me to sputter unladylike all over my dress. A cough wracks my body as I choke on the liquid.

Colin jumps out of his seat and rushes over to me, patting me roughly on the back. “This is going to sound strange but trust me. Put your arms up in the air. It will help open your lungs.”

I want to question him on his methods but instead I just follow his instructions. My lungs burn, but as soon as my arms are up in the air the spasming slows. “Thanks,” I say between coughs. “Theo’s in your class?” He set me up with his damn teacher? This is way worse than I expected.

“He is. He’s not exactly the highest academic student I have, but he leaves an impression all his own.” I bet he does. Theo will never hear the end of this. He holds out his hand. “Would you join me for a walk on the deck? The fresh air might help some.”

I place my hand in his, letting him guide me outside. He strides slowly beside me as I set the pace. My stomach flutters as he tucks my hand into his elbow pulling me closer to his body. I try to ignore the tingles across my skin where we are touching. It has to be the alcohol flowing through my veins because the urge to lean into his warmth is overwhelming. I barely know this man and I want to just rest my head on his shoulder. A yawn slips past my lips as the warm breeze flows around us.

“Sorry about him. He’s a good friend, but he tends to be over the top when he sets his mind on something.” The breeze is warm, but it sends a chill down my arms the more we walk. The air caressing my skin brings heightened awareness of how much of my body is currently exposed. No wonder Theo encouraged me to wear this low cut dress.

Colin slips off his suit jacket and sets it on my shoulders. He smells of mint and musk, the scent stronger on his jacket as I pull it close letting the heat envelop me. “He definitely is a tad over the top.” He slows and stands at the railing, the waves rushing past the ship below shimmer in the moonlight.

“This one time, Theo had this great idea that we needed to attend the New York fashion week. Tickets had been sold out for months, but he was determined to go. You know what he

thought was a great idea?” I stand on my tip toes and glance down at the decks below. We’re only on deck 6, but it still seems so high up.

He turns sideways, leaning an elbow against the railing. “I can only imagine with him. He once tried to tell me that his thesis research for my class had been deleted off his entire computer in the middle of the night from a random upgrade and he hadn’t backed it up to the cloud. He wanted an extension for another month to redo all the work he lost. Who doesn’t backup their work to the cloud?”

I bite my lip and grimace. “Yeah I remember that, unfortunately that really did happen. He was so upset with his teacher that he plotted paying you back in some way with a prank. Instead, we stayed up all night working on his research together and piecing together the first required paper over the next forty hours without sleep.”

He blows out a breath. “Shit.”

I nod. “I wouldn’t hold my breath that he won’t pay you back one day for that one. I was even tempted to send you a bag of dicks in the mail. I just didn’t realize his teacher was you.” I once saw this small company on social media that will send a pack of miniature plastic dicks to anyone you request anonymously. It was a genius small business idea really. If I didn’t love making my jewelry so much, I would have done something like that for a side hustle. It would have been entertaining seeing the reasoning of why people want to send tiny dicks to others.

“Anyways, back to fashion week. He figured out the stage manager’s schedule and randomly bumped into him at the local coffee shop the man frequented daily. He literally stalked the man until he figured out the best place to randomly ‘bump’ into him. He hooked up with him and got him to take him as a plus one. He literally slept his way into fashion week.” I shake my head as I lean back against the railing. “He really is something else.”

He mumbles something under his breath I can’t quite make out but sounds like ‘so are you’. My pulse races as I glance

towards his mouth. The space feels warm and I'm not sure if it's still the alcohol causing these internal temperature spikes. I lean closer to him, my arm brushing his fingertips on the railing. His chest rises and falls, his lips parting as I move to face him. "I'm not an irrational person. One who jumps feet first into things without thinking of every possible outcome."

His fingers brush against my skin. "Neither am I."

Reaching out with my fingers, I fight the urge to touch him. My hand hanging in the air, only an inch from his face. "This isn't me. But I can't help this feeling."

I watch as his smile falters, his face turns sideways as he plants a soft kiss against my palm before standing straight up and putting space between us. "Thank you Avery for the company at dinner and the gorgeous walk outside."

My heartbeat slows as I take a deep breath allowing my walls to go back up around me. I didn't come here with any intention of starting something serious. After seeing the heartbreak my father went through with my mother, losing love is not worth being with someone. This is for the best.

"I hope to see you soon," he says.

"Have a goodnight Colin. Thank you, especially for making it interesting." I smile as he bows slightly and heads towards the elevators. The further away he gets the more my head clears. It was for sure the alcohol causing me to almost fall into bed with a stranger.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLIN



I OPEN our suite door while unbuttoning my shirt collar. What was I thinking? Damn Evie and her incessant need to hook me up with someone. Since my ex-girlfriend left me high and dry after proposing to her five years ago, I just haven't seen the need to actually date anyone. To put so much time into a relationship then to have it just torn away. Nope, I'm not doing that again.

The thought of Avery's lips when she smiles and the way her eyes light up with mischief when she plots revenge on our matchmakers plays on my mind. I may not be looking for something but being with her tonight was the most fun I've had in a while.

The door opens behind me and I hear giggling. Evie better not have brought a man back to our room. She appears in the hallway, stumbling while trying to pull off her heels. She snorts as a hand wraps around her waist catching her. Oh hell no. "We had a deal," I say. "No men or women in the suite."

"Professor Turner!" Theo comes around the corner laughing hysterically. He has a red feather boa wrapped around his neck.

I let out a sigh. It could be worse, she could have brought back a fling. But honestly I'm not in the mood to see either of them right now. Especially with this pounding headache I currently have. "Theo," I mutter in response. Walking over to the couch, I start to push them together to make the bed. Maybe they'll get the hint and Theo will go back to his own cabin. Avery is probably wondering where he is, while I'm

wondering why the blind date I just met is so prominent on my mind after only a few hours of hanging out.

Evie stumbles into the room further and starts unzipping her dress. “It’s so hot in here.” She pulls the straps off her arms and lets it fall to the floor.

I turn my head away quickly before I see way more than I ever want to see of my own sister. “What the fuck, Evelyn. Put your damn clothes back on.”

She snorts. “Theo here doesn’t care. Do you Theo?”

“Nope!” He lets the P pop on the end.

“If you haven’t noticed,” she whispers loudly for everyone to hear. “He likes men not women. My parts do nothing for him.”

I hear her rustling in the other room so I chance a look at Theo. He’s staring into the bedroom at her while twirling the boa. “Well I mean there was this one time at band camp.”

A growl emanates from my throat. “Dude, that’s my sister.”

He busts out laughing, “Professor, you’re too uptight. It’s from a movie from your generation.” He shakes his head laughing. “I actually have somewhere to be anyhow.” He waves the boa at me. “The drag queen I got this from wants to have some drinks together tonight so I’m off for the evening”

“Shouldn’t you check on Avery first?” The words slip past my lips without me even thinking.

He turns back around while raising his eyebrow. “Did something happen between you two that I need to check on her?” His voice deepens and all joking subsides. “If you hurt her, I will kill you myself. No one will look for your body in the ocean until morning.”

I shake my head and finish setting up my bed. “Nothing happened. Go have fun Theodore before I find ways to make your life difficult for meddling in my love life.”

I picture all the ways I could make him suffer, but none of them have my heart behind them. Tonight was the first time in

years I actually felt like myself, I can't be mad at either of them for that.

“On that note, I'm out. Night Evie!” He waves as he shuts the door behind him.

Evelyn walks out of the room with a robe wrapped around her, her makeup smeared under her eyes. She yawns while throwing her hair up into a bun. “How did it go tonight? Did you at least give her a chance?”

I grab a pair of gray sweatpants from my bag. “Hmm,” is all I respond before heading into the bathroom and shutting the door on her. She doesn't get to know I enjoyed myself, not after springing a blind date on me. I'll let her sweat it out for a while.

“Come on Colin. You could at least give me an idea of how it went.” She stands outside the closed bathroom door begging me for info. She hiccups and I hear a few curse words slip past her lips.

I open the door to see her propped up against the wall, her bloodshot eyes glaring at me. “Would you stand still, it's hard to focus when you keep moving around like that,” she mutters.

“I am standing still.” I watch her as her lips turn down in confusion. “You're drunk.” I help her to the bedroom and lead her to the bed where she falls down onto the pillow.

“Of course I'm drunk. I'm on a gigantic boat with alcohol at every turn. It's only customary to drink until the room spins.” She hiccups again as she closes her eyes. “Except, I really hate when the room spins around me. It's the worst feeling.”

“Go to bed Evie. And next time, don't drink so much. You're lucky Theo helped you back to the room.” I watch as she struggles to sit up but loses the battle and falls back onto the bed.

“You can't not tell me about tonight. What happened with Avery?” She props her face up on her hand. “She's so sweet, I hope you weren't mean to her. You can be an asshole when you're mad at me.”

She continues to ramble on, not even giving me time to speak. “Did you see the dress she was wearing? It was stunning.” Her head falls off her hand and lands on the pillow beside her. She gives up trying to keep it propped up, her eyes slowly closing as she yawns.

“It was,” I whisper as I remember the way it hugged her curves. Avery has a stunning body, but her personality won me over.

“Don’t you fuck this up Colin. This could be your happily ever after. You never know.” She yawns again before rolling onto her other side. “Now get to sleep you big dumb idiot.”

Her springing this blind date on me isn’t too surprising. She was heartbroken when my ex left me, they were friends too. But mostly, she always says she missed seeing me happy. She’s been on a mission for the last few years to find me someone to date. For once, she picked a person I can get along with.

Avery isn’t like other women. She’s not self-absorbed. She has a sense of humor, a style that is all her own, and she loves to torture her best friend and my sister for setting us up on this horrible cruise.

I flip off the light, Evie’s gentle snores already filling the room. She’ll be out until tomorrow morning. It’s only night one and we’re both already drunk and exhausted. This is going to be a long week.

CHAPTER FIVE

AVERY



“WAKE UP SLEEPY HEAD.” Theo’s voice breaks through my sleep, officially wrenching me out of the sex dream I was having with Colin.

“Ugh, five more minutes you asshat.” I groan while throwing a pillow over my head.

He snatches the pillow then lays on top of me, batting his eyelashes with a huge grin. “Nope, we have things to do, people to hopefully stick things in or have stuck in us, and drinks to get drunk on.”

I let out another groan. He’s on his tirade again. I swear his mission for this trip is to torture me every way he can. “No one is sticking anything in me.” I glare at him.

He shrugs. “I don’t judge. If you want to peg someone, feel free. More power to you and all that.” He jumps up and yanks the covers with him. “But let’s go. We have plans at the Razzle Dazzle today. I met the man of my dreams last night, and today he’s going to be the woman of my dreams.” He waggles an eyebrow while shimmying away.



The Razzle Dazzle is not what I expected. The red and black decor gives it more of a vintage feeling than a romance theme. People are taking their seats at different tables, mimosas are spread around for the patrons. I see one person in a gorgeous

black sequined dress and a bright red wig talking animatedly with a few people two tables over from us.

Theo pulls out the chair for me and then sits on my left side. His wide eyes roam the room searching for something or knowing him, someone. I grab a mimosa and down it before sliding his over in front of me too. I have a feeling I'm going to need a little liquid courage today. I'm not a fan of crowds or organized events. So this is taking me really far out of my comfort zone.

A little old lady, she looks no older than eighty but is probably ninety, comes to our table. She's walking with a large cane that looks strangely like a gigantic penis. I can't stop staring at it, I swear it's watching me, judging me and my dream last night. Her short gray hair is styled close to her head and her makeup is halfway on her face, she missed a few spots for her eyebrows she drew on. My eyes widen as she pats Theo on the shoulder and grins at me with a bright white smile adorned with small lipstick marks on her teeth.

"Hey there handsome. I haven't seen you around here before. Are you here for the hot dogs or tacos?" She waggles her eyebrows at him.

Theo chokes on a laugh, his eyes wide as he takes her in. "Ummm, they don't serve hotdogs or tacos at this brunch. But I am excited for the mimosas and singing."

"Hotdogs it is then. Are you sure?" She rubs his bicep. "For someone as good looking as yourself, I'd be willing to try and turn you on to a nice taco."

Theo's face reddens as he gets her hidden meaning. I hide my smirk behind my glass and enjoy the show before me. "Payback is a bitch," I whisper to myself.

"I'm Gertrude. My friends call me Trudy. I just call myself a horny woodpecker." She shakes her cane in the air while laughing. "Woody the woodpecker here keeps me upright but also helps me pick up the men. It's a great comparison tool if you know what I mean." She smiles up at someone sitting beside me. "Oh la la. Who do we have here? I'm a tad thirsty and you are a fine drink of water sir."

I glance to my right and see Colin's face turn bright red. Evelyn sits down next to him at our round table. "Gertrude! It's so good to see you again," Evie says.

"Hey there sweet thing. Aren't you looking gorgeous as ever." She pats her on the head. "I'm off to find me some available men. Now that you're here I need to work fast before they all see you and I have to compete with you for their attention." She salutes us with her phallic looking cane and takes off across the room to a table full of guys chatting.

Colin and Theo are stunned silent with her retreat. The fact she was able to shut Theo up with just a few sentences has me admiring the old lady. That is pure talent there. I hope I get to be like her when I'm older. That fun, carefree, fuck the world's opinions attitude.

Colin shifts in his seat next to me, his eyes watching Gertrude from across the room, most likely making sure she doesn't come back to flirt with him again.

Evie turns around and takes in the room. "I am so excited for this! After hearing Joe's stories last night about the show here, I couldn't wait to meet his alter ego Anna Conda."

Colin spits out his water with a cough at the name. "Anna Conda? That's a unique name."

Theo starts singing the song by Sir Mix A Lot while we wait for the show to start.

The drag queen in the black sequined dress grabs the microphone and starts talking. "Welcome to Razzle Dazzle, ladies and ladies who aren't dressed yet! My name is A-manda, and I'll be your MC this morning. I hope you're ready for some fun! Our show will begin in just a few minutes, so please go ahead and order your breakfasts, get your mimosas, and get ready to party!"

"This should be fun," Theo says.

We all place our order for breakfast, getting a heaping helping of French toast with extra powdered sugar. I'm ready to enjoy this show and fight the hangover pounding in my head from last night.

“How did Theo con you into coming to this brunch?” Colin murmurs to me.

I glance at him with a raised eyebrow. “What do you mean?” He can’t really be that big of an asshole can he?

His eyes widen. “Oh no, that’s not what I meant.” He waves his hand in the air. “I have no problem with this. I meant because you don’t seem like the type who likes organized events like this. And you look a little hungover.”

A snort slips past my lips. “So that’s how you tell a girl she looks like shit?” I take a drink as he stares at me with narrowed eyes.

“That’s not what I meant either.”

“Hmm. You sure seem to be saying all the wrong things today. So what did you mean?” Our conversation is interrupted when our breakfast and mimosas are brought to the table. I can’t help but eye the pile of French toast. My stomach growls loudly.

Colin reaches across the table and grabs a few slices with his fork and plops them on my plate. “Eat. Maybe you won’t be so hangry with a little food.” He grabs some for himself also.

Everyone around us starts to cheer and clap as A-man-da starts the show with a song. “I’m not hangry.” I pour a ton of syrup on my plate and take a bite. A moan slips past my lips as it hits my tongue. Oh my god this is the best thing I’ve tasted in a while. I take another bite and my irrational anger at Colin dissipates. I hate that he was right.

CHAPTER SIX

COLIN



I WATCH as Avery's face changes, her eyes close with each bite she takes. I didn't picture her as the type to get angry when she's hungry. But apparently mixing hunger with a hangover from hell, if it's anything like mine, would cause anyone to be grumpy.

The drag show goes on around us, but neither of us are paying attention. She's too focused on her food and I'm focused on her. She's gorgeous. I noticed last night, but today I see her real beauty. Without the makeup and sexy dress, I see the real her. The genuine her. She's wearing a red sundress with small white flowers and skulls all over it. I smile as I notice them. I've only known her for a few hours but I know this dress fits her personality perfectly.

Evie clears her throat beside me, pulling my attention away. When I look at her all I see are her bright teeth showing through the Cheshire grin on her face. Leaning back, I place my hands behind my head and wait for her commentary. This ought to be good.

"So..." she says. I'm assuming she's waiting for me to say something about Avery, but I'd rather make her work for it. I cock my head to the side without saying anything. She rolls her eyes and flips her hair over her shoulder. "So that's how it's going to be. Not even a thank you?"

"Thank you for what?" I ask incredulously. She really is self-centered sometimes, but I have no idea what exactly she expects me to thank her for. I already told her thank you for bringing me on the cruise. Even though I had no idea it was a

love at sea cruise. If I had known, I would have told her no, not in a million years.

She points to Avery then to me with her eyebrows raised. She lets out an exasperated breath before lowering her voice to a whisper. “For setting you up with Avery. I see the way you’re looking at her. You haven’t noticed a woman like that in forever.”

“I don’t...”

She cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “Don’t even deny it. I’m not stupid and neither are you. You like her.” She stares me down. “Stop being a stubborn ass and ask her out.”

Before I can respond, one of the drag queens comes over to our table. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a special guest joining us today. My friend Theo here came to see me put on a show.” They’re wearing an ocean blue dress with sequins and silk gloves up their arms. The blonde wig ties the look together. “What man doesn’t want to see Anna Conda in action?” The crowd laughs with a few whistles sounding in the background.

I watch as Theo gets bright red, but his eyes never leave Anna Conda’s. He looks infatuated with her. I feel a nudge on my arm. Evie leans over. “That’s the look you give Avery. Now you can’t deny what I’m seeing.” She shrugs and sits back. She claps and catcalls as the show continues to progress.

I’m left speechless as I watch Theo’s gaze track Anna Conda across the room. He looks like a love sick puppy. Evie must be smoking something good to think I would ever make that face at anyone. Especially someone I just met.

“That was interesting.” Avery’s voice cuts through my thoughts and my pulse races. Fuck. Evie might be right. “Anna Conda seems really interested in you Theo.” She wraps her arm around his while quietly singing to him, “My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns hun.” Then she busts out laughing as Theo slaps his ass.

“Oh I got the buns,” he says before winking at her.

I grab my drink and down it. “I’ll be back,” I mumble to whoever is listening as I push away from the table. If I’m going to make it through today, I’m going to need something way stronger than a mimosa. Fuck. I’m going to need a whole bottle to ignore the thoughts of Avery in my mind currently. Evie’s laugh rings out across the room, mocking me.

The bar has a few people milling about ordering extra drinks for their tables. I grab a scotch on the rocks, taking a tentative sip while glancing back at the table. Avery laughs at something Theo says, her eyes glistening with happy tears. Evie is talking animatedly to them and the laughter continues. I watch as she lays her hand on Theo’s arm, her smile genuine and caring. My heart picks up speed as I watch her.

“Hey there Romeo. Why aren’t you over there with your friends?” Gertrude stands next to me, her cane a little too close to my arm for comfort. It really does look like a giant penis.

“I just needed to grab a drink.” I avoid staring at Avery for too long.

“Why would you need a drink when you have a pretty thing like her over there waiting for you.” Gertrude picks up the fruity drink off the bar that she ordered. “That sounds like a piss poor excuse to not make a move. Instead you’re standing over here just watching her from the corner.” She takes a sip. “Men are such pussies now a days. My late husband had no problem telling me he wanted me.”

Hearing about Gertrude’s sex life makes me cringe. “I’m not sure what I’m feeling right now.”

“Well, I suggest you figure that out before you make any moves. It’s probably good you’re over here brooding at the bar. Figure that shit out before you get in too deep.” She pats me on my arm. “I’m off to find me someone to bring out to the bar tonight. Good luck with your woman.”

She shuffles off towards some other unsuspecting victim. Avery and Theo cheer for the show going on around us. Gertrude is right, I need to figure my shit out. I drink the rest of my scotch, making eye contact with Evie I make a slight wave of my hand before I head out of the Razzle Dazzle. Her

face falls, but she just nods. She had to have known it wasn't going to be easy for me to just start dating someone. No, I need time to clear my head. Because right now all I can think about is Avery.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AVERY



THE DRAG SHOW WAS FUN, I have never been to one before and I might make it a regular habit. The people are so nice there and Theo was in his comfort zone. Colin, on the other hand, left halfway through and never came back. Evie said he had to use the restroom, bad food or something, but I figured she was lying with the smirk she had on her face.

Theo walks the deck with me, the bright sun beaming across the sky lighting up the full view of open water all around us. It's a little frightening when I think about it. If something were to happen to the ship, how quickly could help get to us? There's no land to be seen anywhere and I know the ocean is too deep to even comprehend. My stomach flips at the thought and I have to push it away before a panic attack creeps in.

“Joe talked to me before we left, he wants to meet up after his last show for the day. I told him we could all hang out if you're up to it.” Theo is twirling a feather between his fingers from the boa he wore back to the cabin last night. He stares off into the water with a dreamy look on his face.

“You go ahead and meet with him. Get to know him. You don't need a third wheel hanging around.” I bump his shoulder with mine. “Besides, I was going to head up to the Port Gallery and check out the artwork.”

He throws his arm over my shoulder and hugs me. “Aves you are never a third wheel in my book. You can come with. In fact, I'd love for you to go with and meet him as Joe.”

I shake my head. “Really, I want to see what all they have to offer on the ship besides drag queens and tons of alcohol.” I lean my head on his shoulder.

“Um hmm. And maybe take your mind off Professor Turner?” He laughs. “He is so into you.”

I crinkle my nose at the thought of being set up on a blind date to begin with. He’s not that bad, but the fact my friend thinks I need help finding a man just makes me feel weird. I can find a date, I just choose not to. There’s more to life than love. I’m completely content making my own jewelry and running my business without distractions. I do pretty well too. Men are not a necessity in my life.

“You can keep denying it, but we all see the way you two look at each other.” He shakes his head and plants a kiss on my head. “Enjoy the art gallery. I’ll meet up with you this evening and we can discuss everything Joe and I get into.” He shimmies his hips.

“I don’t need the details. Just go get you some. One of us might as well on this love at sea cruise.” A smile turns up my lips. I’m genuinely happy for him, he deserves all the love. He’s been through hell and back over the last twenty three years of his life. Our age difference of seven years makes me feel like an older sister at times, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.

I head to the elevators, deck 7 holds the art gallery and hopefully a little peace of mind for me today.

The gallery isn’t as large as I hoped. It’s about the size of a smaller department store with a mixture of paintings on the walls and sculptures in the center. There’s no one in here with me, which gives me a burst of relief I wasn’t expecting.

The pictures are stunning. They range from still life paintings to photos of nature. There’s one photo of the ocean glistening under a stormy sky as the rain drops hit the water perfectly, causing splashes when they hit to be captured on camera. The urge to run my finger over the photo is strong but I resist knowing that the oils in my hand will ruin it.

“Postmodern contemporary art can be inspiring.” His voice consumes me. A chill spreads across my skin as he leans over my shoulder, taking in the picture with me. His breath caresses my skin as he speaks. “I personally love the Renaissance Era of art, but today’s postmodern photos tend to capture my attention too.”

I don’t move for fear of what my lips may do with him this close. “I don’t know a lot about art history, but I do know what appeals to me visually. The way the water flows with the wind and how the photographer captured the rain at just the right moment is stunning.”

He doesn’t say anything, but he holds his hand out to me. I’m not sure what is happening but I take it and push my logical thoughts to the back. He leads me around a corner to another set of paintings. These have pastels and darker colors, the women and men portrayed living life.

“These aren’t originals, just copies of course. But these are renaissance art. See how the painters captured the essence of life? The emotions are being shown through their faces. Before this time period they never captured smiles in paintings, it usually depicted a face staring to the side.”

The photo in front of me is a replica of some famous painting called The Birth of Venus. “I mean it’s pretty, but I’m more of a nature girl.” He gives me an astonished look, like I just told him his dog was ugly.

“This is an extremely famous painting by Sandro Botticelli.”

I shrug like it’s supposed to mean something to me. “I have no idea who that is.”

He shakes his head. “Art history is such a lost teaching. They should have it in every high school across the nation. It plays a huge role in human history and how we evolved through the years.”

I walk over to a small bench and sit facing a sculpture of a bunch of random objects. “Art is subjective. To me that looks like a huge mess of random items just thrown together.” I peer

at him from the corner of my eye. He's pinching his nose like I'm giving him a headache. "But when I make jewelry I see beauty in the metals and stones I use. Each piece pulls together a story for me."

I hold up the green choker I'm currently wearing. "The stone is a moldavite, it's small and probably looks like a chip of green glass to most people. But to me it's a connection to the earth. It was formed fifteen million years ago when a meteorite collided with earth. I love the fact something created millions of years ago still survives today."

I hold up my other bunch of necklaces. "These are rose quartz, hematite, tourmaline, moonstone, and Libyan desert glass. Each stone represents something different. Some people wear stones for connection or beliefs of healing properties. I love wearing them for their beauty. They aren't just rocks, they have cracks and crevices; fissures created through time and manipulation. Hidden gems that we find, and I create art out of them."

He touches the small choker at my neck, his finger sliding along the thin gold chain. My pulse races as his eyes bore into mine. "Stunning," he murmurs.

His soft pink lips move closer as his hand rests against the side of my neck, his fingers tangled in my hair. He waits, giving me the option to close the distance. "I..." my words fall away as my mind reels with the possibilities. We only have a week together, one week of adventures and once in a lifetime chances. Before I can think any longer, I push my lips against his.

The taste of him mixes with the mimosas we drank not long ago. His hands slide into my hair further. The desperate need to be closer consumes me. I grab his shirt in my fist and pull him towards me, his body heat enveloping mine. Sliding my tongue against him, he opens letting me in. We fight for control, both of us tasting and moaning with each passing second.

I pull away, panting through my numb lips. He runs a hand through his hair ruffling up the perfect waves he had. "That

wasn't what I was expecting when Theo introduced me to you." I hadn't thought this would be anything, that we would connect. But the lingering electricity coursing through my skin from his touch has me second guessing everything.

He grunts in agreement, his green eyes roaming over my features. Voices from the entrance interrupt our moment. I stand from the bench and put space between us. He rubs the back of his neck with his hand. "What are your plans for tonight?"

"I told Theo we could hang out and catch up after his date today." Now that more people are coming into the gallery, the space between us grows.

"Evie is dragging me to the speed dating event tonight. She's determined to find a rebound from her ex, Derek." My heart drops as I think of all the women that will be there tonight, flirting and getting to know him. "I was hoping you would be there too."

I bite my lip at the prospect. I would rather poke out my eyeballs than participate in speed dating. "You never know, I may show up."

His eyes light up as he smiles. "Well then, I hope to see you later tonight. Until then..." He places a gentle kiss on my cheek before turning and walking out of the gallery.

I wasn't planning on speed dating tonight but watching from the sidelines is definitely on the agenda. I try to convince myself it's for entertainment purposes only, not because of the pang of jealousy I feel in my gut.

CHAPTER EIGHT

COLIN



THE ROOM where the speed dating is being held has more dark red and black decor. The lights are dim to entice the romantic vibes. Evie is dressed in a short black dress and red heels, her blonde hair pinned back at the nape of her neck. A few of the men glance at her as we enter, their stares lingering longer on her body than they should be. I can tell tonight's going to test my patience. Evie's ten years younger than me. At twenty three, her judgment about people and men isn't the best. She's so eager for a happy ever after that she looks past the red flags that should have her running.

I head straight to the bar and purchase a glass of brandy. I drink it fast, refusing to sip it like I should. The burn of the amber liquid in my throat relaxes me slightly. I hold up a finger at the bartender for another one. This one I'll sip. The room is beginning to fill up with men and women looking for their matches.

Whoever created speed dating was an idiot. You can't learn jack-shit from someone in five minutes. It's easy to hide your flaws in less time than it takes to eat a meal on an actual date. Gertrude walks past me, her cane in hand, with a determined look on her face. She's heading towards a man I saw when boarding, his eyes widen when he sees her zeroing in on him. "Unlucky bastard," I snicker.

Gertrude is entertaining for sure, but she's a little intrusive and loves to talk about dicks way too much for my liking. I have one myself, but I don't like to talk about other people's or

even imagine other people's dicks. I shudder pushing the thought out of my head.

“Welcome!” The host's voice grabs the attention of the room. “I'm Jenna Montgomery, co-owner of Love Snack Speed Dating, and your host for the evening. I hope by now you've had the chance to get some liquid encouragement because we are going to start in the next few minutes. If this is your first Love Snack encounter, allow me to go over the basic format of the evening. We'll start with the speed dating rounds. Men, you will be on the inside circle. The number given to you upon admittance matches your table number, where you'll stay throughout this portion of the event. The women, sitting along the outer circle, will rotate around you. Each round will last no more than five minutes. If you enjoy your time together and want to make a match, put a check mark beside the name and number on your cards. If both parties check the box, we'll share your contact information tomorrow via email.”

Fuck me, I'm really doing this. I down my drink and order another. There's no way in hell I'm doing this fully sober. I glance at my card and it says seat five on it. I head towards my table while a man steps up next to Jenna.

“This is my business partner, Sebastian Montenegro. He'll take us through the second half of the evening.” He's standing extremely close to her.

“Hola and welcome,” the man greets us, his voice deep and smooth with the hint of an accent. “After our speed rounds,” he continues, “we will have a mix and mingle. You can choose to stay or go, your connections will be emailed either way, but I highly encourage you to stay. Talk to anyone with whom you had a connection. Get to know someone better you didn't click with right away. Make conversation, make friends”—he drops his voice and winks—“make lovers. Most importantly, have fun and be yourselves.”

There's a flurry of applause from the crowd. Make lovers? This night is going to be worse than I even imagined. I glance around the room at all the women here, but none of them are who I'm looking for. Her dark brown hair and vibrant eyes are

nowhere to be seen. I had hoped she would show, maybe give me a chance to sneak out of this with her.

Jenna's talking in the background but I can't focus fully on what she's saying. A few people head to the bar to grab drinks, quite a few of us look uncomfortable being here. The nerves are apparent on our faces. The first round begins and I watch as the women take seats across from all the men.

The overpowering scent of roses washes over me as a woman in a bright blue dress sits across from me. She has curly black hair swept over her shoulder and bright red lipstick. Her dress is so tight her breasts are barely contained in the thin fabric.

She crosses her legs at the ankles and leans forward on the table, giving me a view I wish I wasn't seeing. "I'm Pamela. What's your name sexy?"

Uninterested? Is it rude to say that? "Colin." My voice is stiff even to my own ears.

"Not much of a talker, are you Colin?" She laughs an obnoxiously loud laugh. Almost like a donkey. "It's okay, I can talk for both of us. In my free time I love shopping, but not at like those department stores. I online shop and find the best deals I can. It's a thrill, like jumping out of an airplane."

I raise my eyebrow at her admission. "So you have a shopping addiction?" I blurt it out before I can stop myself.

Pamela narrows her eyes at me. "I don't have an addiction. I don't do drugs. God, you're an asshole."

Jenna calls out, "Times up. Switch to the next table and make sure you mark on your card if you had a connection."

"You're not getting my info, asshole." She stands and storms off to the next table.

"Fuck me," I mutter.

The guy at the table next to me laughs. "You can say that again." I glance over and he's raising his beer to me before downing the entire thing.

I notice most of the men look to be miserable, half of them are either too drunk to care or are hating themselves currently. The other half look pretty excited at the prospect of getting laid sometime soon. I spot Evie across the room sitting down across from one of the excited looking men. My eyes narrow as I see him lean back with his hands behind his head, his eyes staring straight at her chest instead of her eyes.

I'm half tempted to go over there and drag her out of here like some caveman. Me big brother, you little sister, come with me. Fuck, that makes me seem insane. Another body sits in front of me. I glance up waiting for the torture to begin.

"Hey, I'm Melinda." She smiles brightly, her red hair, although a little frizzy from the humidity, frames her face perfectly. She shifts in her seat looking just as uncomfortable with the entire prospect of this night as I am.

"I'm Colin." I give her a genuine smile. She seems sweet, a little too young for me but kind all the same.

"What drags you onto a cruise like this?" She fiddles with her hands in her lap, her blue eyes watching everything around us.

"My sister." Her eyes snap back to me and I realize how bad that actually sounded. "No, I mean she tricked me to come on this cruise so she could set me up on a blind date."

She laughs but covers her mouth quickly with her hand to hide it. "So where is this blind date of yours?"

I wish I knew. "I'm not sure. But I'm here keeping an eye on my sister. She tends to pick complete assholes for dates."

She looks around the room. "Which one is she?"

I nod towards Evie, she's still with the douche from before. He's now leaning towards her across the table, his eyes completely focused on her chest still.

"Ah. She's gorgeous, but that man is an ass. Look at him not even listening to her." She turns around to me. "I see why you want to keep an eye on her."

"Switch tables," Jenna calls out.

“It was nice meeting you, Melinda.” I hope she finds someone who treats her right.

She smiles as she stands. “You too. I’d say we should meet again, but I have a feeling you’re waiting on your blind date to show.” She winks at me before heading to the next table.

I can’t wait for this to be over with.

CHAPTER NINE

AVERY



HE HASN'T SEEN me yet. I snuck in after the introductions were starting. I was going to participate but then decided against it. Instead, I've been sitting at the bar watching and drinking with a few other people. Every time another girl sits at his table, I take another shot.

Why I'm putting myself through this torture is beyond me. I barely know the man, but that kiss today has me second guessing all of my beliefs about dating and men. The room spins slightly as I take another shot. A redhead is currently sitting across from him, they're both smiling at each other. They seem to be getting along. I hate that there's a pang of jealousy in my chest as Colin laughs at what she says.

"Girl, if I was you, I'd be over there staking a claim on my man." I peer next to me at Gertrude. She's pointing the offensive end of her cane at Colin.

"What is that supposed to be?" I squint at the top of her cane, my curiosity too strong to not know.

"This?" She wiggles the top at me. "This here is a woodpecker carving. I call it Woody." I raise an eyebrow as I try to see what exactly makes it a woodpecker. She points to a small indent on it. "This here is the eye. It's a little used so it's hard to tell."

"It looks like a giant penis to me," I blurt out. "Oh shit, I'm sorry Gertrude. That was rude of me." I slap a hand against my mouth to stop my unfiltered thoughts from talking.

She smiles a toothy grin at me. “Don’t be sorry. It does look like a penis, that’s why I use it. It’s a great conversation starter. It’s my pecker.” She laughs out loud. “I got to get back to my seat, I have a hunk coming up next I get to meet. But you should go get your man. He looks as miserable as you.”

She twirls her cane between her hands in an obscene gesture, then walks back towards the tables. That little old lady is a spitfire. They call out for everyone to change tables. I see the girl heading straight for Colin’s table, her smile spreads as she pushes her chest up and out while hiking up her dress to show more leg. Oh fuck no, I’m over this. I down my last shot and head straight towards them.

Before she can reach the seat, I slide into it across from him. Her eyes widen and then narrow as she puts her long fingers on her hips, the hot pink nails clashing with her orange dress. “Excuse me but it’s my turn at this table.”

I smile at her, but I can’t really control my face with all the alcohol pulsing through me. She backs away, slowly shaking her head. “Never mind, you can have him.”

“Avery.” His voice does things to my insides, melting through me.

I turn to face him, the smile still on my face as I lean on the table. “Colin. Fancy meeting you here.”

His lips curve up, revealing a sexy dimple on his cheek. I wonder if he knows how cute those dimples are. “How much have you had to drink?”

I wave my hand aimlessly around. “A few.” I lean forward like I’m conspiring with him. “But you had more girls looking at you than I had drinks.”

He leans forward, his eyes serious as he watches me. “Are you jealous, Avery?”

My mouth suddenly feels extremely dry, making it impossible to answer. I shake my head ‘no’ avoiding the truth. I’m sure he can tell it’s a lie. Who gets drunk while watching someone they barely know go on a speed date? A crazy

person, that's who. I'm crazy and unstable right now. I wish I could blame it on the alcohol.

He stands up abruptly and rounds the table, slipping his hand in mine and pulls me to my feet. "Let's get out of here." His words come out rough, almost like he's fighting the urge to throw me over his shoulder.

I notice Evie as he drags me past the tables, she smiles and waves. She pats her date on the hand, apologizes and walks away, leaving him speechless. Almost like she knew Colin being here would cause jealousy in me. Sneaky, sneaky Evie.

The cool air slaps me in the face as we step out onto the deck. The sounds around us dim as the door shuts on the speed dating scene behind us. "I think Evie has a bit of evil in her. She's good." I try to form a coherent thought but it just gets jumbled. "I mean she's good at being evil."

He snorts in response and continues to walk with me at a slower pace. "You'd be surprised how well she can concoct a plan especially when she's determined to have something go her way."

Just like last night I start off hot from the alcohol, but the wind cools me down quickly. The moon in the sky shines an eerie glow over Colin's features. His eyes darken as he stops and faces me. Slowly his hand slides around my back, pulling me close. "Although, this one time I'm thankful for her plan."

My body vibrates, I need to be closer to him. "This is insane, isn't it?" The wind carries my words away. "To want each other this bad and barely knowing each other?" I lean back to look into his eyes. He seems as confused as I am with all of this.

"Insanity is doing the same thing over again and expecting different results. This is far from that." His thumb caresses my bottom lip. My tongue shoots out and licks the pad of it. He hisses in a breath, his eyes dilating.

He captures my jaw with his hand, tilting my face up towards him seconds before his mouth lands on mine. Everything around us disappears. All I feel is his body against

mine. I taste him on my tongue. He walks me backwards until my back hits the ship wall, my arms wrap around his neck and tangle in his hair as he lifts me off the ground and pulls my legs around his waist, neither of us caring who sees.

My body tightens as my stomach flips with each caress, each grind of him against my sensitive areas. “Fuck,” I breathe out, desperate for more.

“Avery.” His hands dig into my thighs as he holds me against him.

I need him, more than just this kiss. I need to feel him, it’s been too long. “We can’t use my cabin,” I say between kisses.

“Mine it is.” He places one last kiss against my cheek, then slides me down the wall until my feet hit the floor. We don’t speak, we just walk quickly to the elevator. He pushes for deck 15 and it feels like it’s going to take forever.

My hand trails down his back as the elevator slowly ascends. He stiffens under my touch, his muscles hard beneath my fingertips. The doors open with a ding and he pulls me out, we rush down the hall towards his room, his wristband ready by the time we get to the door. A note on it reads: *C, I’m staying with Theo tonight. Enjoy the bed and room, just don’t get any of your shit on my belongings. Gross. Signed with a heart, Evie.*

“I told you she was evil. She planned this.” I wave between the two of us and the room.

He grabs the note and balls it up before opening the door. As soon as it shuts behind us he lifts me in his arms and his lips are back on mine. The urgency in his movements apparent as he kicks his shoes off while walking into the room. He pulls away for a moment. “For once, I’m not going to even question how she knew this would happen.” He places my feet on the floor and holds my waist to keep me balanced.

The alcohol is no longer in my system, I’m here in the moment and this is what I want. I reach up and slowly slide my dress strap off of my shoulder. I reach over and slide the second one off causing my dress to slowly fall to the floor at

my feet. The black bra and underwear I wore tonight a sign to what I was hoping would happen between us.

He takes me in, tracing his hands over my curves with his gentle touch. "You are stunning."

Reaching out, I grab his shirt and slide it over his head as best as I can. Being almost a foot shorter than him though, I need his help with the rest. He grabs it and removes it, then unbuttons his pants letting them fall to the floor. "Are you sure this is what you want? I don't want to move too fast for you."

The strain against his boxer briefs catches my eye. "I want this." Wrapping my hand around his waistband I lower his boxers, freeing him.

He doesn't need to hear anything else as he unhooks my bra with one hand. I pull it off, leaving me only in my stilettos and underwear. "Leave the heels on," he commands.

I bare myself to him, follow his command as I walk towards the bed giving him a fantastic view of my ass. I hear him crinkling a wrapper before following me. At least he remembered protection.

"Lay back on the bed and spread your legs for me." I do as he says, my body wet with just his words. His mouth is on me in seconds, his head between my legs working me into a frenzy. I can feel the orgasm building within a few swirls of his tongue. It's been too long since I've been touched, everything is sensitive. I feel it curling in my body, tightening just before it snaps and I moan out with the release. He presses his hand gently on my lower stomach as I come, causing the sensation to intensify rapidly, another one tearing through me.

My body shakes as he slows his pace with his tongue. Pressing kisses to my inner thigh he trails his hands along my sensitive skin. He crawls up me, placing the condom on himself as he lowers to my entrance. "We can stop if you want." He waits for my response before moving.

Him being so considerate and making sure I'm okay with each step we take has my heart beating faster. "I don't want to

stop. Please, I need you inside of me.” A shiver courses through him as he slowly slides into me.

He’s larger than I’m used to, the tightness I feel with him is not unwelcomed though. He goes slow, letting me adjust to the feel of him. “Colin, go faster.” I breathe out. “I’m not breakable. Fuck me, hard.”

He slams into me. I shift on the bed with the movement as he stretches me. The pain mixed with pleasure causes spots behind my eyelids. He picks up the pace, slamming into me over and over. Both of us panting, the pleasure building again. My body releases, clenching around him as I yell out his name.

“Fuck me,” he breathes as he comes with me. My body is spent, satiated. For the first time in years, I feel relaxed and happy. He rolls to the side, removing the condom. I watch as he goes to the bathroom then comes back with a wet washcloth. He wipes me off, the warmth easing the sensitive area that will for sure be bruised tomorrow. He tosses the cloth in the hamper against the wall and returns to the bed next to me, pulling the covers back so we can both snuggle underneath.

“That was...” I don’t even know what to say that won’t sound cheesy. Fantastic seems so generic.

“I know,” he says. He pulls me close, wrapping his arm around my side. “Get some sleep. We can figure this all out tomorrow. For now, let’s just enjoy the moment.”

My eyes close of their own accord, pulling me into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

COLIN



THE SUN SHINING through the window wakes me from the best sleep I've had in a while. Avery is curled up under the covers still sound asleep. I only know her name and a little bit of what Evie told me after introducing us, yet we've already slept together. Today, I'm taking her on a proper date. One without alcohol involved so we can both enjoy the moment.

I gently run my hand down her side, causing her to stir out of her sleep. Her eyes blink open and a yawn slips past her swollen lips. I want to take her again right here, but I'm sure she's sore after last night. Even my own muscles ache. "Good morning sleepy head."

She glances out the window at the sun and pulls the covers over her head. She starts mumbling something to me, but I can't hear her through the blankets. I pull them back, revealing her closed eyes and pursed lips. "You're the devil for waking me so early."

I can't help but laugh at the pout on her lips and the stubborn way she refuses to even look at me. "I figured we could go to the pool today. Have a proper date together. If you want to..." I start second guessing myself. What if she's not interested in anything more than just sex. Am I reading too much into this?

She sits up, the covers falling off her bare chest. "A date?"

My eyes struggle to stay focused on hers, but I want to show her the respect she deserves. "A date. Maybe a pool day, then grab some lunch?"

The smile spreading across her face cracks my heart in half, bleeding out joy. “I haven’t been on a date in years. I’d love to go on a date with you.” Realizing she’s bare from the neck down, she grabs the sheet and pulls it to cover her chest.

My shoulders relax as I fight the urge to kiss her. This is our first date and I’m going to treat her right. “We can start fresh. Go on a proper date like we just met.”

She busts out laughing a deep belly laugh. “It’s a little late for that.” She looks down at my body hidden under the covers, the response to her being so close not unnoticeable to either of us.

Rolling my eyes, I push myself off the bed letting the sheet fall. I hear her deep inhale of breath as my bare ass heads towards the bathroom. “I mean we can pretend or you can jump in the shower with me then we can start fresh after.”

The sheet rustles behind me as I hear her giggle. An actual fucking giggle slips past her lips causing my dick to jerk wildly. “Last one in doesn’t get to pay today.” She pushes me sideways and runs into the bathroom past me.

I stumble, grabbing the wall, my mouth open. “Did you just cheat and push me?”

She flings her hair over her shoulder while jumping in the shower and turning it on. What type of person gets in then turns on the water? She’s like a puzzle I need to figure out. “I win!” She cheers while stepping under the falling water.

I try to argue, but the words fall from my lips as the water cascades down her bare breasts. Fuck. This woman is going to be the destruction of me.



The shower lasted over two hours this morning. We started there and ended up on the bed for the last hour. I glance over at her as she finds a table near the bar by the pool. Her tiny frame fills out her dark blue bikini perfectly. Her skin is a deep brown from the sun and her lineage. She has her hair twisted

into a messy bun atop her head and is wearing a pair of large black sunglasses.

She hops up onto the stool under the umbrella table, her feet barely reaching the rungs underneath. I head over to the bar and rethink the no alcohol option today. I grab us two Hurricanes, some kind of fruity concoction that shouldn't be too heavy on the alcohol content. I set one down in front of her. "I figured we only go on a vacation like this once in a lifetime. Might as well enjoy it."

The drinks are a gorgeous blue and red that glisten off her lips after she takes a sip. The pool is empty, which takes me by surprise. We're near a group of girls packing up items on one of the loungers by the pool. The pool sounded like a good idea this morning, but now I'm wondering why no one is in it.

"Oh my god! Ewww!" one of the girls at the lounge yells.

"It got on me!"

I watch as she frantically swipes a towel on herself trying to rub something away. Avery looks over watching the chaos unfold.

"What the?" she asks just as another girl grabs a bag off the chair and starts vomiting into it.

Oh fuck. This is the worst first date ever. Avery's skin pales to a gray as she tries to tear her eyes away from the clusterfuck happening before us.

"Nope," another of the girls says loudly as she storms past us. "I can't do it. I didn't sign up for this shit." As she passes by, we can hear her muttering, "In the pool... bunch of fucking lightweights."

We both glance at the pool as crew members rush around the chaotic scene. "She vomited in the pool? Fuck a duck," Avery mumbles, her face cringing as she turns away from the chaos.

I run a hand over my face and let out a sigh. "This is the worst first date."

“Not really. I mean, come on, we got drinks...” She holds up her glass. “Entertainment...” She nods towards the remaining few girls who are helping their friend get cleaned up. “And the pool is completely empty so it’s nice and peaceful.”

The optimism she has in a moment like this is unreal. She takes a sip of her drink and I can’t help but watch her throat move with it. Last night she was screaming my name from those lips. Fuck. Get it together man.

One of the crew members comes over to our table. “We are so sorry for the issues with the pool today. Here’s two tickets for complimentary drinks for both of you to make up for it. We will be cleaning all day, so the pool won’t be open the rest of the time.”

I take the tickets from him. “Thanks. Are these good only at the bar here or any of the bars on the ship?”

“You can use them anywhere and they won’t expire during the trip. So you can use them today or whenever you choose. Again, we apologize for the inconvenience.”

“It’s not your fault someone got sick in the pool.” Avery pushes her sunglasses onto the top of her head.

The crew member shudders as he tries to hide his reaction. I speak up, “Thank you again. Good luck today.”

He nods before heading over to help with the mess. “I would not want that job.” She watches him walk away. “So, should we stay here or would you like to head somewhere a little less chaotic?”

I pull out my phone, opening the cruise ship app to see what all is going on today. “It looks like there’s a scavenger hunt today on deck 7. They have a time slot in ten minutes if you want to try that.” What could go wrong with a scavenger hunt on a cruise ship? This will be a perfect icebreaker for us too.

“Let’s do it. I’m pretty competitive just to forewarn you.” She grabs her bag off her chair and pulls out a black cover up, slipping it over her head.

Thankfully I wore a t-shirt with my swim shorts today. I sign us up on the app, securing our spots. “It says here we need to meet at the social area on deck 7 first.”

“We better hurry, it starts in less than eight minutes.” She puts her bag on her back like a backpack and starts rushing to the door. She wasn’t joking about being competitive. This should be interesting.

The social area is full, the cruise director stands in the center with another man. I remember the director from boarding when he made the *Princess Bride* joke. He steps up and claps his hands together.

“Welcome everyone! I’m Eduardo Montoya the cruise director. This here is my partner Doug.” He gestures to the taller and hairier man next to him. Eduardo is short and very tan, not a hair out of place and extremely waxed. It looks like he waxes everything, including his arms.

“Today you’ll be participating in a scavenger hunt of sorts for couples.” Doug smirks while talking in a thick New York accent. Doug and Eduardo are complete opposites. “So make sure you both have the app on your phone and are registered. You’ll get a list of ten tasks to complete. You’ll need to take a picture or video of yourself doing these things, then upload it to the app.”

Eduardo speaks up, “But be sure you rotate who does each task. It needs to be every other task done by each of you. No cheating.”

“When a task is complete, hit submit on both of your apps and we will get the info on ours in real time. Whoever finishes first and with the fastest time throughout the entire day will win the grand prize. Winners will be announced later via the app.”

Avery and I look at each other, the excitement on her face evident. “We’re going to win this,” she whispers.

“Alright everyone.” Eduardo clicks something into his phone. “You all have been sent your scavenger hunt tasks, each group is in a different order to keep it fun and to not

overcrowd any one area. Go ahead and head on out! Best of luck to you all.”

“And keep it spicy!” Doug calls out as we all leave the social area.

Avery stops in her tracks as she looks down at her phone. “Oh shit.”

I glance over her shoulder to see what’s upset her. “Is everything okay?” My throat dries as I read the scavenger hunt tasks.

SCAVENGER HUNT REQUIREMENTS:

- 1. Order a blow job shot as loudly as possible from any bar
- 2. Fake an orgasm in front of a group of people. (Must be at least ten people within listening/watching distance)
- 3. Find something sexually suggestive in a gift shop and take a picture.
- 4. Use a cheesy pick-up line on a complete stranger
- 5. Video yourself in one of the public bathrooms pretending to have a massive shit (cannot be alone in the bathroom)
- 6. Give a drag queen a piggy back ride
- 7. Serenade a staff member with a sexy song: (a la “I Wanna Sex You Up”, or “Baby Got Back”, or “Candy Shop” etc.)
- 8. Prepare for a dare from Gertrude.
- 9. Ask a passerby to take a racy (but not pornographic) photo with your partner in the art gallery
- 10. Model 2 different Kama Sutra positions at the pool deck (with clothes on). Ask someone to take your pics.

Shit. I'm not sure what's worse, this as a first date or the vomit in the pool. My heart races as I read further on and the tasks get dangerously sexier. This could be fun or a complete disaster. Either way, I'm glad I signed up with Avery and she's not doing this with some other man.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AVERY



THE LIST just gets worse the further I read. Whoever created this list was determined to cause a scene for the couples. I'm not sure what I expected from a scavenger hunt on a love cruise, but this isn't it.

“So, are you still up for doing this?” Colin's voice seems unsure as he rubs the back of his neck.

“Are you kidding? This just makes it even more of a challenge. We're still going to win this.” Taking a deep breath, I put myself into competitive mode. “So do you want to do task one or should I?”

He cringes as he reads task one and then task two. “I'll take task one. There's no way I'm faking an orgasm in front of others.” He looks desperate to get out of this, but once I set my mind on something I need to finish it. I guess that's why Theo and I get along so well.

“Come on then, we're already behind everyone else. We need to catch up.” I grab his hand and drag him out of the room. There's a bar not far from where we are and honestly this task looks to be the easiest on the entire list. We walk inside, I was expecting it to be dead this time of day but it's pretty full for an afternoon. Colin grunts beside me as he takes in the room. “Don't you chicken out. We can't lose this game.”

I shove him gently towards the bar, he only hesitates for a moment before waving down the bartender who is busy helping others. “So I need to order a blow job shot?”

Glancing at the task I nod. “Yeah but it says you need to order a blow job shot as loudly as possible. I’ll record it with your phone so you can upload it.” I hold out my hand as he pulls it from his pocket and opens the camera app.

“I swear, no one else could get me to do this besides you,” he mumbles as the bartender heads our way. My heart races at his words but I quickly push my emotion aside as I start recording.

“I apologize in advance for this,” Colin tells the bartender while shaking his head. He raises his voice and yells out, “Can I get a blow job?!”

The bar quiets down, a few men snicker in the room. I hear one of them say, “You heard the man, he wants a blow job.” His buddies laugh beside him.

Colin’s face turns red but he doesn’t move. The bartender hands him the shot. Before it can touch the table, Colin grabs it and throws it back. The bartender chuckles. “Let me guess? The scavenger hunt started?”

Colin just nods and puts down a ten dollar bill. He takes his phone from me and starts uploading the video. I snort as he grumbles under his breath. “Thanks! One task down with only nine to go,” I tell the bartender as I pull Colin out of the bar after me.

He hits submit on task one then turns to me with a dark look in his eyes. The fire there causes my body to heat with just his glance. He backs me up against the wall of the entryway of the bar. Everyone is still within earshot, I see a few people with their phones out but I can’t take my eyes off of him.

He trails a finger down my arm, his lips only a whisper from mine. My body arches towards him, trying to close the distance between us. He places a few kisses along the side of my lip, trailing to my neck and up to my ear. My eyes roll backwards as he continues to pepper me with kisses. He’s not even touching me anywhere else, his arms now on the wall beside me boxing me in.

“Colin,” I breathe. My brain tries to remind me we’re in public but my body doesn’t care. The urge to wrap my legs around him is unbearable.

“Task two is fake an orgasm in front of a group of people.” He smiles against my lips. “I figured we might as well give the people in the bar a full show since I already ordered the blow job.”

Fuck. He’s playing me for the stupid scavenger hunt. But I feel his excitement pressed into my thigh as he shifts his body out of view of the bar and I second guess if he’s actually playing me or just fighting these feelings like I am. Two can play that game. I will not lose this scavenger hunt.

“Oh god,” I moan in his ear. He stiffens beside me, his hands turn to fists against the wall. His face whips up as he stares me down. He didn’t think I would actually go through with it. I see the war on his face as he fights the urge to drag me out of here and into his bed.

“Colin,” I breathe. I arch my back against the wall to make it look like he’s doing more than just standing there like a statue. “That feels so good.” I groan. My need to win is almost drowned out by the embarrassment currently coursing through me.

A few catcalls and shouts from the bar surround us. I need to get this over with before I chicken out or by the look on Colin’s face, he murders someone for watching me fake an orgasm.

“Yes, just like that.” I start to pant faster and harder. At this rate I’m going to need to have a real orgasm to release the tension in my body. “Faster,” I breathe. I reach forward wrapping my arms around him and burying my face in his chest as I scream out. “Fuck yes! Oh my god.” I pretend to tremble with a release. “Oh God.” I moan one last time before going limp against him.

“Holy shit!” someone calls out. “Did you see that?”

“Damn this cruise is something else,” another person says.

One man laughs, “I got it all on camera.”

This catches Colin's attention as he pulls away from me, he stalks over to the man who's replaying it on his phone. He snatches the phone from him. The guy starts to protest but stops when he sees the murderous glare from Colin. My phone pings, and I see a video from an unknown number pop up. I click on it and it's the video of me faking my orgasm, except from this view it looks real. All too real. Colin's eyes are blazing as he watches me like we're the only two in the room.

Oh fuck. My entire body tingles with need. I quickly save the video and upload it to the app hitting submit. Colin tosses the phone back to the man and grabs my hand dragging me out of the bar.

"Hey! You deleted the video," the man yells out. "What the fuck?"

My heart jumps in my chest as Colin drags me out of the area like I'm his and his only. This man is worming his way into my life faster than I expected.

CHAPTER TWELVE

COLIN



WATCHING Avery pretend to come in front of a bunch of drunk men about killed me. I wanted to rip all of their eyes out just for seeing her face in pleasure, even if it was pretend. Fuck. I'm not a possessive person. But seeing them eye fuck her while she pretended to fuck me about destroyed my composure. This scavenger hunt is ridiculous.

“So umm...” She looks up at me through her lowered lashes. My dick jumps at just the sight of her. She bites her lip. “Are you still up for the rest of this?”

I groan. Am I still up? My fucking dick is as hard as rock, but I know that's not what she meant. I just nod. The urge to throw her over my shoulder and drag her back to my room sits right below the surface. I don't even speak. I glance down at task three and snort. Of course this is my task. Something way less embarrassing than orgasming in front of strangers.

“So task three...Find something sexually suggestive in a gift shop and take a picture.” Her hesitant voice cuts through the tension around us.

“That should be easy.” I shrug. Forcing a smile on my lips I turn to her. “We're doing pretty good, it only took ten minutes total to do two tasks.”

Her eyes narrow. “We need to do better.” She takes off towards the gift shop. “Come on slowpoke. We have phallic looking objects to find and pictures to take.”

A few people walking by look at us. I just shake my head at the feisty woman currently rushing down the ship to find a

penis looking object in a gift shop.



“What about this?” Avery holds up a long souvenir cup for drinks that is almost as big as her. The blue plastic is long in the middle and round on the end.

“It kind of looks like a penis.” Who knew I would ever say those few words in my lifetime.

She nods her head. “Yeah this will work.” She hands it to me and grabs my arms, positioning them in the air. She has them holding the girth of the cup and the bottom that’s rounded facing my lips. She’s posing me to look like I’m giving it head.

I roll my eyes. “Is this really necessary? It just said something sexually suggestive. Not that I had to give it a blow job in the process.”

She slaps at my hand as I try to drop it down to my side. “Stop, if you hold it like a cup no one will know it’s supposed to be a penis. But if you pose with it like you’re deep throating it, the suggestive part will be obvious.”

Someone next to us chokes at her words. I swear she says shit for shock value. “Fine. Just hurry up and take the picture, we aren’t posing for a magazine here.”

She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Oh dear Colin, I’m totally making a scrapbook of all of these when I get home. I’ll be putting them on rotation in my digital photo frame on my living room wall.”

I startle at her words, and my eyes widen as she takes the picture. “Perfect!” she yells while showing me the photo. For fuck’s sake. It looks like I’m gagging on an overlarge blue plastic dick. I grab my phone from her and quickly upload it.

“You can delete it from your phone if you want. I already sent it to myself.” She waves her phone at me with the new message bar lit up.

I narrow my eyes at her. “It’s fine. I saved the video of you. I don’t ever want to forget the sounds you make.” I stalk closer to her and she backs away while putting a finger up, halting me in my tracks.

“Oh no. You are not distracting me from winning this.” I pull up the app and read task four. “This one is easy! Use a cheesy pick up line on a stranger.” I look around the gift shop, it’s empty but there’s a few people milling around in the walkway. I toss my phone at Colin for him to record.

I see a group of guys standing around looking at something on their phones. This will work, they all look distracted and I don’t see any girlfriends around who will beat the crap out of me for flirting. I walk up next to the man with the phone in his hand. His sandy blond hair hangs in his eyes. I tap him on the shoulder to get his attention.

When he sees me he instantly transforms his smile, he starts looking me up and down and leans back a bit, flirting with his body language. My palms get sweaty the longer I take and his buddies watch the interaction probably thinking I’m nuts. Taking a deep breath, I pull my shoulders back. “Excuse me for interrupting. I just wanted to let you know, if you were a vegetable you’d be a ‘cute-cumber’.”

He doesn’t fumble or miss a beat in his response. “If I’m a cute-cumber, then you can be the jar for my pickles.”

“Oh shit,” one of his buddies says, busting out laughing.

I snort. “That’s the worst pick up line ever.”

He raises a pierced eyebrow. “Not much worse than your cute-cumber one.”

I feel Colin crowd in behind me, his hand landing on my lower back. The possessive posture causing butterflies in my stomach. “Sorry about that. I had to do a cheesy pick up line for the scavenger hunt.” I wave my phone at him after I hit submit.

He shrugs. “No worries. I had to do that earlier today too. I figured that’s what you were up to.” He laughs. “Big man here about had a coronary though watching me flirt back.”

Colin doesn't move, but his hand grips my shirt pulling me into his chest. The guy holds up his hand. "Don't worry man. I don't swing that way, but you are definitely my type." He throws a wink at Colin catching him off guard.

I slap Colin's back. "Big man, do I need to be jealous here?" I fight the smile pulling at my lips as he glares down at me.

"No, never." Is his only response to me.

"Damn. Big man really likes you," the sandy haired guy comments. "Good luck with the scavenger hunt. We had a time of one hour and fifteen minutes. You better not waste too much time."

Fuck. "Come on Colin! Task five is waiting." I quickly read the next task out loud. "Video yourself in one of the public bathrooms pretending to have a massive shit, you cannot be alone in the bathroom."

Colin rubs his temples. "Fine. This is absolutely ridiculous but now I need to beat this guy's time." He points over his shoulder to the sandy haired guy who is laughing.

"Thanks!" I call out to them as I take off after Colin. Too bad I'll have to wait in the hall while he does this part. I can only imagine the noises he will be making.

He stops short of the door to the men's bathroom. "Don't judge me for this. And stay here for the love of everything. Do. Not. Listen."

I nod excitedly. "Hurry! We need to catch up. Go take a shit." I wave to the bathroom.

He shakes his head as he walks inside saying, "What did I get myself into?"

I wait patiently watching the clock, it's been three minutes. I bet he chickened out. This is the easiest task of all. No one has to even know it's you in there pretending to push out a gigantic shit. The door opens and a horrified looking man comes out followed by someone else. "Holy shit man, whatever you ate didn't agree with you."

A few minutes later the door opens slowly and Colin peaks outside to see if anyone notices him. He walks briskly to me. “It’s done and uploaded.”

“Can I see the video?” I try to peer over his shoulder.

“Nope. And it’s completely deleted. We are never speaking of this again.” I pout. “No, that was ridiculous and something I wouldn’t even do if I actually was sick to my stomach.” He shudders remembering whatever it was he was doing in there.

I look at the next task of giving a drag queen a piggyback ride. This should be interesting considering I’m only five foot three. “Come on, I have the perfect person to ask to do this with me.” I head towards Razzle Dazzle and pray Anna Conda is working today.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COLIN



AVERY STANDS in the hallway with Anna Conda on her back, she's barely holding her up but she's making it a few steps. By the third, Avery falters and stumbles slightly. Anna Conda lets go of her back and relieves the weight off her shoulders. "Damn, that was harder than I expected." She breathes out with her hands on her knees.

"That's what she said!" a passerby yells out, eliciting a chuckle from everyone around us. The one thing I've noticed on this cruise is that everyone enjoys laughing and dirty jokes. Avery submits the video to the app before grinning at me.

"It's your turn to serenade a staff member." She wiggles her eyebrows at me. "Who are you going to pick? I can't wait to see this. Can you sing?" she keeps talking as she animatedly waves her hands in the air.

"Anna Conda, would it be okay with you if I serenade you for the scavenger hunt?" I ask, getting permission before I make anyone feel uncomfortable. I'm already uncomfortable with the majority of this scavenger hunt myself.

Anna Conda fans herself with the red boa she's got wrapped around her neck. "Oh honey, you can serenade me anytime, just know I may already be taken." She winks at Theo who blushes bright red.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for letting me embarrass myself at both our expenses." I open my phone and hand it to Theo. "Can you record this so I can post it to the app?"

“Of course. This ought to be good.” He chuckles as he stands next to Avery.

For the next few minutes, I stumble my way through the song of “Baby Got Back” by Sir Mix A Lot. It’s been a while since I’ve heard the song fully, so I’m not even sure if I’m singing the correct lyrics. But everyone around us starts clapping and joining in with me. As I sing the last line, everyone cheers and Anna Conda fans herself. “Damn, you sure know how to hit on a lady.” She blows me a kiss before chuckling and wrapping an arm around Theo’s elbow. “Come on handsome, let’s go shake our asses on the dance floor. I feel like moving to some music now.”

They head back inside the Razzle Dazzle as the crowd disperses. “That was amazing,” Avery says with a grin lighting up her face. “I never thought hearing you sing a rap song about big butts to another person could turn me on, but it so did.” She starts swaying her hips.

My skin burns as I watch her body move. “If you don’t want to lose this competition, I suggest you stop moving like that. Or else I’m going to give up and drag you back to my room with me.”

She stops abruptly. “No! We can’t lose. Besides we got this far, it would be stupid to quit now.”

“Exactly. I did things I never thought I would have done in public, so we better win or at least try to.” I look at the app. “Now we have to hunt down Gertrude to get her to give us a dare.”

“Are you looking for Trudy?” A group of women stop next to us. “We just saw her down by the casino flirting with the crew members there.”

“Thank you,” Avery says. “Let’s go find her before she scampers off with her woodpecker somewhere else.” She grabs my hand and pulls me towards the elevators.

When we enter the area, we notice her immediately. Her gray hair is bobbing to the music playing while she puts money in one of the slot machines.

“Hey Trudy.” Avery sits next to her.

The older woman smiles big at Avery. “Hey girlie. Did you ever go snatch your man from those man eating whores at the speed dating?”

Avery looks at me then back at Gertrude. Interesting. “Ummm...Colin here needs you to give him a dare for the scavenger hunt.”

She turns around, eyeing me up and down. “Damn girl. Good thing you caught him while you could. Otherwise, I’d be climbing his tree like a monkey.”

I clear my throat, fighting off the laughter. I like Gertrude, she’s extreme, but she’s got a kindness about her mixed with sadness. She’s seen some things in life.

“Anyways.” She waves her hand in the air dismissing her thoughts. “I dare Colin to pretend to propose to you in front of everyone here.” Her eyes light up with mischief. A proposal? Of all the things this woman could come up with, it has to be a public proposal to a girl I just met three days ago.

Avery bites her lip in determination. “Deal. But can you video it for us Trudy? For the app submittal?”

She takes Avery’s phone and holds it up in her frail looking hands. “Go on you two. Get it over with so you can move on to the next task.”

I pinch my nose to fight off the wave of nerves. I was not prepared for this. I figured it would be something sexual in nature knowing Gertrude, not something so serious feeling. I start to get down on one knee but Gertrude interrupts me, “Oh no, not here. No one can see you here. Over there in the center of the room.” She points to the middle of the casino where everyone is milling around taking in all the machines.

Avery stands up and pats me on the back. “Come on big man, let’s get hitched.”

She keeps surprising me every time we face a new challenge. I’ve noticed she’s the go with the flow and not overthink things type of person. She’s different from my usual girlfriends in that aspect. Wait... we aren’t dating. Although I

wish we were. These last few days have felt amazing just being around her.

She stands in the middle of the floor, looking around at the machines like she's trying to decide which one to play. The lights hit her perfectly where she stands, her hair glistening in them, highlighting the light brown streaks throughout the darker hair. I stride over, she's the beacon in the room calling my name.

Going down on one knee I take her hand in mine, pulling her attention to me. She acts surprised, her eyes wide as she places her other hand over her mouth like she might cry. Damn, this woman should have been an actress.

"Avery Santos," I watch as she waves her hand in front of her face like she's fighting back tears. I have to take a deep breath to hold back the laughter. "I've only known you three whole days, but the minute I saw you I knew I wanted to taste your lips. You make everyday a little easier with your goodhearted soul and go with the flow nature. You balance out my overbearing urge to throw you on my shoulder and yell out mine every time someone looks at you."

She stops fanning her face, her gaze staring into my soul. No longer pretending, we're both in our own world. Just the two of us feeling something out of our control. "Avery, you have made my heart beat faster these last few days than any woman has my entire life. I want to enjoy that feeling for the rest of our lives together. Will you marry me? Make this a reality every day for us."

The room quiets, only a few clinging sounds from machines in the back sound out. She looks down at me as her lips part. "Yes," she whispers.

People yell out and cheer. I don't move from my spot. Everything I said to her was true. I could see us together every day of our lives. It's like we've known each other for three years, not three days. Someone claps me on the back, pulling me from my connection with her.

"Congrats!" the person says. A few women hug Avery congratulating her, breaking the intense moment between us.

Trudy stops next to me, handing me the phone. “If I wasn’t so old with bad eyesight, I would say you were really proposing to her and not doing a dare.” She looks up at me with knowing eyes. “But who am I? Just a crazy old widow who never gave love another chance because my first love was my everything. I married him after only knowing him a short time too.” She pats my hand. “Don’t live life with regrets. It’s too short.” She walks away, leaving me even more confused than I was ten minutes ago.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AVERY



AFTER COLIN PROPOSED, the rest of the tasks seemed like a piece of cake. I glance at the photo of us in the art museum, my hands against the wall with my legs spread as Colin leans over my back kissing my neck. My hands shake as I remember the thickness pressing into me at that moment.

The next two photos are of us in some weird Kama Sutra positions on the pool deck. The crew members really thought we were nuts but were at least willing to take the photos. Apparently Doug's scavenger hunt was the talk of the crew. He always did things with an extra flair and just bordering on taking things too far. We submitted the final task exactly fifty minutes after the hunt started.

Colin took off after saying he had to get ready for this evening with Evie. She apparently begged him to hang out with her because she was bored so we're all going to The Manor club in a little bit.

I lie back on the bed in our cabin waiting for Theo to answer the text I sent him begging him to come talk with me. The door swings open with his arrival. "I'm here! Where have you been?" He stalks over to me, flopping on the bed next to me.

He looks refreshed, happiness radiating off of him. "Did you get laid?" I enquire. He definitely got laid. He's never this relaxed.

"Of course I did. Now tell me where the hell you've been and what happened with Professor Turner. I saw the way he

was looking at you outside the Razzle Dazzle earlier.”

I throw an arm over my face and tell him everything that’s happened in the last three days ending with his fake proposal.

I peek at him from under my arm. “Are you going to say something?”

He looks broken. He’s not talking and Theo always talks. Crap, I broke him. “So wait, you went on a blind date you bitched me out for. Then you ended up sleeping with him, faking an orgasm in public, and he proposed to you in the casino?”

I roll my eyes. “It was a dare. When you say it like that it sounds insane.”

“It is insane, but in a good way.” He grabs my hand and pulls it off my face. “You really like him. What’s the worst that can happen if you let him in?”

“Oh I don’t know. I could have my heart broken. Or we get back on land and he decides he doesn’t like me anymore. We aren’t even dating. It’s all just so overwhelming.”

“Hmm...” He stands up. “That’s it. We’re going to look at this like it’s a vacation fling. Nothing serious. Just enjoying it as it comes. Literally.” He waves his finger at me.

“Ugh, seriously?”

He goes over to the closet and pulls out a hanger with an outfit on it I haven’t seen before. “No not seriously. Don’t you get it? You’re going to enjoy this and not take it serious. Whatever happens, happens.” He lays the sparkly outfit on the bed next to me. “Now get dressed in that. Not one of your outfits you brought. This is perfect for the club tonight. He’s going to be drooling all over you.”

I grab the dress from next to me, looking to see what else he has to pair it with. There’s very little fabric here. He walks away without another word and the final nail in his plan is in place. I’m going dressed like a slut. Fuck me.



The Manor club is lit. There're people everywhere partying and dancing. The drinks are flowing as people grind together on the dance floor leaving all their inhibitions behind at the door. The tight black dress Theo gave me lands just below my ass cheeks and hugs my curves like saran wrap covered in sparkles. The five-inch black heels he gave me complement the entire look. I feel sexy, I just hope I don't move the wrong way and let one of the girls fall out.

"Theo!" Evie's voice carries to us from a table in the corner. If anything, this trip has brought me some great friendships. She always looks so happy and excited to see us. We'll have to make plans once we're back home for us all to hang out.

"Hey Aves!" She stands up and wraps her arms around me, squeezing me in a hug. "Now that the awkward shit is over and done with, you know since you've officially screwed my brother, we can be besties too!" She pulls me into the seat next to her and slides a glass to me.

I drink it without asking what's in it. I trust her. Only a few people could hand me a drink and I would actually consume it. You never know what people do to drinks nowadays. The liquid burns on the way down, taking my breath away. "Fuck." I wince. "What was that?"

"Tequila. Duh!" She takes her cup and tosses it back.

"Shouldn't you warn people in advance what they're about to drink?" I grab a lime wedge and suck on it.

She pats my hand. "I tried but you took it before I could get the words out." She giggles. "I suppose I'd be drinking too if I was proposed to in front of half the ship."

"Evelyn, leave her alone." Colin sits down across from us, a harsh look on his face.

Theo grabs Evie's hand. "Come on, let's dance and leave these two alone. They're kind of downers today after all the

drama.” They head out onto the dance floor, leaving me with a brooding Colin.

I take another glass sitting in the center and throw it back. This one isn’t as bad as the first. I suppose if you drink enough, you numb your taste buds completely. “Well future Mr. Avery Santos, we might as well drink up. We have some celebrating to do.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Doesn’t the woman usually take the man’s name?”

“Yeah if they’re stuck in the old days. In today’s world a man can take our name too.” I shrug. Grabbing another shot I hand it to him and take one for myself, holding it up in a toast. “To the future of either Mr. Avery Santos or Mrs. Colin Turner, at least for the remaining four days of this trip.” He clinks my shot glass with his and tosses it back. He doesn’t even flinch from the taste.

“Well future Mrs. Turner, if you were to get married, would you want a big wedding or a small one?” He twirls the cup on the table between his hands.

I tap my now numb lips with my finger. “Honestly...” I sit back, letting the chair absorb some of my tension. “I’d probably just go to a courthouse and get married. I’m not a big fan of large organized events.”

He’s silent for a moment. “Wouldn’t you want your family to be there?”

“After my mom died when I was five, I swore I’d never do a big wedding if she couldn’t help me plan it.” I fight off the memories of her, they take my breath away when I think too hard. “My dad would understand. Besides, I’d have him and Theo come to the courthouse with me. They’re the only two I’d want there, anyhow.”

This conversation went deep really fast. This seems to be the theme for us. Shit gets real way too fast on this damn boat. “What about you?”

He sits back and crosses his ankle over his knee. “My mom would want a large wedding, but she’d understand. After

my ex-girlfriend turned me down when I proposed, I swore I'd never get married."

His ex-girlfriend turned down his proposal? Theo didn't tell me that. I doubt he really knew, but shit Evie should have warned him before setting up this blind date trip. The subject is too heavy, too real. Theo said enjoy the moments as they come. Nothing serious. "I think we both deserve more drinks. To asshole exes and new beginnings." I flag down a passing crew member who has drinks on their trays. Apparently tonight there's a bachelorette party somewhere and they have free drinks on the house for the first hour. Perfect.

I hand one to Colin and we both taste it. It's not bad, more of a fruity flavor than anything. "Let's go dance, shake off some of this depressing aura around us." I jump up as a popular pop song starts streaming through the speakers. He follows me to the dance floor where we let all our worries and questions float away to the pulsing bass around us.

After a few more songs and a lot of shots later, all four of us are drenched in sweat. My heels are killing my feet and this dress is way too uncomfortable. "Theo, why did you make me wear this tight ass dress?" I pull on it as I flop onto the seat at the table.

His eyes are bloodshot, his cheeks bright red from the alcohol. "Girl...if I didn't dress you..." He looks around at a group of girls cheering. Something comes flying at our table, a straw landing smack dab in the middle. Theo picks it up and a flesh covered penis straw sits between his fingers.

"Huh, that's not very big," Evie says, eyeing it up. "It's actually pretty cute looking."

"For hell's sake, Evie." Colin lays his head on the table.

She grabs the straw and tucks it in her purse. "Don't be such a prude. It's cute. I'm going to disinfect the shit out of it, then I'm putting it on my bookshelf," she says like it's an everyday occurrence that penis straws fly out of the air.

I snort picturing a bookshelf with a random penis straw sitting amongst the books. "Do you have a lot of penises on

your bookshelf?” I turn to look at her, causing the room to spin.

“Of course!” Her face looks astonished like she can’t believe I would even ask her such questions.

Colin groans. “And on that note I’m out of here. We have the jungle river tubing tomorrow, Evie.”

Theo smiles. “We all have that tomorrow. Another one of our glorious plans for you two. Although it seems like we really didn’t need to put so much work into it. You both are huge hornballs.”

“Theo!” I slap at his arm or try to, instead I teeter over. Colin’s arm catches me before I face plant on the floor.

“Yup, it’s time to go.” Evie giggles. “I’m feeling a little spent myself.” She stands up and wobbles on her heels. Theo wraps an arm around her guiding her towards the exit.

Colin slips his arm under my legs and lifts me. “What are you doing?” I grab his neck afraid I will fall.

“Carrying you. There’s no way you’re going to be able to walk in those heels back to your room.” He follows Theo out of the club towards the elevators.

Everyone is silent, I lean my head against his shoulder too tired to argue. He smells like mint again. I take a deep breath, breathing him in as my eyes close. I hear the doors ping before I pass out in his arms.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

COLIN



THE TUBING EXCURSION is not the first thing I want to do today. My head pounds from all the alcohol we consumed last night. I can't imagine all the bumps of the river will feel great with this hangover. Evie and I line up to get our lifejackets. They brought us here on two different vans, Theo and Avery should be getting here in the next few minutes.

I glance up as a white van pulls into the parking area, the driver slamming on the breaks. Everyone starts to exit and I hear a few curses about a rough ride and how they're happy to be alive. Theo and Avery exit clenching each other's arms. She looks terrified.

I start across the parking area towards her, I don't see anything wrong with her visibly but she's definitely traumatized. "What's wrong? What happened?" I look her over.

Theo shakes his head. "The drivers in Jamaica are just a little intense. They drive like they don't care if they live or die."

"I'm fine. I just never want to ride in that van again." Avery walks towards the building with lockers available for our belongings. We all follow, but I'm still worried about her. She doesn't seem like herself.

She tosses her bag into the locker along with her wrap she was wearing over her swimsuit. Her body never ceases to amaze me. Her round curves are hugging a one piece black

swimsuit that has sections cut out across her chest and midsection.

“I’m so ready for this. It’s going to be epic,” Evie says as we head towards where the tour guide is handing out lifejackets. Avery and Theo grab theirs at the same time a girl wearing a wedding dress comes out of the lockers.

She’s holding her head high, a friend by her side as they head down to the tubes tied together. I admire her strength to wear a wedding dress in the Jamaican heat. “I suppose she’s doing one of those wreck the dress things?” I ask whoever is listening to me.

Theo glances over. “Oh the poor thing. I heard she was left by her asshole fiancé. I hope she gets some amazing photos destroying her dress.”

“She’s stunning,” Avery looks at her. “What ass would leave her?”

I glance back over to her as she climbs in the tube. I wish they had that option for men, wreck the suit or something when your heart is broken by the love of your life. We head over to the tubes and board with the rest of them. The water is much warmer than I anticipated as I walk to sit on the tubes. At least if we fall out, it won’t be freezing.

“Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream,” T-spoon, the tour guide, yells out as we all get into our tubes. “If you see a crocodile, don’t forget to scream.”

“Crocodiles?!” Evie squeals. “Is he serious?” She looks in the water frantically searching for the large amphibians.

Avery sits on the tube tied to mine, her legs touching the side of my raft. People start passing back disposable cups and a large bottle of something strong smelling.

“It’s rum punch,” T-spoon says when someone else asks. “You can never drink too much rum in Jamaica.”

“Hear, hear,” someone towards the back yells out as we continue passing the drinks along.

Rum punch tastes more like a punch in the face. This shit will get you drunk after one cup.

“No. In Jamaica, we say ‘ya, mon.’ Let’s try it,” the other tour guide behind all of us says. “How we doin’? Everyone ready to head out?”

“Ya, mon!” we all repeat back in unison.

“That’s what I’m talking ‘bout,” he says.

Drifting down the river goes a lot slower than I thought it would. The calm water flows around us, letting us float at a leisurely pace. I sip my rum punch and listen to everyone around us chatting.

“This shit will knock you out.” Avery holds up her glass still completely full. “I’m not sure it’s the best hangover cure for me.”

Theo holds out his arm to her. “Give it to me you light weight. I’ll drink it up.” She hands him her cup and he downs it like a shot. Tonight I might be carrying him back to his room instead of Avery from the looks of it.

The rafts float over a rapid as water splashes over us, drenching a few in the front of the group. People cheer as we spin with the water for a bit. Avery is lying back with her sunglasses on her eyes, I can’t tell if she’s awake or asleep from this angle but she looks completely relaxed.

“Stop staring,” she mumbles. “I’m awake, don’t worry I’m not going to fall asleep and fall in the water.”

I should have known she was watching me too. “Are you feeling any better today? You had a rough night last night.”

She throws her hand over her face. “Don’t remind me. Theo said I puked all over your shirt when you dropped me off at my room.” She peeks through her fingers at me. “I’m mortified, but I’m sorry.”

I chuckle. “Trust me it’s not the first time someone has puked on me from drinking too much.”

Evie’s sitting on her raft with her eyes closed. “Hey, don’t bring me into this. I’m young and dumb. Shouldn’t you two

old farts know better than to drink that much?”

“He’s older than me,” Avery complains. “I’m not an old fart, I just happen to forget my limits sometimes.” She shrugs.

Theo kicks his feet in the air at her. “Oh no, no excuses from you. You were trashed and you know it. But it was so worth it to see prince charming rescuing you.”

Her cheeks pinken with his comment and I can’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment. I’m not a prince charming, but I’d always help her if she needed me. We hit another rapid and the water splashes over the side, soaking Theo and Avery. She gasps as it catches her off guard. Her laughter rings out with the bumps of the ride.

“This place is stunning.” She looks around taking in the trees hanging over the river, the vines and flowers all around us. “When I get home I’m creating a jewelry line with a little piece of each place we stop.”

Evie perks up. “That would be perfection! We got in some amazing metal pieces the other day in the shape of trees and vines that you could make into a gorgeous piece.”

She lifts her glasses up, staring at Evie. “You’re just now telling me this?! I would have been in there the day they showed up if I had known. When we get back we need to go over the inventory so I can stock up.” She grins. “I’m so excited, this will be the first time in a while I’ve come up with a new line.”

I remember her mentioning she made jewelry for a living, I just didn’t realize it was that intensive. “What’s the name of your company?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s nothing you’ve probably heard of.” She waves at me, dismissing my question.

Theo lets out a snort. “Yeah sure, Aves.” He looks to me. “Since she’s being too stubborn, I’ll tell you. Have you heard of the jewelry line Mya and Lane?”

Holy shit, that’s one of the largest jewelry businesses in our area of New York that’s featured at the local art museums and stores. It’s a popular small business that blew up on

TikTok a few years ago and now all the jewelry is constantly sold out. I think Evie has a few pieces and they're stunning. "You are Mya and Lane?" The more I get to know her the more she surprises me.

"Yeah, I named it after my mother and grandmother. Mya was my grandma's first name and Lane was my mother's middle name. My grandmother helped raise me after my mom passed and taught me the skills I needed to be an independent woman." She shrugs like it's a normal thing to be a famous jewelry artist in the small business world. "So I created my business in memory of the two women who I loved so much."

My mouth is ajar as I stare at her beauty. She's humble, I haven't once heard her brag about her lifestyle. She definitely makes way more money than anyone can imagine. Mostly though, her talent is awe-inspiring. "It takes a great deal of creativity and artistry to take metal and stones and turn them into a stunning piece people want to wear every day."

She lifts her lips in a smirk. "Are you flirting with me Professor Turner?"

"Flirting isn't the word I would use," I mutter. More like falling head first for you. "More like paying you a great compliment with a smidge of flirtation in there."

We slowly float to the swimming hole as more rum punch is passed around. The water is cooler here as everyone gets in the water to go swimming for a bit. Avery and Theo both jump right in, the cold water not even affecting them. The minute it hits me though I jump. The chill burrows into my skin, the sun is looming above us creating a stunning backdrop with a waterfall off to the side. People are jumping in all around enjoying the fresh air and the break from the ship.

I watch as the girl with the wedding dress stands on shore and a man with a camera captures pictures of her, the sun hitting her just right as she smiles. At least she's happier now. Like my own experience, it's better to be happy and alone than with someone who would make you miserable.

My eyes rake over to Avery, and I think of all the potential possibilities. The future we may or may not have once we

disembark the ship. Her carefree laugh rings out as Theo splashes her.

“Hey, aren’t you the guy that proposed in the casino to some girl?” A guy I don’t recognize is standing next to me, watching everyone around us.

I want to tell him it was a dare for the scavenger hunt, that it wasn’t real, but I can’t get the words past my lips. “Yeah,” is the only word I manage to spit out.

“That’s crazy cool. You guys met on the ship and fell in love that fast. I mean I found a few chicks to sleep with, but I haven’t found the one just yet.” He looks over at Evie and Avery now carrying on and attempting to dunk Theo under the water.

“What’s up with the blonde chick? She’s hot, I think I’ll ask her back to my cabin tonight.” He nods towards Evie and all I see is red. This dipshit doesn’t even care about women, he just wants to get laid six ways to Sunday.

“Lay off of her, it’s my sister. If you go near her, I’ll make sure you won’t be using your dick anytime soon with the women on board,” I say nonchalantly as I turn away and start swimming towards my girls. My girls. What a soothing thought.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AVERY



WHEN WE RETURN to the ship from the river tubing excursion and eating some jerk chicken, I'm completely exhausted. The day went by fast, but the sun wore me out. I think I drank more bottled water today than I have in a year and I'm still thirsty. Hanging with everyone felt like we had all been friends for years though and it was worth the sunburn I'm sure I'll have tomorrow.

Colin and Evie are heading back to their room to change and shower then we're meeting up for some dinner later. "I'm so glad we aren't doing any crazy excursions tomorrow. I'm exhausted," I mumble as I fall onto the bed with just my towel wrapped around me.

Theo sprawls out on the couch already in pajamas. "I refuse to leave this couch for the rest of the night. Tomorrow I'll join the living again but for now, I'm over it."

I'm regretting my decision to meet up for dinner with the others when there's a knock on our cabin door. Theo looks at me just noticing my towel. "I guess I'll get it. Go get clothes on." He tosses a pair of shorts at my head.

I lay there refusing to move until my body is ready to actually get up. I hear the door shut but I can't hear Theo. "Who was it?" I call out.

"It's me." Colin walks into the room. He's wearing gray sweats and a t-shirt. "I sent Theo up to my suite to have a slumber party with Evie. He was all too willing to have a large

bed to sleep in.” He leans against the doorway, his eyes traveling over my body.

Heat rises in my body as I take all of him in. The memories of our last night together rush through me, causing need to pool in my core. “Does that mean we’re having a sleepover too?” I sit up with my elbows propping me up. The towel falls away from my chest, leaving me completely bare for him to take in.

He moves towards me, his gaze burning with lust. “I think I made the right decision coming here instead of going to dinner.” He leans over me, clasping his hand on my hip as he pulls me close. My body slides along the bed and into him. His lips crash into mine with an urgency, tasting and touching my entire body as he goes.

This is what I wanted all day. What I’ve needed since the scavenger hunt. My body burns with desire as I pull him onto the bed with me, flipping him onto his back. I straddle him, placing both of my arms alongside his head. “Why does your touch burn into my soul?” I run my tongue over his lips, causing him to take a sharp inhale.

He reaches up, brushing a piece of hair off my face and tucking it behind my ear. “Why does it feel like I’ve known you my entire life?” he whispers back.

He grabs my face and pulls me into him, taking my breath away with his kisses. Our bodies entwine, replaying everything we did the other evening plus more.



I wake with a jolt, my pulse racing with the dream I had. I don’t remember most of it, but it felt like the ship was sinking around us. The sheets are tangled around my legs, I look next to me and notice the bed is empty.

The cabin door opens and the scent of coffee reaches my nose. Colin appears with two large cups of coffee and a bag of donuts. “I got us breakfast.” He hands me a steaming cup.

He's already dressed for the day with his hair damp from the shower.

"You should have woken me up. You didn't have to get me breakfast." I take the cup and sigh at the warmth in my hands. "But thank you because this is amazing to wake up to."

He grins as he pulls out the donuts. "I grabbed a few chocolate icing ones and a few honey bun donuts."

The donuts are as large as a paper plate, I've never seen them that large before. "Holy, those things could feed four people." I grab a chocolate one and stare at it. It looks delicious, I'm just not sure how I'm going to eat it all.

"We can share if you want." He grabs a few napkins and crawls in next to me.

I rip the donut in half. "I think sharing is a good idea. I might be sick if I eat that much sugar." Taking a bite, the chocolate melts on my tongue. I moan as the sweetness hits every taste bud in my mouth. I grab the other half from him before he can take a bite. "On the other hand, you only live once." I plop it onto my plate and take another bite. This has to be what heaven would taste like.

He chuckles, grabbing another donut for himself. He takes a bite of his and I wait for his reaction. His eyes close and he groans out, "Fuck. That is good."

My core tightens at his words. "I never wished I was a donut so bad before," I whisper. His eyes shoot up to mine and he's on me before I have a chance to move my plate. It's tossed to the side as he has his way with me and instead of moaning on my breakfast, I'm screaming out his name for the next hour.

We head out to the non-excursion option for the day in Grand Cayman. There were tons of excursions to choose from today but after yesterday we both decided we needed a break. We sent Theo and Evie our tickets to the reef and wreck snorkel adventure. We board a bus after paying the fee and head towards the beach. The driver follows the bumpy roads, letting us know about different things to do on the beach.

“There’s a lot of restaurants along the beach,” Colin says. He’s looking at the cruise app where it lists all the tourist safe areas we can check out. “They even have cabanas along the beach you can relax in.”

My dream of sitting on a beach, drinking out of a coconut with a little umbrella, and sitting in a cabana might actually come true. “I’m getting a cabana and enjoying the sunshine.”

He closes the app and slips it into his backpack. “We could grab some lunch at one of the local restaurants too later today.”

The bus travels down a smaller path until the ocean comes back into view. There’s barely a crowd and the water is crystal clear. The driver stops and lets us all off with a wave. The warm air calms my nerves. Sleeping with Colin is easy, even the small talk is easy. But being inside my own head and second guessing everything is hard.

He reaches out and holds my hand like we’ve been doing it for years. I never needed a man to make me happy, I still don’t. I’ll eventually be happy either way this works out, but I can’t say it wouldn’t hurt if we didn’t continue seeing each other.

“Should we grab drinks first or head to a cabana?” He looks down the beach. It’s not like the beaches back home where you can’t even sit and enjoy the sand without another group of people being right there next to you. Here they have everything spread out, it’s peaceful like the pictures you see in magazines.

“Let’s grab drinks first. It doesn’t look like we’ll be short on anywhere to sit.” The sand squishes between my toes and sandals as we walk. I can’t stand the feeling so I bend down and pull them off my feet before we get to the bar.

The beach is lined with walk up bars, restrooms, restaurants, and shops. Even with all of the people at them, it’s still quiet. The little tiki hut hosts an array of bottles on a wicker shelf. “They have everything here.” Colin gazes at the shelves while we wait for the bartender to finish helping another couple.

“What can I get ya?” He turns to us with a toothy smile. His tan skin matches his dark brown hair.

I look to see if he has any coconuts anywhere. “This may sound weird and I apologize in advance, but can you make a fruity drink with an umbrella? And maybe put it in a coconut? If you don’t have one, a cup is just fine,” I ramble on.

He laughs. “We have coconuts everywhere here. Don’t worry pretty girl, I’ll make you a coconut drink.” He looks at Colin. “What about you sir? You wanna coconut drink?”

Colin looks at me as I grin. “Please get the drink with me.”

“Yeah, might as well. You only get a vacation like this once in a while.”

“Vacation is the best! Yes, coconut drinks for all!” The bartender smiles as he starts mixing a ton of liquors and juices together. I try not to watch the concoction he’s making, my liver already hates me on this vacation.

After a few minutes, he places two large coconuts filled to the brim with an iced drink and two pink umbrellas. Colin pays him and leaves a generous tip before we head over to one of the unoccupied cabanas.

I take a tentative sip expecting it to burn, but it goes down smooth. “This is delicious.” I take another drink trying to figure out what it reminds me of.

He takes a sip of his drink. “It almost reminds me of a rocket popsicle.”

I nod as I take another sip. “That’s what it is. I couldn’t figure it out.” The cabanas have large loungers inside, the white walls surrounding them give a semblance of privacy to make it feel like you’re alone on the beach. We set our stuff down in one that has two loungers next to each other. The ocean laps quietly at the shoreline not far from where we sit. A few people are swimming in the water a ways out.

“I can’t believe how clear the ocean is here. You can see the bottom through the water.” I can’t stop staring at the blue waters. I’m used to seeing the dark water back home where you can’t even see your feet in it.

“Do you want to go for a swim?” He pulls his shirt over his head and bares his chest. The v shape by the edge of his swim trunks grabs my attention. I try not to stare, but it’s like a moth to a flame. I can’t help where my eyes are attracted to. He clears his throat pulling my attention back to him. “A swim? Or would you like to cut our beach day short and head back to the ship?” The suggestion in his tone is not lost on me.

“No, we’re here to enjoy new places, not be stuck inside a cabin all day, even if it is for amazing sex.” I pull off my cover up, revealing the other bikini I brought. I can’t wait for him to get an eye of the back of it, I picked it out just for him.

He shrugs his shoulders. “The offer still stands.” I turn around and hear him suck in a breath. “Holy fuck.”

Mission accomplished. Walking towards the water, I shake my ass in my thong bikini to make sure he gets a good eye full. Just because I said we didn’t need to be inside having sex all day doesn’t mean I’m not going to torture him in the process.

The water is warm against my skin as I wade further out, there’re barely any waves so my fear of drowning diminishes significantly. He follows behind me, swimming past me to a spot further away from others and prying eyes. I join him, the water landing right above his chest if he stands. I have to tread water because I’m so short. Reaching out, he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me into him. My legs encircle him when he hooks his hands under my ass, holding me there so I don’t have to tread water anymore.

“When I came on this cruise I didn’t expect to enjoy any of it. I planned on drinking the entire week and praying it went by fast.” His hands slide back and forth against my skin underneath the water. “Now here we are on day five and I’m dreading for the end of it.”

I place a gentle kiss against his cheek, the water on my lips leaving a salty taste on my tongue. “Let’s not think about the future. Let’s just enjoy the moment. The here and now.”

He squeezes me tighter, his enjoyment pressing against my sensitive area. “Oh, I’m enjoying every damn minute I have

with you.” He captures my lip between his teeth and gives it a little tug before licking it.

My entire body shivers at the sensation shooting through me. “Besides amazing sex, what else do you enjoy the most about this cruise so far?” I need to learn more about him, to feel like I know who he is deep down.

He places a kiss on my neck. “Besides amazing sex and spending time with you, I’m really enjoying seeing the cultures at each port we stop in. Oh and seeing Gertrude flirt with every living man on board.” He chuckles as he kisses the soft spot just below my ear.

I let out a sigh as I melt into him. Who am I kidding, I know a lot about him already. Why waste such a gorgeous beach and warm water with boring conversation. “I changed my mind.” I pant as he slides his hands further between my thighs, caressing the sensitive spot through my swimsuit. “I want to talk more about the amazing sex.”

He laughs into my neck while flicking his tongue against my skin. “You taste salty, it’s the perfect mix with your sweet skin.” His hands keep moving beneath the water, drawing me closer to a release. I move with his fingers, not even caring if anyone around us sees what we’re doing. My mind is too focused on him and what he’s doing to my body. He picks up the pace just enough to elicit a moan out of my lips. I feel him twitch against my bottom where I’m sitting on him.

I reach between us, my hand sliding down his shorts and encircling his dick. The warm skin slides between my fingers as I pump back and forth. Now he’s moaning in my ear as I give him pleasure beneath the ocean water.

Looking around I don’t see anyone near us or even paying attention to us. I slide the top of his swim trunks down just enough to free his cock. His grip tightens on my sides as I lean forward some. Moving my swimsuit to the side, I gently ease him inside of me. Moving my hips back and forth in a rhythm with the water, I ride him chasing both of our releases.

“I’m not...” he moans as I push against him harder, “...wearing a condom.”

I keep riding him. “I’m on the pill and I’m clean. I got tested before I came on the cruise.” With that admission he grabs me and slams into me gently without making too much of a movement for others to notice.

I slide against him, feeling the orgasm building beneath my skin. Chasing its release, I move a little faster but keep it calm enough to look like we’re just talking to each other out here intimately. He tenses up as I slam into him one last time and fall forward crying out into his neck with my release. I feel him pulse inside of me only moments later with his own orgasm.

Neither of us letting go of each other. “That was the thing I most enjoyed about this cruise,” I say with a giggle. I can’t believe we just had sex in the ocean.

I slide off of him, adjusting my swimsuit while he fixes himself. “It’s in one of my top ten things I enjoyed about this cruise also. And all top ten involve you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

COLIN



MY MIND GOES BACK to yesterday when Avery made love to me in the ocean. I can still feel her riding my cock out in the middle of the sea. My body twitches with the thought. Today I'm planning on taking her on an excursion. Somewhere we can have a date without hooking up. Although I never expected to have sex in the ocean either.

The heat running through my body is electric. It's like it responds to her whenever she's near even before I notice her. She appears at my side, her small white sundress bright against her brown skin. "Hey." She stands on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek.

"Morning gorgeous." Seeing her smile with those two words has my damn heart beating a mating call in my chest. The stupid bastard has no chill when it comes to her. "I booked us a VIP La Casa Beach Retreat today."

A grin spreads across her face as she squeezes my arm. "Really?! I wanted to do that one, but we didn't have a suite so we couldn't get tickets." Her eyes roam the port from the deck we're standing on.

We landed in Cozumel, the weather is stunning and the views are breathtaking. I grab her hand out of habit, needing to touch her at all times. "The bus will be here shortly to take us to it. Do you have everything you need?"

She nods excitedly, not taking her eyes off the flurry of people down below heading into the city. "I have my bag, my

passport just in case, and my money. I've never been more ready for a date before."

A date. My heart squeezes again with a jolt of happiness. At this rate the damn thing is going to cause me to have a heart attack. "Let's go and find our VIP Beach Retreat." Grinning. I pull her away from the scene as she giggles, her laughter coursing through me with each step we take.



The beach house is more than just a one story house sitting on the sand. This fucker is massive. It's three stories filled with windows all around so you can take in the views no matter what room you're in. The staff have created a small brunch for us in the kitchen along with fresh coffee.

"This is way bigger than I expected." I take in the gigantic floor to ceiling windows.

She snickers. "That's what she said."

I burst out into a deep belly laugh at her dirty joke. Not because it's actually funny but hearing her quote one of my favorite shows is priceless. "I had no idea you liked *The Office*."

She turns to me while placing her hands on her hips, "Only sophisticated people like *The Office*. It's true comedy gold that I will watch on repeat just to see Michael Scott embarrass himself every day."

I plant a kiss on her forehead before replying. "I think I'm falling in love with you more each day." I didn't mean to say that out loud, but now the words are in the air between us and I'm not sure if it will land in daggers to my heart or fall around us like comforting sunshine.

Someone clears their throat, catching our attention. "Sir, Madame." One of the staff bows. "We have a cooking class starting in ten minutes if you're interested."

I've never been a fan of cooking myself, it takes way too long for something you're going to eat in less than thirty

minutes. Before I can answer, Avery jumps in. “That would be amazing. Thank you.” She turns to me. “I suck at cooking. I burnt mac and cheese once. Maybe I’ll learn a few pointers here.”

“How did you burn mac and cheese?” We follow the staff member towards the back of the house where the kitchen is located.

She shrugs. “It was boxed mac and cheese. I put the noodles in the water and got distracted. I forgot it was cooking for over thirty minutes.” She laughs while in the memory. “I actually smelled it burning before I remembered I was even cooking.”

When we enter into the kitchen there’s an elaborate set up. Full dinner is laid out for us to cook along with a chef getting everything out for us to proceed with the class. He has bowls and spoons lining the large counter island, spices and seasonings piled along with the food. I hope this is a better experience than it looks like it will be because that’s a lot of food and a lot of work.

“Welcome! I’m Emanuel!” The chef is about mid-fifties, a short tan local man. His vibrant mannerisms light up excitedly when we enter. He claps his hands together. “Grab an apron and wash on up. We’re going to be making Caribbean salmon today!” He hurries around the counter handing us both white aprons to put on.

I hold it up and tie it around my waist then my neck. At least it covers most of my clothes, but it makes me feel like I’m wearing a dress. Avery’s apron is almost down to her ankles, her short stature not built for such a large apron. I help her tie it up around her neck higher so it doesn’t fall down.

She glances down at it. “This is way too big. I feel like a little kid playing dress up.”

Emanuel chops his hand through the air. “Nonsense. Senorita, you look beautiful. Everyone does when they cook. It’s about the art of cooking, not the fashion.” He stares at the food on the counter dreamily.

I mouth at Avery ‘Okay then’ causing her to giggle. “Right. Let’s get on with it.” Emanuel claps his hands again, shuffling to the stove and handing us a pan. “Caribbean salmon is a favorite here in Cozumel. The delicacy of each intricate taste mixing with the fresh salmon from the sea is muy bueno.”

We walk over to the counter, Avery on my side as we take in everything we’re about to make. “You only live once, right?” She shrugs. Clapping her hands together she looks to Emanuel. “Where do we start?”

Twenty minutes later and Avery has spices all over the counter and rice pilaf in her hair. A smudge of something on her cheek sits there as she concentrates on mixing the dessert we’re preparing while the salmon cooks in the oven. “Can I help you with that?” I made the salmon while she did the rice. But while she makes the banana cake, which apparently is a classic here, she refuses to let me help.

“I got it. I figured I have to learn how to bake at some point. Maybe it’s easier than cooking because that rice about killed me.” She shakes her head. “Why don’t you grease the cake pan, the mixture is almost ready to be poured in.

I do as she asks while she beats away at the bananas in the bowl to get them to mix correctly. The timer goes off on the oven so I remove the salmon and the smell flows through the kitchen. My stomach growls in response. Avery pours the batter into the pan, a few chunks still visible in the mix. “That should be fine, right?” She pats it down with a spoon.

Emanuel left us to our own devices about five minutes ago since everything was cooking. He had another beach casa to go to for a cooking class. I shrug. “Sure. I have no idea but we can see what happens.”

She pops it into the oven and sets the timer. She looks like she’s been in a war zone of a bakery. Flour is now caked on her forehead. I swipe at a piece of food on her cheek. “They have showers here if you want to clean up.”

She looks down at her now stained apron. “Is it that bad?”

She's stunning as she stands there covered in food, I want to wash her off with my hands while the water runs over her bare skin. But the food is going to be cold if we take a shower now because it is not going to be a fast one. "You look beautiful. We can eat then we'll shower." Her eyes light up with desire as she pulls off the apron .

Before I can get distracted I grab the salmon and rice, carrying it to the table in the other room. They have a dining table set right against the windows overlooking the ocean. Avery sits down across from me with a bottle of champagne in her hand and two flutes. "While in the Caribbean." She grins while popping the top off.

She pours us both a glass as I serve us each some food. The experience is unreal, being surrounded by the sea and sitting across from her is a dream come true. She holds up her glass. "To adventures in the Caribbean and people you meet. To us."

We clink our glasses together. "To us," I repeat.

The salmon is amazing, the flavors burst along my tongue the more I eat. Each bite a different flavor almost. She moans around her mouthful and I picture her lips around me. I shift in my seat. "If you keep that up, we won't make it to the shower." I level her with a stare.

She smirks as she takes another bite, closing her eyes with a moan. Tempting me and teasing. I push my plate away. "I'm ready for dessert."

She giggles as she jumps up from the table. She heads up the stairs towards the bedroom. I follow her, my gaze never straying from her as she winds her way up the stairs searching for a room. They said we had the house to ourselves, we could use it as we please today. Right now I want to use it to take Avery while we overlook the ocean.

She enters the first room on the right, there's a large king size bed in the middle of the room facing the large windows. The white comforter has roses laid out and two pieces of chocolate. Perfect. I stalk towards her, wrapping my arms around her from behind.

She leans into me. “Isn’t it stunning?” The views of the waves crashing against the sand are what she’s looking at but I can’t take my eyes off of her.

“You have no idea,” I whisper in her ear. She shivers against me, turning in my arms to face me.

“I think I have some idea.” Her fingers trace my jawline. My skin pebbles at every spot she touches as she runs her hand down my chest and even further. I pull her in, crushing my lips to hers. Her hands on my chest between us grip my shirt letting me know she wants more. We fall to the bed in a tangle of limbs, neither of us able to get our clothes off fast enough.



Panting, she rolls to the side off of me, both of us worn out and fully satiated. “That was perfect. Dinner, sex, and now dessert.” She sighs. She sits up quickly, panicked. “Oh my god. Dessert!” She rushes to throw her dress and underwear back on.

Shit. I forgot about the cake. I grab my clothes and toss them on as fast as I can. As soon as we exit the room the buzzer from the stove sounds. I can smell something in the air, but it doesn’t smell like a fresh baked cake. I run down the steps as she hurries behind me. The oven is smoking. Grabbing an oven mitt, I quickly reach in and pull out a completely black rock that should have been a cake.

“Fuck a duck,” Avery gasps behind me as I toss it in the sink. She rushes around opening windows to get the smell out. “I can’t believe I burned the cake. It’s not even a cake anymore. It looks like a hard rock.”

I turn on the faucet to cool down the metal pan that’s still smoking. “I mean, technically we both burned the cake. We were a little preoccupied.” I smirk as she narrows her eyes at me.

“It’s not funny Colin Turner. Now what are we going to do for dessert.” She glances at her destroyed baking attempt.

I grab her and pull her towards me, placing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “I already had my dessert. But when we get back to the ship we can grab some ice cream together. It’s hard to burn something that’s frozen.”

She snorts. “Ugh. You’re never going to let me live this down are you?”

I shake my head. “Nope. But it’s definitely a memory we’ll never forget.” The numbers on the clock stare back at me, reminding me another day is close to an end. “We have to head back to the ship now.”

She sighs, grabbing her bag she makes sure she has everything she brought with her. “Another day down, only one more to go.” The sadness enveloped in her words cracks open another fissure in my heart.

“We always have tomorrow. And when we get home we can find our new routine together.” She looks away, staring out into the ocean.

She doesn’t respond as she walks over to me and squeezes my hand. “We better hurry so we don’t miss the ship.”

Her silence breaks me. I can feel the distance she placed between us with each brick. I follow her outside where the weather is shifting, a breeze in the air giving me a chill. It fits exactly how I’m feeling currently.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AVERY



THE VIP CASA beach trip was amazing yesterday. We had planned on getting ice cream when we came back, but exhaustion caught up to both of us. We ended up passing out in his bed and sleeping through the night. I feel bad I haven't seen Theo much this trip, it was supposed to be our time together. Instead, I've been pining over a man I just met.

I push out a breath as I fight the urge to run. Everything is so convoluted. Colin walks out of the bathroom freshly shaven. His smile lights up his entire face and I have to look away before I let the tears fall. Today is our last day at sea. I knew this time was going to come to an end soon. I just hadn't planned on how much it was going to hurt me.

Growing up I was always taught that women don't need a man in their lives to survive. No one needs to depend on someone else to make their life happy and enjoyable. My parents fell in love in high school and they carried that love until the day my mom died. I saw how heartbroken my dad was when she left. He became a shell of the man he once was. It's why I don't get attached to any relationships.

The only problem is, I'm already attached to Colin. I can't imagine life without him. Thinking about waking up in a bed all alone breaks my heart. I push the thoughts aside, refusing to put a damper on our last day together.

"I figured we can grab some ice cream today. We slept most of the day away but we might as well get the dessert we missed out on yesterday." He picks up his wallet unaware of the turmoil churning inside of me currently.

“Ice cream sounds perfect. I know there’s the Lick Me shop down on deck 7. I heard they have fun flavors.” I slide on my sandals, avoiding eye contact.

He leans over me, placing a kiss to my cheek. “It sounds like a perfect spot.”

I can’t fight the smile pulling at my lips with his gentle touches. Being so close to him is going to make today even harder. He heads towards the door with a cheerful pep in his step. “I hope they have a rocky road ice cream. It’s one of my favorites.”

“I love anything with cheesecake in it or Oreos.” The closer we get to the ice cream shop the more my mood lifts. People are milling around everywhere chatting away. Gertrude rushes past us, her cane in hand, as she calls after a man trying to evade her pursuit. That woman never gives up.

The Lick Me shop is right in the center of the deck, their sign out front has a giant ice cream cone with a tongue licking the ice cream. It’s a tad sexualized, but I wouldn’t expect anything less from this cruise. We enter inside and see a few tables off to the side, only a few people are in here. Most of them are probably at the bar drinking it up on their last day.

Colin groans as he reads the menu. “Does anything we do not involve sexual innuendos?” He shakes his head.

Looking up, I take in the menu:

- Mustachio Ride
- Chocolate Chip-n-Dale
- Choclit Swirl
- Blueberry Balls
- Cherry Popped
- Ore-ohh Yes
- Beg For Smore
- Strawberry Blondes Gone Wild
- Banana Creampie

Well those are some interesting names. I can't help but laugh at the Choclit Swirl flavor. "So, which one are you having? Because there's no way I'm not getting the Ore-ohh Yes."

"Don't judge me," he says before walking up to the counter to order.

"Welcome to Lick Me. Where all your ice cream fantasies come true. What can I get you today?" The crew member is dressed with a striped apron.

Colin clears his throat looking extremely uncomfortable. "Can I get a bowl of Choclit Swirl and a..." he looks at me.

I hide my grin as I look at the crew member with a straight face. "I'll take a cone of Ore-ohh Yes please."

"Coming right up." He winks at us. While he scoops the ice cream, I sit down at one of the tables by the window. I watch as the other passengers carry on and party. Deck 7 has the majority of the bars and restaurants where most people like to hang out. Colin sits across from me and hands me my gigantic cone.

I take a lick of it letting the Oreo and chocolate concoction melt on my tongue. It's not too bad, better than I expected. I take a few more licks while watching out the window. Gertrude is back, talking animatedly to someone, her cane waving wildly in the air.

Colin sees where I'm looking. "Did you know Trudy is a widow? She told me the other day. She lost her husband after fifty years together. She never dated again after that but loves to go on cruise ships to meet new people."

I look at her again. "It must be lonely. Losing your soulmate and having to survive without them." I see my future in her. If I fall in love, I'll be just like her and my dad. Grieving for what once was and I can no longer have.

"Lonely now. But I bet she loved life with her husband. To find a love so strong that it lasts fifty years is a feat. That would have been pure bliss." He takes a bite of his ice cream while watching her.

I study him while he's not paying attention. I engrain every detail into my brain, the way his hair falls across his forehead. How his eyes crinkle when he's excited or thinking about something that makes him happy, like art. I fight the urge to reach out and trace his face with my fingers. "How can pure bliss turn into such heartache?"

"That's life, isn't it?" He looks at me. "For centuries that's what humans have done. They find their partner, the one meant for them, and live. They go through the struggles together while building their own form of happiness. Then they die or move on. It's human nature."

That went dark fast. "Human nature is depressing." I take another lick of my ice cream.

He sits back. "Human nature has been intriguing through the years. That's why I chose art history. To learn about cultures and humans even centuries ago through their paintings. I've learned that no matter what, life seems to follow the same process for everyone and ends in death. The final scene."

Watching him describe it has me rooted in place, wanting to learn more. I see why he became a professor. "You're good at that." I nod at him.

He looks at his ice cream and back. "Eating ice cream?"

I chuckle. "No. I mean yeah, but no. You're good at capturing an audience when you explain art history. I'm stuck on every word you said and I'm not even your student."

He takes another bite. "That's the best compliment I've been given before. Thank you."

I smile. "Of course, I wouldn't last a day in your lecture because all I would think about is jumping your bones. I don't think the rest of the class would appreciate that."

"Probably not. But I would." He groans. "I'm now picturing you bent over my desk with your dress pushed up around your ass."

Holy. Fuck. I squirm as my body responds to his dirty words. "How about instead of your desk, you bend me over

your bed.” I toss my ice cream in the trash while winking at him. He throws his away, then rushes behind me lifting me in his arms and throwing me over his shoulder.

He grunts. “I can’t help it. I’ve been wanting to throw you over my shoulder this entire time.” He slaps my ass as a few people call out, cheering to us while he takes me to the elevator and back to his room for the last night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

COLIN



AVERY PACES THE ROOM, her wild hair swaying every time she turns around. We spent all day in bed, making love and hearing her scream my name for the last few hours has been amazing. Then her mood shifted when I talked about disembarking tomorrow.

Her eyes are wild as she looks everywhere but at me. Tomorrow we leave. I knew it was going to be difficult, but I figured since we lived near each other we could make this work. “Avery, it’s going to be okay. We’ll go back home and we’ll figure this out. I don’t live far, our schedules are flexible. We can go on dates and see where things go between us.”

She looks at me while biting her lip. “How Colin? We just met, literally. I barely know you; you don’t even know my dad’s name. I’ve never met your parents. This is all moving so damn fast, how do we know it’s not going to crash and burn around us back on shore.”

She’s panicking, her voice shaking as she thinks of every possible thing that we haven’t done yet. Not the fact that we’ve basically been living together this entire cruise, getting to know each other with each activity and date we took. “Take a breath and let’s think this through. We may have just met, but we know each other. I know more about you than you think.”

Her eyes narrow as she sits on the edge of the couch in my suite. “There’s nothing to think through. We just met. No one falls this hard and fast after only a week. Not without something being wrong with them. Besides that, what if

something happened to one of us? It would be a heartbreak I know we couldn't survive. My dad had to bury my mom, he's never been the same since. I just can't fall in love with you. I can't let this happen because if I do, and I lose you, I'll never survive." Her voice cracks as tears fall down her cheeks.

I raise an eyebrow as I take in everything she just spilled to me. Her fears of losing me. Of loving me. My heartbeat jumps as I imagine burying anyone I love like her dad did with her mom. She keeps talking, "It's only a matter of time before we lose the honeymoon phase of whatever this is between us. Then what? Maybe we'll be miserable and healing broken hearts. So either way, it all ends in heart break. It's better if we just stay friends for now. Before the heartache is too hard to live with."

"Friends?" I clench my jaw. We have never been "just friends". This entire thing started out faster than a friendship takes to develop. "Avery, I think we're more than just friends. And we can't just assume it's going to end in heartache."

Rubbing her face, she shakes her head refusing to look at me. "That's the problem. Can't you see? We should have been friends first, before we fell into bed together."

Her words hit me like a nail in my heart. Before we fell into bed together. Not the fact that every time we touch my body aches for her. My chest feels like it's cracking open as she pulls away from me. "These last seven days have been the best of my entire life. I was serious when I told you that you make me happy, that I love you."

Her face cringes at the words. An actual disgusted look appears when I tell her I love her. She turns her face away, looking at the wall instead of at me. "I'm so sorry, Colin. That is why we should leave whatever this is here, on the ship. Love was something neither of us came on board for. Now here we are, tempting fate with it. We barely know each other."

This woman is going to give me a coronary. "I keep telling you, it doesn't matter how long I've known you. You are the only person I want. I fell in love with you and I want to see

where this relationship goes. But you just won't listen." I start to pace, my hands on my head, trying to fight off the tears that are threatening to spill. "You just keep repeating yourself, asking the same damn question over and over. I answer you each time, but you just ignore it."

A snuffle slips past her lips as she stands. "I'm sorry. I really am. Please come see me tomorrow during disembarkment. Come say goodbye. I want us to be friends when we get home."

I don't know if I can do this. If I can lose her as my lover but keep her as my friend. "I don't know if I can be just friends with you." The words sound hollow to my own ears.

She walks over to me, her hand reaching out as she slips her fingers around mine. "Please, try for me. I want you in my life. I just can't be more than that right now." She gives my hand a squeeze before walking out of the room and out of my life.

When Avery Santos first made eye contact with me at the dinner table the first night, I was a goner. I knew then, that she was the one for me. Her vibrant eyes alight with mischief as we planned out our revenge on Theo and Evie. Then, as we continued to meet at the most random places, I felt this pull towards her. One that kept bringing me back to her, no matter where I was on the ship.

I soaked up as much information she would tell me about her, I wanted to know everything she loved. What made her happy. In six short days, I know Avery better than I know myself. Her selflessness towards others, her vibrancy, the excitement she has at a challenge, the knowledge of random facts, and her talent for making gorgeous jewelry pieces. She has a loving family, her grandmother raised her after her mom passed. She loves the ocean but is scared to death of jellyfish.

All the things she tried telling me I couldn't possibly know about her, I do. My body vibrates with pent up frustration. She wouldn't even let me talk. I slide my shoes on. Fuck this. I'm not sitting around and wallowing in my heartbreak. No. I'm going to drink myself into oblivion until I can't feel anything

anymore. Then tomorrow, Evie and I will head back home on a different flight than Avery. I can't handle being twenty thousand feet in the air with her and not being next to her.

I head out the door with only one task left to do for this cruise ship. Get completely wasted and forget about Avery Santos. The girl who stole my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AVERY



THE SHIP SAILS INTO ITS' home port. This week has been a whirlwind of emotions. I came on board with the expectation of being severely disappointed with a love cruise. Now I'm leaving without knowing if Colin and I are even going to get back together eventually or stay friends after all of this. Things were moving so fast I felt like I couldn't breathe. Meeting someone and falling for them in only a matter of days doesn't happen in real life. There has to be a catch.

When I told him last night that I think we should leave us behind on this trip he about lost it. I tried explaining my feelings but instead I just made everything worse. Now here we are leaving the ship and I'm wishing I was staying longer.

Theo slides his hand into mine and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Aves, I'm sorry but we have to go." I nod but keep looking back to see if he will show up. I begged him to say goodbye to me before we left. To stay friends. But he said he didn't know if he could do that.

I swipe at the tear that falls down my cheek. I promised myself I would never cry over a man, now here I am shattered over one. Theo starts walking towards the disembarkment area, never letting go of my hand in the process. Passengers are hugging and smiling with each other, a few are exchanging numbers. My heart cracks as I see a couple kissing, their happily ever after found onboard.

"All I found was heartbreak," I mutter. The crowd starts to thin out as we're released based on our numbers given at boarding. Theo and I have a flight to catch back home today.

Evie told us they were staying an extra day in the area before flying back home. She had some stores she wanted to check out before they went back. I think it was just an excuse so Colin didn't have to be on the same flight as me.

Our number is called to disembark, the hallways alight with laughter as people head back to reality and land. Theo has our bags on a cart that he's pushing to the exit. I'm ready to just get the hell off this ship. There are too many memories in this short span of time I want to forget.

"Aves, you don't have to stop seeing him." Theo cuts through my miserable thoughts.

I refuse to argue this again with him. "It's over. None of what we had was normal. You can't fall in love in a week."

He purses his lips but doesn't respond. Good. I'm not in the mood to defend my irrational thinking. I'm not even sure why I'm fighting this thing we had so hard. I just never wanted to depend on someone else to be there for me. I've been alone my entire life, sure I had a few boyfriends and flings, but nothing serious. I never wanted serious.

There are too many things to have to change to be with someone. Dreams you can't explore because you always need to be there for the other person. I won't give up my dreams for anyone. Theo snaps his fingers to catch my attention. "Earth to Avery. You in there?" The concern is evident on his face. I glance up at him. "The Uber is going to be here in a few minutes. Are you sure you're okay? I haven't seen you this sad in a long time."

I grab my sunglasses off the top of my head and slide them over my eyes, effectively shutting him out. "I'm fine." I turn my back on my only friend and wait for the Uber to take me back to reality. Back to my home and away from my heart on the ship.



The plane ride home was uneventful. I slept most of the way so I didn't have to hear a thousand questions from Theo. Even

Joe, his now boyfriend, texted him repeatedly to set up plans to get together again. Apparently he'll be in New York in the next month for a role at a Drag Queen play, Anna Conda is going onto the big stage. I'm happy for him. He and Theo both deserve the best in life. But I'm a little jealous at how easily Theo can just live his life without worrying about the outcome.

My apartment is quiet and just how I left it. Nothing is out of place, the plants are still alive thanks to my neighbor, and it's just as lonely as when I left. I drop my bag in the hallway and head into my studio. The walls are covered from floor to ceiling with storage containers housing all my parts and pieces I need to build my jewelry. I look at the sketchpad I left out before I went on the cruise, the concept piece a simple diamond in the center of white gold vines wrapping up and around the chain to make it a choker. The vines have tiny emeralds imbedded into them where a leaf would be.

Looking at my work, my life, I don't even have the energy to enjoy it. It feels like a burden now. I close the door to the studio, shutting out the visions I had for the future. The future I screwed up with my fears. I shut off my phone and strip down to my underwear. Jet lag catching up to me, I crawl under my covers and let myself drift off to a restless sleep. Better than being awake at this point in time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

COLIN



MY CHEST ACHES every time I see something that reminds me of her. The way the wind blows in the leaves around my apartment building. The sunset in the evenings. I slam my fist into the punching bag again. Since being home, I started going to the gym to work out some of this frustration after classes. Theo keeps me updated, but he holds back the details.

I know she's barely functioning, I can see it in his eyes when he says she's coping. Or she's handling it okay. There's a sadness buried in his gaze. I hit the bag again, the slap of my glove against it cracking in the air. I drove past the store a few times where Evie and Theo work hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but she was never there.

Evie is another pain in my ass. She refuses to even speak Avery's name around me. She blames me for scaring her off. Fuck. I hit the bag again. Things got too serious, too fast. We both saw it coming, the destruction at the end of the trip. You can't expect things to just continue being okay when life gets back to normal. Avery said we couldn't possibly be truly in love after only a week.

If someone would have told me that before I met Avery, I would have believed them. But after this cruise, I one hundred percent believe in love at first sight. The moment that woman walked into my life it was over for me. I couldn't live without her being near me.

Now here I am beating the shit out of a bag in the middle of the night, fighting the demons she left behind in me. I wanted to go to her when she was disembarking, but she only

wanted to see me if I was willing to be friends. Screw that, I can't just be friends with her.

My phone pings from inside my gym bag, I ignore it as I slam my fist repeatedly into the bag. It starts to ring the annoying ringtone I set for Evie. With one last punch to the bag, I take off my gloves and pick up the phone.

“What?” I grumble.

She sighs on the other end. “Well hello to you too, you brooding asshole.”

If she wasn't my sister, I would have cussed her out already. “What do you want, Evelyn. I don't have the energy for your shit tonight.”

“Why are you doing this to yourself? Just go see her. You both are so fucking miserable without each other because you're both stubborn dumbasses.” I can hear her clicking her nails against a table on the other end of the phone.

“She left me.” I say it to remind myself mostly.

“Oh for fuck's sake. You're so dumb. Colin, get your shit together. Go get a shower, sleep. Then go see her. I cannot stand seeing you both miserable. And you all are starting to ruin Theo for me too.” She grunts. “He won't even laugh at my jokes anymore at work. The man was depressed when I brought in an entire box of hot pink sequined wallpaper. You broke him.”

I knew we were causing Theo to be a little stressed, but I didn't think we were breaking him. The more I think about him, I start to realize there were signs I had missed in class. He was showing up late, he didn't talk constantly during class, and he never raised his hand anymore with a random question during lectures. I rub the back of my neck as I sit down on the bench next to me. “He really didn't care about hot pink sequined wallpaper? I find that hard to believe.”

“Nope.” She pops the 'P' at the end like Theo always does.

“Alright. I'll talk to her. I'm not sure what I'm going to say yet but I'll talk to her.”

“About damn time,” she says. “I love you, but you’re still an idiot.” She hangs up the phone before I can respond.

It’s currently nine at night and the gym in my building has no one else in it. I wipe down the bag and the equipment I used then shut off the lights before heading upstairs to shower. Maybe the water will clear my mind.



The water did not clear my mind. In fact, I’m now standing outside of Avery’s apartment building at ten at night pacing the sidewalk. Thank god no one is out here to see me. They’d probably call the cops thinking I’m planning a robbery or something. Fuck it. I head inside the building to her apartment before I change my mind.

I knock on the door repeatedly, she’s a heavy sleeper so she probably can’t hear me. Finally, after a few minutes I hear feet walking towards the door. The door chain slides off and it’s flung open.

Theo’s bloodshot eyes stare back at me in relief. “Thank fuck. About damn time you show up.” He grabs his shoes from the floor and puts them on. “I’m going home to get some real sleep. Listening to her rant and rave all night has me sleep deprived. I might end up going into a psychosis if I don’t get real sleep anytime soon.”

He slips past me in the hall. “Good luck with her,” he calls out before disappearing.

Now that I’m here, I hesitate about going in. If she’s that upset to the point where even Theo can’t handle her, what the hell am I going to do for her besides make her more upset?

I hear her voice calling from the other room, it stabs me right through the heart with a blade then gently sews me back up again. I quietly close the door after I enter before I chicken out and go back home.

“Who was it Theo?” Her silhouette is highlighted from the moonlight through her windows. She’s sitting up on her bed,

her hair tied up on top of her head. She's gorgeous even in the dim light.

"Avery," I whisper her name like a ghost trailing the halls. She freezes, not a thing on her body moves as her breathing picks up.

"Colin?" I swear I hear hope in her voice with that one word. She reaches over and turns on the lamp next to her bed.

This is the first time I've seen her since we've been home. Exactly five weeks ago we left the cruise ship and started our new lives without each other like she begged. She swore it would be for the best but judging from her red rimmed and swollen eyes, she was wrong.

"What are you doing here?" Her teeth graze her lips like they always do when she's nervous. A habit I noticed from the first night we met.

"Evie called." Shit. That's not what I wanted to say. I see the hurt in her eyes immediately. The tears form before I can explain.

"So it took Evie calling you for you to show up here?" She swipes at her eye with the back of her hand, I'm not even sure she realizes she is crying.

I rub the back of my head and stare at the floor. "That's not what I meant to say."

She stares me down. "Did Evie call you tonight?"

"Yeah...but..."

She doesn't let me finish. "Then I think that's exactly what you meant." She pulls the covers up over the sweater she's wearing in bed. She looks thinner, her clothes hanging looser off her body.

"No it's not. She did call me, but only because I've been bugging the shit out of her asking about you these last few weeks." I start to pace her room, the pent up anger at this entire situation is too much.

"I needed to know how you were doing and no one would tell me. Neither of those two would tell me more than you're

‘coping’.” I make air quotes around the word. “What the hell does that even mean? You’re coping?”

I look her up and down. “Lying in bed all day with tear streaked cheeks is not coping.” I stop pacing and walk next to her bed. “If you had even the slightest amount of feelings for me, then you’d be doing what I’m doing.”

She looks up at me, another tear rolling down her cheek. “What are you doing?”

“Self-destructing.”

She watches me for a moment, the fire starting to burn in her eyes again. It’s been too long since I’ve seen that in her. “You have no room to be upset. I told you to come see me, to say goodbye to me.”

Is she kidding me right now? “You told me to see you only if I could be friends with you.” I slam my hands down on her bed, moving closer to her.

“Why can’t you be a friend to me? Do I mean that little to you?” She snuffles.

I reach up and pull her chin up gently with my finger. I need her to look me in the eyes when I say this to her. “You mean so much to me that I can’t be just friends.” A tear tracks down her face and I catch it with the pad of my thumb. “I can’t be friends because friends don’t love each other the way I love you.”

She sucks in a breath as her eyes widen. My admission swimming around us covered in betrayal and anger. “I love you,” I say again. “I’m here to tell you I need you in my life. I’ve been miserable without you. The sunshine doesn’t warm my skin like it used to. The rain doesn’t wash away my heartache, it only makes it heavier to carry.”

She closes her eyes and leans into my palm. “But how can you love someone you just met?”

I grab her face between my hands causing her eyes to pop open. Leaning in, I leave only a breath between us as I whisper, “Because I’ve known you my whole damn life. You’re my soulmate and when you find the one, it doesn’t

matter if it's only been hours or weeks...you know immediately they are your future." Moving in closer, I touch her lips as I speak, "Why do you think I meant it when I asked you to marry me in the casino? I was serious. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Fuck societal norms. I want you."

Her hands reach up, grabbing my hair as she pulls me closer deepening the kiss. Her tongue flicks out seeking entrance to my mouth. I let her in. I drink all of her in before she can slip away again.

"I..." she places another kiss on my lips. "...love..." another kiss to the side of my cheek. "you too," she whispers in my ear just before kissing right below it on my neck.

Tonight, all of my heartache washes away as I make love to her. Reminding her how much she means to me. My future Mrs. Avery Santos Turner, if she'll take my name.

EPILOGUE

AVERY



Six months later

EVIE HOLDS up a dark blue dress against her looking in the full length mirror. “What about this Aves?” She does a small twist from side to side, the fabric twirling around her. When she asked me to go dress shopping for her hot date tonight I didn’t expect to be out for over six hours and still not have her find the exact dress she wanted. Apparently date dresses are ‘super important’ as Evie put it earlier.

“Like the last twenty you held up, it’s gorgeous. Evie, you will look stunning in any dress you wear.” I sit back in the plush chair as she frowns at her reflection. The look she’s giving it only means it’s not the right one.

She puts it back on the rack. “You know, I have the perfect red dress at home. I could just wear that.”

I bite my tongue before I say something to upset her. “If that’s what you want to do. I’m sure whoever this guy is, he will love it.” I would have loved it had she figured out she was going to wear a dress she already owned six hours ago.

“His name’s Matt. I met him at the store, he’s one of our distributors but this was the first time we actually talked.” She stares off with a dreamy look on her face.

I stand up and grab her hands. “He’s lucky to have you going out with him, whatever you wear won’t compare to your personality.”

She squeezes my hand, her tear filled eyes locking on mine. “Thank you. I’m so glad you’re my soon to be sister-in-law. You’re way nicer than Colin is. He would have cussed me out after twenty minutes of shopping knowing I was just going to end up wearing whatever I had at home.”

I snort. “Trust me I debated it, but I figured it was a coping mechanism for you so I just went along for the ride.”

She turns my hand over in hers and glances down at the large shiny diamond in the middle of my ring finger. It’s a two

carat solitaire surrounded by a halo band. “This is absolutely gorgeous. I’m shocked how well he did picking this out. Maybe he’s changing for the better.”

I take in the gorgeous ring. It’s nice, but it feels like way too much compared to what I usually wear. I would have been fine with just a silver band, but Colin never does anything halfway. I mean he did propose to me after only knowing me three days on the ship.

The door chimes behind us, pulling my attention to the entryway. Colin’s sharp gaze lands on me with a heat buried behind them. His devilish smile telling me everything I need to know about his plans for us tonight. “Evie, are you done with my fiancée yet? I have some very time consuming plans for her this evening.”

“Gross!” Evie exclaims in disgust. She turns back to me. “I take it back. He’s not changing. He may be worse now.” She pops a kiss on my cheek before turning to him with her arms crossed. “She may be your fiancée but she’s my sister now. Hoes before Bros and all that is now in play.”

Colin rolls his eyes at her before glancing at me. Raising my eyebrow, I cross my arms in solidarity with Evie. “Hoes before Bros,” I repeat. I never had a sibling before. I grew up in a large family with multiple cousins, but I never had the closeness of someone in your life that you could confide in. Someone to dress up with and talk about all the things that were secret.

“Hmmm, I see how it is.” He smirks. “Just remember, there’s things I can do to you that no one else can. So when you’re screaming my name...”

Evie pales as she slaps her hand over his mouth. “For fuck’s sake. I get it.” She shudders. “I need to now go home and take a scalding hot shower to burn the thoughts out of my mind.”

He’s goading her on purpose, the whole date she’s going on tonight is all she’s been talking about for a week. He’s happy for her but he knows how nervous she is for it. He told me the only way to get her mind off her nerves is to piss her

off. Apparently this is his way of doing that. “Come on Casanova.” I wrap my arm around his elbow and lead him out of the shop. “Good luck tonight Evie. I’ll call you at eight thirty to make sure you don’t need an out. And remember the code word is Orange,” I say before we leave.

“Got it. Orange. Thank you Aves. For everything.” She smiles before bouncing out of the shop singing to herself, happy once again.

Colin strides beside me down the sidewalk. “Code word?”

Leaning into his arm, I breathe in his scent. I’ll never tire of it. “Yeah. It’s always best to have a code word for dates. Something that won’t trigger the person you’re with if you use it.”

His eyebrows pull together in confusion. “Why would you need a code word?”

Sometimes, for someone with a PhD he really is stupid on street smarts. “Going on a date in today’s world, it’s not always the safest. So a code word can be used if you feel you’re in danger and need the other person who knows the code word to come get you. It’s a safety precaution in case the date is abusive or dangerous.” I shrug. “Theo and I have one in place for his dates too.”

His steps falter as he comes to a dead stop in the middle of the street. I grab his arm and pull him onto the sidewalk before we’re both flattened by a car or something. That would make an interesting end to our love story. He stares at me horrified. “I never even thought...all these years I never even checked up on her when she went on dates.”

I run my hand along his jawline trying to ease the tension from him. “Why would you? No offense but you’re a straight male. The dangers of blind dates or any online dating is not as prevalent for you. Woman and others who are not straight males tend to have a harder time, especially with the online dating world. There’s some really creepy people out there.”

He grabs my chin with his hand and tilts it up towards him. “Have I told you how much I love you today?”

I smile. “You did, but I’d love to hear it again.”

“I love you Avery Santos. Thank you for not only being there for me but for taking my sister under your wing and protecting her too.” He gently brushes his lips against mine. “Now, for our date tonight. I was thinking we should grab dinner before the movie. Then head home for dessert.”

“Hmmm,” I purr. “I love that, but let’s do dessert first then we can do dinner and a movie.” I move closer, my body pressed against his as I wrap my arms around his neck.

He takes me in his arms and kisses me deeply. Every ounce of emotion rolls off his tongue and into me. He pulls away, grabbing my hand in his. “Dessert it is. We can do dinner another night.”

He takes off running with me next to him, my laughter ringing out through the air as we head back home. Our home. The only place I ever want to be besides in bed with him. I never thought I would understand my dad and why he never cries anymore over my mom. But I finally figured it out.

Love can consume us, deep into our hearts, that even after we lose the people we love the grief will always be surrounded by the happy memories you have. Love is worth every heartbreak you can experience, and I’m so glad I went on that cruise seven months ago and met Colin. He’s my reason to let love live in my heart. The reason I don’t mind knowing one day I may lose him because in this moment he’s all I need and he’s all mine.

ABANDON SHIP

A JILTED BRIDE ROMANCE

Continue your voyage with the next book from the LOVE AT SEA SERIES.

Abandon Ship by Karigan Hale

Love at Sea, *Book #6*

Releasing on November 14, 2022

A jilted bride with trust issues. A disgraced photographer with something to prove. A Love at Sea cruise determined to distract them both.

Abby

Instead of walking down the aisle, my fiancé walked out the door. So I'm taking our honeymoon cruise without him. I'll enjoy seven perfect days of endless margaritas, pristine beaches, and island excursions even more with my best friend instead.

What I need is a complete break from ANYTHING akin to romance. Complete break.

That includes the tempting Grayson Hamilton, I remind myself. No matter how much of a crush I had on him back in high school. No matter how lickable his abs turned out to be.

I AM ON A BREAK!

Grayson

Scoring my dream job with the industry's leading travel magazine was a lucky break. Unfortunately, I'm just about out of luck. This all-expenses-paid cruise my employer sent me on is my last chance to save my reputation.

I have to stay focused despite all the beautiful, single women on this Love at Sea cruise. Yep. Focused. Focused on my job.

NOT on my best friend's little sister, all grown up and smoking hot, looking like she needs someone to help her get over her freshly broken heart.

On second thought, maybe a little distraction couldn't hurt. Maybe an offer of a no-strings-attached rebound will help get

her out of my system. Then I can concentrate on saving my career before we both Abandon Ship.

Abandon Ship is a jilted bride romance, part of the Love at Sea multi-author series. Get ready to set sail through the Caribbean on Festival Cruises' most alluring voyage with eight of your favorite authors - happily ever after guaranteed!

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Damn it All to Hell (Coming Summer 2023)

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As always, reviews are appreciated. They help author's get seen across all platforms. If you have time, please feel free to leave a review for this book. Thank you again.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T. L. Anderson currently lives in Wisconsin where it's freezing cold in the winter and has five months of enjoyable weather year round. Her house is filled with constant chaos between her teenage daughter and toddler son, infant daughter, two rambunctious dogs, a stubborn cat, and guinea pigs that keep her and her husband on their toes.

Since the age of three, she has loved reading and creating her own stories in her mind. Now her passion has developed into a career. After earning a certificate from the Children's Institute of Literature she decided it was time to put the multiple characters in her head onto paper so she can share their stories with the world.

She's the author of multiple novels which include new adult, romantic suspense, and paranormal reverse harem.

She has a slight obsession with doughnuts, coffee, and dinosaurs. When she's not writing you can find her lurking on social media looking for new books to read, taking care of her mini-zoo at home, or having her nose stuck in a book.

