

# Wrong Guy, Right Room



Michelle Angelle

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**MichelleAngelleBooks**



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*We dedicate this book to our friends and family who never wavered in their support of our writing dream.*

# Chapter 1 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn gasped and almost dropped the eggs as she walked into the kitchen. Noah stood there, dressed like a blazing firecracker and drinking red wine. He wore a red lacy bustier, red spandex boy shorts, a long red wig, and the tallest red leather high-heeled boots she ever saw. “You look amazing, but why are you wearing your costume at home?”

Noah twirled on his heels expertly, not spilling a single drop of wine. “It’s from our Americana number. We performed it tonight, and I didn’t want to take it off yet.”

Adam walked out of the pantry, wearing a blue straight bob wig, his nose dusted with white powder. His white ruffled apron covered most of his outfit, revealing only his blue tights and blue lace-up heels. Kaitlyn stifled a laugh thinking of a half-naked Smurfette with a cocaine addiction. “Hey, got your message. I brought eggs.”

“Thanks. I can’t believe I ran out in the middle of this recipe.”

She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. “So, who’s playing white if you’re blue and Noah is red?”

“We still need to fill the spot.” Adam sifted flour into a bowl. “You wanna do it?”

“Hell no.” She shuddered. While her brother had serious hip-hop moves out of the womb, Kaitlyn started walking with two left feet. Her rehearsal time would more than double Noah and Adam’s.

Adam narrowed his eyes at her, flour on the tip of his nose. “You’d rock a gorgeous white wig and a white dress.” He spun around and the fancy ruffles on his apron fluttered. “You can wear this.”

“And have my bare ass showing? No, thank you.” Kaitlyn put four eggs down on the counter and ran some water on a tea towel. “Speaking of a white costume, let me get some of this coke off your face.” She wiped the flour off his face too hard, making Adam wince. Throwing the towel in the sink, she

washed her hands in a vigorous motion. She needed a run, but it was too late for intense exercise. If she ran now, she would be up all night. Kaitlyn cracked the four eggs into a small ceramic bowl and began aggressively whisking.

Adam hip-checked her. “Uhh, Katie dear, is there something you need to talk about?”

“Yeah.” Noah peered into the yellow bowl. “You’re seriously abusing those eggs and poor Adam’s face.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Kaitlyn kept her head down, hoping they would let it go.

Adam scrutinized her bowl of whisked eggs. “Katie, love, I need six eggs, not four.”

She reached into her pocket, took out two more brown eggs, and cracked them. “Right.”

“Did you walk here in the dark with eggs in your pocket?”

“Of course, I did. It’s only a couple of blocks away.”

Noah clicked his tongue. “It’s 10:00 at night. Someone could have robbed and murdered you.”

“For eggs? In Santa Barbara?”

“Check out her attitude.” Adam pointed a spoon at Kaitlyn, still whisking as if her life depended on it. “I think she could take the guy.”

She put the whisk down and stared at the two of them defiantly. They can’t make me tell them. “What else can I do to help?”

Noah handed her an empty wine glass and gave it a full pour. “You can drink with me. Adam likes to bake alone.”

Adam drizzled the eggs into the flour mixture. “Don’t question my creative process.”

“Never. As long as you’re the one baking, I’ll keep out of your way, honey.” Noah hopped off the stool and motioned for her to join him in the living room.

Kaitlyn settled into the plush navy velvet sofa and dug her back into the silky pillows. She wanted to disappear into the cushions forever. The couch felt like a hug. She caught Noah gawking at her. “What?”

“My question exactly. What’s going on with you tonight?”

Kaitlyn took a big sip of wine to avoid answering, but she could tell Noah would not let it alone. She shouldn’t have come over in this mood. “It’s not a big deal. Just drop it.”

“Need a break from Neil’s lovin’ already?”

Heat rushed to Kaitlyn’s face. Damn, what does he know?

“Oh God, is Neil bad in bed?”

“I don’t know.” Ah, did I say that out loud? She quickly took another sip and hoped Noah didn’t hear her.

“What do you mean you don’t know, Katie?” He squinted his eyes at her as she shook her head back and forth. Noah slammed his empty glass on the table. “You haven’t slept with him yet?”

“Noah, I don’t want to discuss this.”

“What in the hell are you thinking?”

“Well, I think Neil is being romantic, and this is none of your damn business, dearest brother.”

“But Katie—”

“Please drop it.”

“You cannot marry a man you haven’t slept with. This is serious. I think I need another glass of wine.” Noah filled his stemless glass, emptying the bottle. “Adam, I need some help in here stat,” he called into the kitchen. “You need to make her see reason. She’s not listening to me.”

Adam sauntered over, still in his Smurfette costume. “My first batch.” When she went to grab one, Adam slapped her hand like she was a small child. “Don’t touch them for five minutes. The lemon curd will still be hot.” He picked up the

empty bottle and glared at Noah and Kaitlyn. “You didn’t leave me any?”

“There’s another bottle in the pantry, and you’re gonna need it when you hear what Katie has to say.”

Kaitlyn jumped up. “I’ll get it.” She thought of running out the front door but caught Noah and Adam sharing a quick glance in her direction. She promptly changed her course.

Noah and Adam followed her into the kitchen, staying close behind. “I missed something exciting, didn’t I?” Adam sulked. “I swear you two wait for me to leave the room to gossip.”

She made a run for the pantry, and Noah jumped in front of the door to block her. “I can tell what you’re thinking, and you can’t hide from us in there.”

How can he run so fast in those heels? “I’m not trying to hide, for God’s sake.” She searched for another door, but there was only the Sub-Zero stainless-steel refrigerator. She wished she could hide in there, but she might freeze to death. On second thought, a perfect plan.

As if reading her mind, Adam stood in front of the refrigerator. “Oh, I definitely missed something juicy. Spit it out, Katie.”

Noah crossed his arms in front of his chest. “That’s right, spit it out.”

“Oh God, is Neil bad in bed?”

Noah shuffled into the open pantry and grabbed another bottle of Merlot. “Why don’t you tell him, Katie?”

Kaitlyn shot daggers at her brother, imagining him impaled against the wall. That would prevent him from talking.

The oven timer buzzed and Adam grabbed his lobster claw oven mitts. “Oh no, are you preggo?”

“It would be some miracle baby.” Noah tossed the loose curls of his red wig over his shoulders and leaned against the warm Viking oven.



Damn it, the imaginary daggers weren't working.

Uncorking the bottle, Noah gave her a shove with his elbow. "Come on, tell Adam."

"Please do. I'm completely lost." The pop of the cork made everyone jump.

"It's not a big deal. You know how my brother is." She poured herself a glass from the fresh bottle. "He's always so dramatic."

"And you're stalling." Noah tapped his violet painted nails on the edge of the kitchen counter and eyeballed his sister.

Kaitlyn was stalling. She took a sniff of her wine. There were hints of cherry and honey. She had been having second thoughts about the whole no premarital sex thing for a while now, although it seemed a romantic gesture at first. Perhaps she was naïve and Noah was right? Does Neil suffer from erectile dysfunction, or worse, have a hideous penis?

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Kaitlyn's thoughts raced back to the day she met her fiancé. She was pruning in the vineyard without her gloves again when she severed her digital nerve, which was a terrible thing apparently because the ER doctor immediately requested the cosmetic surgeon on call. Dr. Neil Connor walked straight out of Barbie and Ken's mansion and into the Santa Barbara ER.

He was exquisitely tanned with a strong jawline and perfectly coiffed blond hair that kept falling over his forehead at just the right angle. Dr. Connor casually picked up her hand to examine it. "It seems you might lose a finger, Kaitlyn."

She fainted right on the spot and Dr. Connor caught her. He literally swept her off her feet that day. The finger thing was a joke, but when she went back to the ER for an outpatient

checkup, Dr. Connor sat in his office with a potted plant in his lap.

“They’re called finger flowers.” He held the plant out to her. “In case you need a spare.” He smiled and his perfect teeth gleamed. “Can I take you to dinner tonight?”

She couldn’t imagine a more perfect meet-cute. It was straight out of a romance novel, except for the lack of hot sex.

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“Earth to Katie.” Adam waved his hand in front of her eyes, bringing her back to the present.

Kaitlyn blinked and took another gulp of wine. She pushed all thoughts of a deformed penis aside. “Neil and I are waiting until our wedding night to have sex.”

Adam turned to Noah, who shook his head in disbelief. “Why in the hell would *you* do that?” He gestured with his pinky finger.

Adam stressed “you” in his sentence and Kaitlyn knew why. Ever since Luke, Kaitlyn had been unsuccessful in the sex department. She had experienced way too many short dicks, crooked dicks, dicks that came sooner rather than later, dicks that came late, and dicks that thought only of themselves. She hadn’t struck a home run dick in almost a decade.

“I’m sure Neil’s penis is perfect.” Kaitlyn began nervously poking at the muffins on the cooling rack, trying to cover the flush racing up her neck and flooding her cheeks.

“You haven’t even seen the man’s cock?” Adam and Noah shouted at the same time, making her flinch.

“It never came up. I mean, out. I mean ...” Kaitlyn knew what it sounded like. Lately, she wondered if Neil was hiding something alarming. She shook her head, trying to erase the thought.

“He’s gay.” Noah opened the kitchen cabinet and pulled out a fluted china serving dish. “Katie, honey, you can’t marry a gay man. It’s a huge mistake.”

“He’s not gay.” Kaitlyn kept her eyes on the dish.

“How do you know?” Adam used tongs to remove the hot muffins and then placed them orderly around the corners. The blueberries were bursting from the tops, making her mouth water. “My cousin Doug didn’t come out of the closet until all four of his kids were out of college. It devastated his wife.”

“Listen, you two. He’s not gay.” She guzzled the last of her wine and choked a little. “I think he’s slept with most of his nursing staff.”

“What? He slept with the Barbies?”

Kaitlyn cringed every time Noah and Adam called Neil’s nurses the Barbies, but she couldn’t deny they looked like plastic dolls. They were 5’7” golden statues with perky breasts and perfect skin. Nipped and tucked in all the right places and sporting the perfect blowout of blonde locks, they could be clones of each other. Kaitlyn met Neil in the ER, but he worked as a cosmetic surgeon for the rich and famous. He had a waitlist of eager Barbies a mile long, and many of them worked as part of his staff.

“It’s fine.” Kaitlyn gripped her stomach, soothing the irritating pang. “I don’t even know for sure. I’m fine with it.”

“So you said, twice.” Noah and Adam twisted their mouths.

Kaitlyn caught their shared expressions and glanced away. They disapproved of how flirtatious Neil was around his nursing staff. “Neil mentioned when we were first going out that he used to date a certain type of woman. It’s why he wants to wait to have sex with me. He wants our relationship to be different.”

“OMG, Katie, you didn’t tell the Barbies you haven’t slept with Neil yet?”

Kaitlyn blushed again. “They didn’t say, but I think they already know. They thought they were helping me by hinting

about all of his favorite toys and positions at the bridal shower last week. It was super awkward.”

Adam walked across the kitchen to his costume closet down the hall and started pulling out lacey lingerie. He found a black one with garter belts attached and threw it at her. “Put this on immediately and go see your man’s macho tool. You can’t trust a Barbie.”

“And wear this.” Noah tore off his wig and put it on her head. “Channel a sex goddess. You’ve got this.”

“I’m not like you two.” Kaitlyn pulled off the wig, blanching at how ridiculous she felt. “I can’t wear this kind of stuff and strut around with all eyes on me.” She pushed the serving dish aside and jumped to sit on the counter. “And I’m short.”

It remained a running joke in the Thompson family. Noah and Kaitlyn were like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito in the late 80s movie *Twins*. They shared a womb, but nothing else. Where Noah stood tall at 6’2’, Kaitlyn was only 5’2’. Where Noah shared the dark-skin and dark-hair of a Greek god with his father, Kaitlyn resembled her mother, fair-skinned and blonde. Noah’s gorgeous good looks contrasted with Kaitlyn’s cuteness. Cute Katie was even her nickname in high school. It annoyed her to death.

“You’re never too short for sexy.” Noah pulled her off the counter, handed her another glass of wine, and pushed her into the bedroom. “Now, get dressed.”

Adam threw the wig in after her. “Don’t forget the wig.”

## Chapter 2 - Luke

Luke stood at the velvet-curtained entryway to the cocktail bar with his luggage in his hands and his phone plastered to his ear. “Yes, put him on. I’ll talk to him.” Luke lowered his suitcase and leaned against the wall, exhausted and irritated he had to make alternative hotel plans. “Hey, buddy. I understand the medicine smells bitter, but remember, we talked about this. It tastes like black licorice, which is my favorite candy by the way. You must take it before bedtime because it needs to start working before your surgery tomorrow morning with Dr. Reyes. Okay?” A lengthy pause hung on the line. Tommy was one of his favorite patients. He hated missing his surgery for Neil’s wedding. “Let’s make a deal. If you take it and don’t like it, I will bring you a bag of red licorice on my next visit. Okay?” He nodded his head as he listened to Tommy list other kinds of candy. “Yes, I like Snickers too. Yes. Great. Now go take your medicine. See you in a few days. Tell your mom I said bye.”

Luke hung up and reoriented himself out of doctor mode. He scanned the packed seats at the bar, searching for Neil. The hotel manager indicated he would be inside drinking with his groomsmen. Still fatigued and annoyed, he wanted to greet Neil and then find a hotel nearby to crash for the night. He heard a shout from the far-left side of the room and turned. In the corner, surrounded by fawning women, Neil played darts. His groomsmen stood behind him, not paying attention to his game but chatting up a group of barely dressed women at the table next to them. Luke contemplated turning around and flying back home in time for Tommy’s surgery, but he didn’t like to flake out on commitments. A hot blonde with an off-the-shoulder dress eyed Neil like he was a piece of meat. Perhaps she’s the bride to be? He should at least say hello. As Neil threw the last dart in his hand, just missing the bullseye, Luke stepped into the bar and headed toward them.

“Better luck next time, Doctor.” Luke heard the blonde say as she flipped her wavy locks, creating a whiff of flowery jasmine perfume behind her.

Neil moved in closer. “Nurse Becky, maybe you can turn my luck around before I’m a taken man?”

She giggled and pursed her lips at him.

So, *not* the fiancée. Awkward. “Neil.” Luke cleared his throat, interrupting him from leaning into the woman farther.

Neil turned, grazing the blonde’s ear with his lips as he did. “Dr. Luke Anderson.” He clapped him on the back. “Glad you made it.”

Luke’s shoulders twitched with the gesture. Flying back home looked like a better idea by the second. “So, about that ...” He shifted the suitcase still in his hand.

“Why don’t you put your luggage away and come back down for a drink?” Neil lifted a glass full of a dark syrupy liquid. “We’re celebrating a few more days of my freedom.”

“Huh?” Luke raised his eyebrows. “I thought we were celebrating your upcoming nuptials.”

“Oh, yeah, those too.”

“I just stopped in to say hi. I can’t stay. I’ve a bit of a problem. The hotel is overbooked and they don’t have a room, even though they took my reservation. I’m staying down the street. At least, I’m hoping one of the chain hotels has a room open. I’m heading there now, but I’ll see you tomorrow at the rehearsal dinner.” Luke clenched his teeth. If I leave right now, I can catch a flight tonight.

“No! You can’t leave yet,” Nurse Becky sulked, running her finger down his arm. “I’ve always wanted to spend the night out with Mr. Darcy.”

“Mr. Darcy? From *Pride and Prejudice*?”

“Well, if the sexy Dylan McDermott played Mr. Darcy. Did anyone ever tell you that you’re the spitting image of him? Yum. You gotta have at least one drink with us.” She turned around, pulling her friends into the conversation. “Right, ladies?”

“Oh, yes. Please stay.” An identical sculpted blonde checked Luke out, gazing up and down his body while licking

her red Botox injected lips. “I think this seat next to me is free. Come and tell me all about you.”

“But don’t go on and on about this Foundation you’re starting.” Neil patted his back. “You can tell Mother and Father the details this weekend. They can’t wait to hear how you plan to help all the underprivileged kids with sensory neurological hearing loss. The topic is too depressing and boring for tonight. Right, girls?” The nurses giggled in perfect sync with one another. Neil turned back toward Luke. “You always were a bleeding heart.”

One blonde stepped toward him. “I love a bleeding heart.” She trailed her finger down Luke’s neck.

He ignored her. “Neil, I’m grateful for your parents’ contribution. I couldn’t move forward without their support. The seed money they provided will make such a difference to \_\_\_”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Neil rolled his eyes. “You can tell me all about it another time. Take your bags to the front desk. We can deal with your room situation later.”

“I need to see if I can find an available room now.” Ugh, his parents will be at the rehearsal dinner. Maybe I can leave afterward and ditch the wedding?

“No, really, I insist.”

Luke surveyed the space for an easy escape route and found another blonde woman batting her long lashes at him. “Hi, I’m Candy. I work for Neil. I mean Dr. Connor. Let me help you with your luggage.” Before he knew what happened, she walked out of the hotel bar with his bags.

A second round of shots appeared out of nowhere. “Down the hatch,” another guy at the table called out before swallowing the green liquid, then added, “Time for the next location. Let’s blow this joint.”

Luke observed everyone get up from their seats. “What’s happening?” Another blonde woman in a hot pink tube top and a black leather miniskirt yanked his arm in the direction of the

crowd. “Where are we going?” He tried to plant his feet so he wouldn’t get pulled into the group.

The woman tugged on his sleeve. “We’re going somewhere more exciting.” She pulled him close and twisted her fingers through his thick hair.

“I don’t want to go.” Luke rooted his feet on the ground like a 6-foot toddler. “I’m exhausted. My flight was delayed and I was on call all week. I need to find a room and get some sleep.” Why didn’t I turn around when I had the chance?

Neil was behind him, clapping him on the back again. “Don’t be a bummer. I promise you can tell me all about your Foundation at the Cabaret Club.” He grinned at Luke as he grabbed the arm of another buxom blonde. “Suki, honey, take Luke to the limo outside.”

Luke glowered at the woman who had her arm hooked through his and grudgingly walked in step beside her. “Are you a friend of the groom or bride?”

“God, not the bride.” Suki grasped him closer to her, rubbing her breasts into his ribcage.

Surprised, he stepped away from her a little. “Wait, is Neil’s fiancée here?”

Suki busted out laughing and grabbed his arm again. “As if. The girl wouldn’t know what to do with this party of ours, much less a hunk of a man like you. Poor thing.”

Luke faked a smile and tried to pull away. “Sorry, I’m exhausted.” There had to be some way to evade Neil’s blonde girl mob.

She tugged him again. “One drink, Baby, then you can go. Dr. Connor gets what he wants, and he says you’re coming with us.”

Luke sighed as they went outside where the Hummer limousine waited. He was tired of fighting, so he reluctantly climbed in. As he sat back into the seat, the thumping bass vibrating the windows, he remembered why he hadn’t spoken to Neil since medical school graduation. Suki and Candy sidled up on either side of Luke and stroked him. He cleared



his throat and gaped at Neil, beseeching him for help, but Neil leaned back into the soft leather seats while Nurse Becky nibbled on his ear. Soon, the other groomsmen piled in, draped with more scantily clad blonde women. Luke closed his eyes, wishing this was only a nightmare, but as the car sped away and then dumped them out at a high-end strip club, Luke knew he couldn't dream this up if he wanted. He should have known better than to make an appearance in the hotel bar.

The second location reeked of sweat. Sticky bodies pressed against one another at the humid bar and colored strobe lights flashed in every corner. A blinding headache replaced Luke's exhaustion. When a second set of strippers mounted the stage in white bikinis, the blondes pushed Luke into a round red leather booth. Neil slid in next to him, wearing a grin. "Phenomenal view, huh?" Nurse Becky, or maybe it was Nurse Candy, draped her body over Neil's lap.

"Where is the bride-to-be tonight?" Luke screamed over the blaring music. He gestured toward the glitter-covered strippers near their table. "I wonder what she thinks about all this debauchery?" He knitted his brows, taking in the woman thrusting her breasts into Neil's face.

Neil laughed. "Does my perfect and pure bride want me hanging out with hot naked strippers? No. It would horrify her. What Kaitlyn doesn't know won't hurt her." He nudged Luke in the side. Catching Neil's elbow hard in the ribs, he winced. He didn't know how to respond.

Neil laughed again and slapped Nurse Candy on the behind. "Nurse Candy is much more enlightened."

"Oh, Doctor, I'm flattered." She wrapped her legs around Neil.

Luke couldn't believe the scene before him. Well, he could believe it, but he didn't want any part of it. When he saw the waitress heading their way, he took that moment to make a run for it. "I'm gonna head out. I need to deal with my room situation and get some sleep."

"Nah, don't go. Several of my nurses can show you a fun time. I can vouch for them."

Luke didn't know what else he could say, so he shook his head no.

"Here then. Take my room." Neil put his room key into Luke's hand. "I won't need it tonight, anyway."

"You sure?" Luke kept his hand out, giving Neil the chance to take it back.

Neil pushed his hand away. "Hell yeah, man. Take it. It's my gift to you."

"Thanks." He slid out of the booth away from Neil. This was his escape. "See you tomorrow night."

"Right, see ya." Neil leaned in and kissed Nurse Candy.

Luke stood aghast as Neil pushed his tongue into the woman's mouth. It didn't seem possible Neil was getting married in two days. "Poor girl," he groaned as he headed out into the crisp, clear night. The silence outside the bar was a relief. Instead of going back to the limo, he pulled up his Uber app.

In under fifteen minutes, he was back at the hotel and collecting his luggage from the front desk manager. "Thank you for keeping my bags."

The manager with a thick French accent beamed at him. "You are welcome and *bonne nuit*. I hope you have a good night, sir."

"Thank you." Luke sighed and ran his hand through his messy damp hair. This rotten night has got to get better.

## Chapter 3 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn arrived at the Pacific Palms Resort and stood next to the fountain, gathering her strength. She cinched the belt on her black trench coat tighter but figured the red wig and the fishnet stockings were a dead giveaway of her nefarious intentions. Kaitlyn scratched at her leg, snagging her nail in the fishnets. Noah told her to channel a sex goddess, but she thought the effect missed the mark. Her outfit didn't fit in this fancy environment. The way Joe, the Uber driver, wouldn't meet her eyes confirmed her suspicion. How had things turned sully so fast?

Neil booked a room at the resort instead of staying with her at the beach condo because he wanted their first night together to be in their new space. Another romantic gesture, wasn't it? She peered down at her shiny heels and recoiled at the contrast they made with the petal pink kitten heels she wore the first time she met Neil's parents. Kaitlyn loved Neil's parents, and they loved her, at least they said so every time they saw her. Oddly, they seemed relieved when Neil introduced her to them.

She remembered the first time she met his parents. "Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend, Kaitlyn Thompson." Neil stuck out his chest like he had won an unexpected prize.

Ellen Connor ran up to hug her. "Kaitlyn, I'm so happy to meet you." Pictures of Ellen in Neil's apartment showed the woman's close resemblance to Christie Brinkley, but in person, you couldn't deny it. She could play her body double. Kaitlyn felt squat and homely next to her.

"You can call me Katie—" She felt Neil's hand land on her shoulder. "Actually, Kaitlyn is great."

Neil preferred to call her Kaitlyn. It wasn't a big deal except no one called her Kaitlyn, so it was strange to hear. It seemed like he was talking to a different person when he said her name. And she felt different with Neil. As Kaitlyn, she gained the self-confidence to take the spotlight. On his arm, she didn't trip over the edge of carpets with her short legs.

When she was Kaitlyn, she broke free of Cute Katie. Neil encouraged her to push out of her comfort zone and stand tall, and he never let anyone outshine her in the room.

Neil hugged his mother. “I told you she’s perfect.” The unlikelihood she could achieve perfection unnerved her, but she tried to lean into the compliment. Neil had a way of praising her for her beauty and her grace. He played the role of prince charming and treated her like his Cinderella. His admiration became infectious and she loved feeling special.

“So glad to meet you, Kaitlyn.” Phillip Connor reached down to give her a hug. Neil and his father were carbon copies. She hoped the combined Connor height genes would override her small stature ones. Kaitlyn delighted at the thought of their tall beautiful children.

Neil must have read her mind because when they sat down for dinner, he raised his glass to toast her. “Kaitlyn, you are flawless in every way, and one day soon, I plan on marrying you and making you the mother of my children.”

She felt flattered but also surprised. Was this a marriage proposal? She didn’t think so, but Neil’s parents stared at her, expecting some kind of answer. She was eager to be a wife and mother, and since dating Neil, she imagined working at her parents’ vineyard with their towhead children running around the grounds. “I can’t wait to start a life with you too.” She swirled the wine in her glass, adding in a hasty manner, “My plans to turn the vineyard into a practical teaching experience for ecology students will dovetail nicely with starting a family.” Kaitlyn turned to Neil, her eyes wide with excitement. “Eventually, I can teach our kids the wine business too.”

Neil chuckled, flushing pink in the face, but then quickly recovered. “Sweetheart, I’m afraid raising children and managing a household will take all of your time.” Neil touched Ellen’s arm. “Right, Mother?”

Ellen gave her a small pat. “I’m sure Kaitlyn would love to do some charity work with me?”

She bit the inside of her cheek and said nothing.

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The fountain gurgled, waking her from her reverie. Kaitlyn took a deep breath to get her nerves under control, but as she watched the Uber drive away, leaving her alone at the front entrance of the hotel, she panicked. This felt like a terrible idea. She pulled out her phone to call the driver back, but she only had two bars and the phone wouldn't connect.

“Damn it.” She tried to follow the car. After getting her heel jammed for the third time in the cobblestone driveway, almost toppling over on her face like some slutty roadkill, she abandoned the mission and went inside. I need to do this.

The resort stood as big and beautiful as she remembered it. The wooden doors opened into the wide expanse of the hotel lobby. Kaitlyn's high heels clicked against the shiny marble floors. On her way to the front desk, the glass doors leading to the Oceanside Ballroom caught her eye. In less than two days, she would exchange vows with Neil in the beautiful room. She stood for a moment, recalling his face as he convinced her this was the right place for them. He showed her how the wall of windows opened and the inside space merged with the outside, creating an open-air veranda. Neil is right, she thought, the Pacific Palms Resort is magical and will accommodate more people than the vineyard.

Kaitlyn wanted a small wedding, perfect for the vineyard, but with Mr. and Mrs. Connor on so many Boards of Directors, the guest list kept growing. There was no way the barn they used for tasting parties could accommodate over 500 guests. When they went to see the resort as an alternative venue, Neil surprised everyone by paying for the whole wedding that very day. Kaitlyn figured they would consider a few other venue options before deciding, but she couldn't destroy his happiness in sharing the surprise with her.

Neil insisted on showering her with expensive trinkets and trips. “My girl deserves the best,” he always said even though Kaitlyn leaned toward simpler tastes. When he bought her gifts, his face lit up with excitement. She didn't want to

damper his enthusiasm by refusing his generosity. Wasn't it every girl's dream to be taken care of and lavished with attention? Providing the wedding venue proved how much he wanted their marriage and wedding to be perfect.

*"Bonjour."*

Kaitlyn pulled her coat tighter as Idris Elba walked toward her. At least that's what he looked like. What she looked like to him was anyone's guess. "Hello."

"Do you have a reservation for this evening?"

His thick accent made her relax until she stumbled and tried to catch her balance. "Umm ... no." Kaitlyn couldn't tell if it was the bottle of wine she drank at Noah's or the 3-inch stiletto heels she wore, but her feet wobbled as she walked. She was shocked Adam had a pair that fit her. His costume trunk doubled as Mary Poppins's bag of goodies.

*"Je suis désolé.* I am sorry. The resort has no available rooms. We are having a wedding this weekend. Can I book you at another hotel?"

Kaitlyn's hands shook at the prospect of postponing this objective. "Umm, I'm here to see a guest, Neil Connor."

"Dr. Connor?"

"Yes, he, umm, invited me over."

Idris Elba crinkled his stunning green eyes at her. "Dr. Connor left the hotel bar about an hour ago with some friends."

Kaitlyn made a desperate squeaking noise and tilted on her heels. "Can I wait for him in his room?"

"It is not our policy to hand out hotel keys, but you can wait in the lobby, or I can call you a car?"

Kaitlyn's eyes welled up. She couldn't wait in the lobby. Neil wouldn't let her stay. He'd call her an Uber to take her home the minute he saw her. She needed to surprise him in bed. Surely, he wouldn't be able to resist her then. "Please." If she couldn't convince the hotel manager, then her next move would be down on her knees begging.

“Excuse me. I must take this call.” He held his finger up to her and answered the phone. She listened as he explained there were no rooms left for the week. He hung up and his eyes traveled down her body to her fishnet stockings and her stiletto heels. “*Mademoiselle*, perhaps you should try elsewhere tonight?”

The heat crawled up her neck like a fiery flash. “I’m not a hooker if that’s what you think. I am here to visit Dr. Connor.”

“Dr. Connor is the groom this weekend. I don’t believe he needs your services tonight. Plus, he is currently not in.”

“I know he’s the groom. Dr. Connor is marrying me.” She turned around to see if any other staff noticed them, and then lowered her voice to a whisper, leaning over the check-in counter. “I’m the bride, Kaitlyn Thompson.”

“Oh?”

The hotel manager stood stunned, but then his face changed and he seemed to understand. “Well.”

“Yes. So, can I stay in his room until he gets back?” Kaitlyn pleaded with her eyes. Idris Elba stood there, waiting for at least two minutes before speaking again.

“*Ma chérie*”—he paused as he straightened her wig—“sometimes a surprise does not always end happily. Perhaps, you want to come back tomorrow?”

Kaitlyn managed a weak smile, figuring the jig was up. “It has to be tonight. I must see his, umm, you know, before we, before I marry him. My brother said I need to find out before the wedding.”

“Okay, *ma chérie*. I think I am following what you mean.” He walked over to the empty front desk and began typing into his computer. “Let’s get you a keycard so you can, uhh, check the situation out.”

“Thank you, Mr.—” She stopped herself from calling him Mr. Elba, which was clearly not his name.

“I am Monsieur Emile Flaubert, the hotel manager.”

So, he was the French version of Idris Elba. He took her hand and pressed his lips to it, then placed the keycard into her palm. “*Merci, Monsieur Flaubert.*” She closed her hand around the card and turned toward the elevators. She felt Emile’s eyes on her back as she tottered away on her high heels.



## Chapter 4 - Kaitlyn

Stepping into the elevator, Kaitlyn lost her nerve again. She inspected her crazy reflection in the mirrored doors. What in the hell am I doing? What if Neil is disappointed to see me? He's never even seen me naked. God, if Noah and Adam knew that part, they'd never let her live it down. I've lost my mind. I look like I'm trying too hard. Then, she heard her brother's voice in her head. "You're never too short for sexy." Right, I'm sexy. Kaitlyn straightened her red wig, threw her shoulders back, and when the doors opened, she walked with renewed confidence toward Neil's hotel room.

The quiet hallway smelled faintly of lemons. Keeping an eye out for the correct room number, Kaitlyn didn't notice the woman a few doors down until she was upon her. "Oh, excuse me." She picked up the woman's fallen purse. "Sorry." Kaitlyn gave her a warm smile. The tall, thin woman stared back with a horrified expression as if she handed her a mouse caught running down the hall rather than a Gucci bag. Then, Kaitlyn remembered her wig and her fishnet stockings peeking out beneath her raincoat. She giggled, causing her to stumble on the tall heels. "Yikes." Kaitlyn caught herself from falling.

The woman clenched her purse to her chest, a sneer still on her face. "Yikes, indeed." Still huffing, she turned toward the elevators.

Kaitlyn shrugged off the rude lady's appraisal. Finding Neil's room, she held the keycard up to the handle. It beeped and the door opened. Please let him be here and want me. The room had no lights on, making it challenging to see in the pitch-black space. However, the glow from the hall illuminated a sleeping figure in the bed. Thank God. Kaitlyn didn't want to admit her disappointment when Monsieur Flaubert told her Neil went out for the evening and hadn't come back yet. She hoped he misspoke, and she would find Neil tucked into bed sound asleep. She relaxed her shoulders. I knew he would be here.

Kaitlyn closed the heavy metal door as quietly as she could manage and then instantly regretted it. In the complete

darkness, she couldn't see a thing. Damn it. She shuffled her feet in front of her until she hit the bed with her knees. Shoes on or off? She knew what Noah and Adam would say, so she kept her shoes on. Be sexy. Think sexy. She slowly maneuvered herself onto the edge of the mattress and dragged her body over the covers toward the top of the bed. She felt ridiculous in her shoes, but she needed to play the seductive part and show Neil the woman he wanted to sleep with, not just marry.

Kaitlyn tried to be more sexually aggressive with Neil in the past, but when she attempted to unbutton his shirt on the couch, he stopped her, giving her his standard line, "I want our relationship to differ from my other relationships." Neil told Kaitlyn he loved her all the time, but he didn't show it physically. He said he found public displays of affection offensive, but Neil had no trouble kissing his staff on their cheeks or offering them tight hugs. She just wanted to play around a little. For God's sake, they were getting married. How much more committed could she be? But if he saw her having any doubts about their no-sex pact, he launched into his practiced speech: "Kaitlyn, I love you more than any girl I've ever dated. You will be my wife soon. That's something special, sacred even. I don't want to spoil it before it even starts. Don't you want to savor our marriage night?"

How could she argue with his logic? Didn't she want a long-lasting marriage like her parents? She did, so she went along with his plan. But she suffered like some sex-crazed teenager longing to caress his body every passing day.

But now, in this hotel room, hovering over him in a black lace negligee and a red wig, she wondered if it had been a colossal mistake to wait. The wedding's scheduled for this weekend. What if there's no chemistry between them? What if Neil's the size of a baby carrot? Will I really cancel the wedding if he stinks in bed? Damn it, Noah, and your infuriating advice. I should have delivered the eggs and kept my damn mouth shut.

Kaitlyn crept up the bed until she heard breathing sounds. Well, at least he doesn't snore. She pulled down the covers

inch by inch until only his boxers showed. He didn't move. The man sleeps like the dead. She crawled forward so she could straddle him, but as she hiked her leg over his body, the point on her high heel became tangled in the sheets below the comforter. Unable to release her foot, she tried shaking it, vibrating the bed. Well, shit. She lost her courage again, feeling less sexy with each ridiculous movement of her foot. Come on, give me a break here. The bed vibrated for a minute more as she pulled her shoe free. Kaitlyn froze, hoping all her movement didn't wake him. When he didn't stir, she tried again. Be sexy. Think sexy. This time, she straddled his body without trouble. Thank goodness for small successes.

"Mmmmmm," he murmured as she moved her face closer to him. He smelled like fresh linen. Hmm. Not his usual scent, but intoxicating. Hotel soap? She lowered her lips to his, wetting his with her tongue. He sighed. Taking that as a sign of pleasure, she pressed her full lips harder against his. It had been a few days since they last kissed. His lips were softer than she remembered. Maybe he got a new lip balm? "Mmmmmm," he moaned, his dick growing hard against her thigh. Yes! She screamed in her head, fist-bumping the air. Thank the stars he's not impotent and definitely not sporting a baby carrot. What a relief. She ground herself against him again and kissed him more, releasing her pent-up desire. The moment was exactly how she envisioned it. They fit together like a puzzle. A sexy, hot puzzle. No need to worry about chemistry, they were smoking together.

He moved with her, moaning with pleasure. She wanted to try some dirty talk, but since this sneak attack worked, she didn't want to push things too fast or scare him. She flushed at the thought of exploring each other's bodies more. She respected his boundaries, but come on, they were getting married in two days.

He reached for her hips with his large hands, tugging her closer. Were his hands always this big? He knew exactly where to place them. She could hardly believe his excited response. Noah's brilliant. This was an excellent idea. She should have done this months ago. She kissed him and rubbed against him and then, without warning, he bolted upright,

fumbling for the light switch and knocking everything off the nightstand.

“What’s going on?” He sat up farther and turned on the light. He froze and his mouth dropped open, but no words came out.

“Luke?” Kaitlyn’s mouth dropped open to match his. Holy hell. She tried to jump off his lap, but she got her heel tangled in the sheet again. “Ah!” She fell onto the floor with a thud, her leg standing straight up in the air and still attached to the sheet. Her eyes went wide at Luke’s shocked face.

Luke stared down at her. “Katie? What the hell are you doing here?”

This can’t be happening. Kaitlyn pulled her heel free and stood up, wobbling on her pointy heels and grabbing her chest in a hopeless attempt to cover herself. Not Neil, but Luke jumped out of bed and stepped back so fast he slammed his legs into the bedside table. They locked eyes for what felt like twenty minutes. Kaitlyn gathered her courage and spoke. “What are you doing here?” She heard the shaking in her voice.

Luke moved away from the table, limping. He sat down on the edge of the bed and used the sheet to cover himself up. He rubbed his face up and down.

“Luke? Answer me.” She crossed her arms and tried to pin him down with her stare.

“Just give me a minute. I need to shake this dream.” He shook his head from side to side as if to make it happen.

She raised her voice to a level close to shrill. “What in the hell are you doing here?” She yanked the comforter free, draping it around her. She kicked off the painful shoes, and they flew across the room, hitting the door with a loud bang. “Believe me, this is no dream.”

Luke turned with raised eyebrows as the heels dropped to the floor. “Katie.”

Kaitlyn expected him to finish his explanation, but he only gave her a vacant stare. “I can’t believe this is

happening,” she said. “I don’t understand what you’re doing here, in Neil’s hotel room no less? Where’s Neil? Are you here to ruin my wedding?” He had some nerve showing up.

“Wait.” Luke held his hand up to stop her from speaking. “What? You’re the bride?”

Kaitlyn’s eyes locked with his. “Of course, I’m the bride.” She sat down on the bed and covered her face with both hands. Was this a sick joke? When she raised her head, she saw Luke’s puzzled face change into one of recognition.

“You’re Neil’s Kaitlyn?” He collapsed on the bed. “Oh, God.”

## Chapter 5 - Luke

A moment ago, his Katie stood before him like every man's fantasy, decked out in the sexiest little black lingerie number. Luke still couldn't believe this wasn't a dream, but then he remembered what she had said. Maybe this was his worst nightmare?

Breathing hard, Katie sat next to him. "I don't understand what you are doing here," she said.

"Are you marrying Neil?" He couldn't wrap his head around this idea. Neil? Playboy Neil? He hoped he hid the concern on his face.

"Yes. I ..." She stopped and stared at him again. "Oh God, I kissed you. I straddled you. I attacked you for sex. This is a damn mess."

"Katie, it's okay." He wondered if he should put a hand on her shoulder to console her.

She stood up. "It really, really is not okay." She tightened the comforter around her like a protective shroud.

"It's okay. I won't tell a soul." He said, relieved he hadn't touched her intimately earlier on the bed. "Of course, you thought I was Neil."

"So, this is his room? The hotel manager gave me the keycard to surprise him. Where is he?"

Luke watched her pan the room as if Neil might be lurking somewhere. "Yes, it's his room. His bachelor party is tonight. I bet he'll be back later." Luke lied through his teeth. The already complicated situation didn't need any extra problems. It also wasn't his place to tell her Neil's out kissing Nurse Candy and Nurse Betty at a strip club. Maybe they agreed on an open relationship? That didn't seem like Katie's style, but it had been a long time.

"And you know Neil? How?"

"Yep. We went to med school together. I haven't spoken to him in the past few years, but I've recently been in touch

with his parents so ...” Luke didn’t want to explain his dislike of Neil and the need for his parents’ money. If it hadn’t been for his parents’ donation, he wouldn’t be attending this wedding. God, he should have taken a flight earlier. Huge mistake.

Katie tapped her nails on the wall, making a rhythmic clicking noise. “But why are you in his hotel room? In his bed?”

Luke glanced over at the noise. So, she still taps her nails when she’s nervous. He smiled at the recollection and then regretted it as memories of Katie flooded his mind. The way she tripped over her feet when she danced so Luke let her stand on his shoes. The way she bit on her bottom lip when she argued, knowing it drove Luke to distraction, prompting him to carry her to bed. The way she—

“Luke? I asked you a question.”

He straightened his face. “The hotel overbooked the rooms. They had a problem with their system, or at least that’s what they told me. Neil said he was happy to share his room.”

“Happy to share? Sure doesn’t sound like something Neil would say.” Katie paused for a moment. “Wait, why aren’t you out with the groomsmen?”

“I went earlier this evening, but I worked on-call all week and the exhaustion got to me. I needed sleep, so I begged off early.” He omitted the part where Neil’s night out included half-dressed, affectionate women. She didn’t need to hear those specifics. Did she?

Katie pinched her lips together and averted her eyes. “I see.”

Luke could tell she did not see. Neil didn’t tell her he planned to party all night. He swallowed hard. Do I tell her about Neil’s party?

“Well, then.” She threw the comforter back on the bed. “I’ll get going.”

“Okay,” Luke said, but he wanted her to stay so he could ask the million questions rattling inside his head. Why are you

marrying Neil? Does he make you happy? Why Neil? What happened to us? Why the hell, Neil?

Katie walked to the door and slipped on her shoes. Before she opened it, a knock sounded three times. She turned to him and gasped. "Oh, God. It's Neil. He can't see me in here. He won't understand why I'm here. Please get rid of him."

"Get rid of him? It's his room," Luke loud whispered back at her. Great, this was turning into an awful reality show.

"Just do something. Tell him you need a beer. Suggest drinks at the bar."

"I don't want drinks at the bar. I want to sleep." I want this nightmare to be over. Damn it, I should have gone home. Why didn't I catch a plane hours ago? Maybe I do need a drink? Or six.

"Luke. Listen to me. He cannot find me in this hotel room. Nothing positive can come from it. I can't explain the circumstances to you, but he won't understand. Do you hear me? I'll hide in the bathroom."

Hearing the fear in her voice, anger boiled in Luke's chest. This predicament is Neil's fault, not Katie's.

Another knock resounded on the door, more aggressive this time. Katie pointed her finger at him in a commanding gesture. "Open the door and get rid of him." Then, she jolted to the bathroom, shutting the door quietly.

"Geez. What a night." Luke ran his hand over his face again. "Coming," he yelled, finally acknowledging the knock. Noticing he only wore his boxers, he grabbed a pair of athletic shorts out of his luggage, put them on, and swung open the door.

In front of Luke stood the tall hotel manager he met at check-in. It caught him off guard. "Can I help you?" Luke stepped out into the hall and rested the door against the doorjamb so it wouldn't latch and lock him out.

"I am sorry to disturb you, sir, but we have a bit of a situation." Monsieur Flaubert wrung his hands like a person in distress.



“A situation?” Luke repeated.

“Yes, there is an emergency, and all the guests must stay in their hotel rooms until further notice.”

“What kind of emergency? Are we in danger?”

“I must insist you stay in your room for your own personal safety. I can’t reveal any more details at this time.”

“Stay in my room until when?” Luke’s skin prickled at the lack of information.

“Until further notice, sir. All persons in the hotel must stay in their rooms or designated areas.”

“Okay. I hear you, but I would like more information as soon as possible, please.” Luke couldn’t believe the disastrous trajectory of his day.

“Of course, sir. I will provide information as soon as I get it. Until then, make sure you and everyone in your party stay in your hotel room.”

“Okay.” Luke slipped back into the room, shutting the door behind him.

Back inside, he scanned the compact hotel space. He needed sleep, but it wouldn’t happen with Katie imprisoned in here with him. They needed more information before they could rest.

When Luke knocked on the bathroom door, he heard Katie jump. He waited as she opened the door a crack and peered out. She scowled at him and checked over his shoulder. “Where’s Neil?” She opened the door wider and stepped into the room. “What did you tell him?”

Luke heard the panic in her voice and he didn’t like it. “No worries. Neil wasn’t at the door.”

“Who knocked then?”

“The hotel manager. There is some kind of emergency, and we need to stay in our hotel rooms until further notice.”

“What? An emergency?”

“Yep, which means you can’t leave. No one in the hotel can leave. They didn’t say quarantine, but that’s what it sounds like to me.”

“I don’t understand. What happened? Didn’t they give you any information?”

Luke shook his head. “Nope. Just to stay in our rooms and they will tell us what to do later.”

“Oh, shit.” Katie flopped onto the bed, her feet dangling off the side.

“Oh, shit is right.” Luke collapsed down beside her.

They were silent for an extended time, just sitting there next to each other. The familiar scent of lavender tickled his nose, making him homesick for the time when Katie was his.

“Luke?” she asked, her voice strained. “I still don’t understand why you’re here.”

“I promise I didn’t know Neil planned to marry you. Trust me, if I knew, I wouldn’t—” If he knew, what? What would he do? Would he try to stop her? Maybe. No, if he knew, he would not come near the wedding. He couldn’t bear it now. Why Neil?

“But the wedding invitation has my name engraved on it. You saw it months ago.”

“I swear I didn’t. I never saw the invitation. Most of my personal mail comes into the office. My assistant opens all of it and handles my business. Knowing Neil’s parents are my financial donors, she RSVP’d and booked the flight and hotel for me. She does all my scheduling. I only knew Neil invited me to his wedding.”

“This is a cluster fuck.” Katie got up to pace the room with quick steps. “I can’t stay in this room with you.”

“I get it.” Being here alone together proved risky. Just seeing her brought back all kinds of visceral memories. “But Katie, they won’t let you leave. It isn’t safe.”

## Chapter 6 - Luke

Luke sat on the bed and bit his lip to keep quiet.

She continued to pace back and forth. “You must quit calling me Katie.”

He rolled onto his elbows and raised his eyebrows at her. “Huh?”

She stopped mid-pace and walked over to the bed. “I don’t go by that name anymore. I use my full name, Kaitlyn.”

Luke noticed her flushed face, and how shrill she sounded. “Right,” he said unconvinced.

“Plus, it is too ...”

Luke sat up all the way, scooted to the edge of the bed, and cocked his head to the side. “Too what?” He thought she was about to say, “too intimate,” but he wasn’t certain.

“Just don’t call me that.” Katie’s voice sounded level this time.

Luke didn’t want to argue with her, so he shrugged and walked to the small window in the corner of the room. “There are several ambulances outside the hotel. Strange we didn’t hear the sirens.”

She paced again.

“I bet someone’s sick and they are evaluating the situation before sharing the information. If they’ve closed the hotel already, it’s serious. Perhaps even fatal.”

“Please stop.” Katie paused in front of the window next to him.

“Stop what?” He crinkled his eyebrows in confusion. “What did I do now?”

“Please stop trying to figure out what’s going on down there. We need to focus and find a way to get me out of this hotel room.”

“Right.” Luke turned toward her, his face scrunched like a person with a plan to get her out of the room. “We could tie the bed sheets together and slide down the side of the building. I’ve always wanted to try out some Spider-Man moves.”

“I mean it, Luke. Focus.” Katie glared at him as if she could tell he wasn’t thinking hard enough. “Neil would be so hurt if he found me in here with you. I can’t imagine what he would think.” She paced again. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Right.” The hotel closed in on him like a torture chamber all of a sudden.

She turned around in front of him, hands on hips. “Please stop saying ‘right.’ It’s unnerving.”

Luke nodded, trying to figure out what he could say to calm her down. Probably nothing. Biting my tongue now.

Katie walked over to the door and leaned her ear to it. “Maybe I can sneak into another room? I can knock on someone’s door, tell them my situation, and then I won’t be in here with you.”

“But you would be in a room with a stranger.” He hoped she wouldn’t prefer that arrangement over being stuck here with him.

“Right.”

He smirked at her.

Katie shook her head. “Oh, shut up.”

Luke noticed she smiled for the first time since discovering him in the room. Her smile was her best feature. At least that hadn’t changed. Did Neil make her smile?

There was a firm knock at the door and they both froze. Katie shuffled toward the bathroom. “Should I hide, just in case it’s Neil?”

“Might as well, to be sure.” He waited while she ducked into the bathroom and closed the door. If it was Neil, he would tell him Katie ran away forever. Ugh. If only that was an option.

Luke opened the door and there stood Monsieur Flaubert again. “Sorry to disturb you again, sir.” He peered down at his clipboard and then back up at Luke. “Dr. Neil Connor?”

“Uhh, no?” Luke responded with a question, unsure how this would play out, especially with Neil’s fiancée hiding in the bathroom.

“No?” Monsieur Flaubert glanced back at his clipboard in confusion. “Oh sorry, we have Dr. Connor on the register as the guest of this room. Maybe a mix-up occurred in our system.”

“No. This is his room.”

“Hmm.” Monsieur Flaubert narrowed his eyes at Luke. “Is Dr. Connor here? I need to speak to you both.”

“He isn’t here.” But his fiancée is hiding in the bathroom freaking out, and I am locked in an alternate universe where the love of my life is marrying a major dickwad.

“He is not? I see.” Monsieur Flaubert stared down at his clipboard again as if it contained answers but then seemed to collect himself. “Are you alone then?”

Luke wavered. He didn’t want to lie to the man if there wasn’t a need, yet this whole situation kept getting crazier. “I’m not.”

“Yes. Well then. Will you ask the other guest to join us at the door please, Mr.—?”

“Mr. Andrews. Luke Andrews.” The manager wrote his name down next to the room number. “I can’t. She needs time alone at the moment.”

“Okay. Well, perhaps you can give me her name for my hotel records?”

Luke hesitated. “Is this situation urgent?”

“I am afraid so.”

“Well, okay. It’s Katie, umm ... Kaitlyn Thompson.”

Monsieur Flaubert raised a single eyebrow. “I made Ms. Thompson’s acquaintance earlier. I believe she came to see her

fiancé, Dr. Connor? Perhaps I misunderstood her.”

“Nope. You didn’t.” Luke brushed his hand up and down his face trying to erase all the unease.

“Well, I will put her down here with your name. Do not worry. It is for in-office use only, sir.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Goodnight then, sir.” Monsieur Flaubert turned to walk away.

Luke stepped farther out the door. “Wait. Don’t you have more information for me?” Geez. Like what’s the deal with the ambulances?

The hotel manager blushed. “Of course. Please excuse me. I am not myself at the moment. There is a possible viral outbreak in the hotel. A guest showed classic symptoms. We closed the first five floors. I am working my way up so I can check on the others. There will be a quarantine in effect for, well, for the time being.”

“If there are legitimate cases of illness in the building, the quarantine will be in effect for quite a sustained time, not just for the time being. The CDC will need to get involved. Have you contacted them?” Luke peeked down the hall, making sure no one could hear. “How many people are sick? Do you need any help?”

“Are you a doctor, Mr. Andrews?”

“Yes. I’m an ENT, but I can provide triage or support if needed.”

“I will inform the CDC downstairs you are here. However, Dr. Andrews, you have been in other parts of the hotel and could have contracted the infection as well, no?”

“The CDC is here already?” Damn it. It’s worse than I thought.

“Yes, and they told me all guests must stay in their room until we can gather more information. A doctor will come around to interview everyone tonight. I suggest you and Ms.

Thompson stay here until we give you the all-clear, just in case.”

“They can check me for signs of illness, but as of right now, I’m not experiencing any viral symptoms.” Although this night might give me PTSD.

“Wonderful news. Please stay in your room until the doctor gives us more information. Goodnight, Dr. Andrews.”

“Goodnight.” Luke closed the door and leaned his forehead against the cool wood for a few minutes. Katie will freak out. A viral quarantine could last for weeks, depending on what the CDC finds to be the cause. “I should have inquired about the exact symptoms. Sheesh,” Luke said to himself as he walked to the bathroom door and knocked.

Katie popped her head out. “Well?”

“I have some bad news.”

She stepped out into the room. “Okay. How bad?”

“They don’t have any definitive answers, but the quarantine could last for an extended time, weeks even, if the outbreak is contagious.”

“Weeks?”

“Yes. A serious outbreak lasts weeks. In that case, the hotel will be under quarantine for a long time. It doesn’t sound encouraging. The CDC arrived already.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘quarantine’? They will keep the sick people and release the healthy ones?” She walked over to the balcony door and leaned her back against the thick curtains. “Won’t they?”

“Well, typically, the CDC isolates people showing viral symptoms, but anyone else who has been exposed will be forced to stay put so they don’t catch or spread the disease.”

“I have to stay here in this hotel room with you indefinitely?” Katie put her hands to her head and squeezed as if a solution would pop out. “Or I could go knock on someone else’s door?”

“Monsieur Flaubert said it was imperative we stay in our rooms until the doctor comes to check us for infection.” Luke hoped repeating the stern warning would distract her from any more crazy ideas. “Plus, other guests might be sick.” Hell, we might already be infected too.

“Oh, God!” She threw herself into the chair by the small writing desk. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Katie?” Luke used his calm doctor’s voice.

She spun her head around. “Kaitlyn.”

Luke put his hands up in surrender. “Kaitlyn, right.” He joined her by the chair. “How do you feel? Any symptoms you forgot to mention?” He put the back of his hand against her forehead. “No fever, headache, or anything hurting to report?”

“No.” She shook off his hand. “Totally fine. I mean, I acted like a complete fool tonight, but physically, I can’t complain.”

“Great.” What a relief. She hates me but feels fine.

“So, what should we do while we wait for more information?” Katie went over to where her purse lay on the floor and collapsed to the ground, tearing up. “I’m afraid to hear your answer.”

“A doctor, probably someone from the CDC, will come around to assess us.”

“Okay.”

“Are your vaccinations current?” Luke realized he didn’t know the answer or anything about her life anymore.

She wiped at her eyes. “Of course, they are.”

“Right.” Luke brushed his hair back off his face and sat down beside her. “Oh, Sorry. *Not* right.” He gave her a mischievous grin. Katie didn’t smile back; instead, she dug around in her purse until she found her cell phone. Luke cleared his throat. “We need to wait until a doctor comes around to examine us.”



Katie didn't answer. Staring at her phone, she hit the side button to check for text messages. "I wonder if I should call Neil? Tell him I'm okay and everything's fine?"

"Are you asking me or are you talking out loud?" Luke couldn't imagine why she wanted to call him. "What would you tell him? That you're in his hotel room with me?"

"Hell's bells. I can't tell him where I am."

"Wait, does he know about us?"

Katie shook her head no and dropped her phone back in her purse

Interesting. Neil has no clue about our backstory. "It's 3 a.m. anyway. I don't think you need to call anyone this late. Even if he came back here tonight, the hotel staff won't let him in. They've locked the doors."

"If he came back?" Katie pulled on one of her red wig curls. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Oh, you know, bachelor parties, out drinking all night, and then an early breakfast of greasy toast and eggs." It even sounded like a lie as he said it. Lucky for him, she fretted too much over the possibility of getting caught to notice. Telling the truth about how he left Neil drowning in a sea of women would only exacerbate the situation. He had already told her so many lies, what was one more?

"Maybe I won't need to tell him." Katie's voice hung heavy with denial.

"I'm sure we will be here for a few days, at least. They don't call the CDC unless the circumstances prove dire. Neil will notice when you don't show up at your own wedding though. Right?" That would fix all his problems. Sorry, Neil, Katie can't marry you because she's infected with a contagious virus. He'd run for the hills for sure.

"Oh, God." Katie pulled her legs in close, her high heels digging into the plush carpet.

"Hell, isn't the wedding scheduled here at the hotel?"

“We’ll have to cancel the wedding.” New wrinkles perched above her brow, grim realization finally setting in. “Neil’s disappointment will break my heart.”

“Neil,” Luke muttered under his breath like it was a dirty word. He had no empathy for that scum. It’s Katie’s heart he worried about.

“I should at least call my brother.” She picked up her phone again. “He’ll see this on social media and freak out.”

“How is Noah? Is he still living with Adam?” Before she could answer, another knock sounded on the door.

“That must be the doctor.” Luke stood up. “No sense in hiding anymore.”

Katie nodded her head at him from the floor.

Luke opened the door to find a tiny grey-haired woman wearing a white doctor’s coat and holding a clipboard and a doctor’s bag in her hands. “Dr. Andrews? I am Dr. Roe with the CDC. I understand you are not currently experiencing any viral symptoms. Do you mind if I come in and ask a few questions?”

“Please do.” Luke pushed the door wider, allowing Dr. Roe to step inside.

Katie lifted herself up from the floor. “Hello.”

“Hello. I am Dr. Roe. I want to ask you a few questions and then I will get out of your hair so you can get some, uhh, sleep.” Dr. Roe paused before the word “sleep” and her eyes traveled from the top of Katie’s red wig to the bottom of her stiletto shoes.

Katie gazed down at her outfit and when she lifted her head, her face and neck turned a deep crimson, matching her wig. Noticing her discomfort, Luke draped the comforter around her shoulders. Katie wrapped it tighter.

“I understand it has been a rough night for everyone.” Dr. Roe tried to avert her eyes back to her clipboard. “The promising news is few people work at this late hour, so we secured most of the hotel employees in the restaurant. They

cannot leave either, but I assure you if you need help, you only need to call the front desk and someone will come. Please, though, stay out of the halls.”

Katie eyeballed Luke and swallowed hard. Luke gave her the “thumbs up” hand gesture before turning back to the doctor. “Let’s get to it then.”

## Chapter 7 - Kaitlyn

After Dr. Roe left, Kaitlyn shuffled over to Luke. “You don’t think it’s measles, do you? The doctor didn’t say what’s making everyone sick.”

“I hope it’s not the measles, or we’ll be confined here for at least two weeks.”

The panic rose in her stomach and the heat crept up her body. She loosened the comforter to let her neck breathe. Two weeks with Luke would not do. Flashbacks of his lips on hers haunted her thoughts. They moved together as if they had never been apart. She did not need further confirmation of their surviving chemistry when she had no clue about her current chemistry with Neil. This plan of Noah’s sure did backfire.

“Don’t worry,” Luke said, apparently regarding the dread on her face. “Dr. Roe would mention if it’s measles or anything serious.”

“Oh, thank goodness this won’t affect the wedding.” She breathed a loud sigh of relief. “I won’t have to tell Neil I came here tonight.” Or about you.

“What about the rehearsal dinner tomorrow? You can’t attend it.”

“Why not? I might be able to go. Who knows, they might let us out in the morning, and I can rush home and pretend none of this ever happened.” Luke cringed, but Kaitlyn pretended not to notice.

“Katie,” he said, pointing to the alarm clock still laying on the floor. “It’s morning already and I’m exhausted.”

Kaitlyn examined the glowing numbers reading 4:05 and the big king-size bed, then peeked back at Luke. I can’t sleep in the bed with Luke. Those toned arms, that broad chest, his hard ... nope. “How exactly is this going to work?”

“Sleep? Well, first you close your eyes, and eventually, you begin to snore.”

“Stop trying to be funny. You know what I mean. And I don’t snore.”

“You do snore,” Luke said, teasing her. “I’m not sure I understand what we need to work out.”

“Get serious. Where will I sleep?” Kaitlyn sat down on the bed, sliding her hand over the soft sheets. Maybe he’ll sleep in the bathroom if I suggest it nicely? “We can’t both sleep here.”

“You can sleep on the floor if you want, but the bed’s way more comfortable.”

She gave him the stink eye. “Definitely not. I thought you could sleep on the floor and I’d get the bed.” Or you could sleep in the bathtub, and I can pretend you aren’t here at all.

“I got here first.”

“But it’s Neil’s room, not yours.” She bit her lower lip, tempting him with an old argument tactic of hers.

Luke wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead. “Umm.” His eyes dilated as he moved closer to her.

Yes. It worked. Her stomach grew warm and her legs turned into jelly. Wait. No. This is working too well. She released her lip and scooted out of reach. “Giving up the bed is the gentlemanly thing to do. Don’t you think, Luke?”

His eyes refocused and he stepped back. “I think the fact I’m sharing the bed with you is the ‘gentlemanly’ thing to do. Or would you rather sleep on the floor? The whirlpool tub accommodates one person as well.”

If anyone’s getting the tub, it’s you, buster. Kaitlyn pursed her lips, revving up for a snide rebuttal, but decided against it. “I’m exhausted and don’t want to fight with you.” Sleeping standing up seemed a viable option. This familiar banter riled her up. They had always ended their fights entwined in sheets.

“Terrific. I hate fighting with you”—he paused, a playful grin spreading across his face—“but the making up part left us super satisfied.”

“Luke.” Kaitlyn’s voice broke and memories of their youthful bodies pressed together jumped to the forefront. After a moment’s pause, she hopped off the mattress, shedding the comforter around her shoulders. “Fine. Whatever. I’m taking a shower.” She scrutinized her shredded fishnet legs. “May I borrow some clothes to sleep in?” God forbid I put this embarrassing costume back on, ever again.

Luke opened his suitcase and pulled out a faded orange Oregon State shirt.

“Seriously?” He wants me to wear his favorite shirt? *My* favorite shirt.

“What? You always loved this shirt.”

Kaitlyn snatched the shirt from his hands and kicked her shoes off against the wall. She grabbed her purse before slamming the bathroom door behind her. She hated letting him get to her, but she admired his torture methods. This mayhem better end soon. She couldn’t take much more.

She peeled off her stripper outfit and threw the bright wig on the counter. Unpinning her hair, the long blonde strands tumbled down her back. That’s better. She turned on the shower to the hottest setting and stepped in. As the scorching water cleansed the horrible night off her skin, her pent-up stress fell away. Everything will work out just fine. It has to be okay. Back in Neil’s arms, her problems will disappear. As she turned off the shower, though, exhaustion and panic set in again. Surely, Neil has discovered the hotel is on lockdown. What if he goes to the condo and sees I’m not home?

“Damn it.” Kaitlyn jumped out of the shower and dumped her purse onto the floor. She yanked out her phone and texted her brother.

**Kaitlyn:** I know it’s early, but I need you to cover for me in case Neil shows up at the condo later today.

**Kaitlyn:** I’ll explain later. ❤️

The phone rang in her hand. “Noah?”

“What the hell is going on? Aren’t you with Neil?”

“No, and I can’t explain it all at the moment,” she whispered into the phone. “I need you to go to the condo and tell Neil I’m sick or whatever if he stops by, and I’ll see him at the rehearsal dinner.”

“Why are you whispering? What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you everything later. I promise.”

“Are you okay? Were you kidnapped or are you playing runaway bride?”

“Both.”

“What does that mean?”

Kaitlyn did not want to get into all the details, but Noah would never let it go. She heard him waking Adam up to listen to their conversation.

“You’re on speakerphone,” Noah said.

“Geez, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Like when you told us you hadn’t seen Neil’s dick?” Adam chimed in, still sounding half asleep.

Kaitlyn paid for the slip of her tongue. She shouldn’t have told them anything. She wouldn’t be in this debacle if she had waited until their wedding night as Neil wanted. “Listen, you two, I need one of you to go to the beach condo and pretend I’m too sick to see anyone in case Neil shows up.”

“Isn’t Neil with you?” Adam lagged behind in the conversation.

“Where the hell is Neil if he’s not with you?” Noah asked, sounding worried. “Wait, you’re still at the hotel, right?”

“Yeah, I’m definitely still at the hotel.” She breathed into the phone. “But there’s been a—”

There was a loud knock on the door. “Katie? Hey, Katie.” Luke knocked again louder. “Sorry, I mean Kaitlyn,” he

corrected. “Are you okay in there?”

“Who’s that?” Noah and Adam yelled into the phone.

“Shush.” She exhaled into the phone and turned to the door. “I’m fine. I’m only talking to myself. Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“No. I’m going to bed. Since you like the right side, I’ll be on the left.”

“Who the hell’s talking?” Noah’s voice sounded excited.

“It’s not what you think. It’s just Luke.”

She heard him again through the door, a little impatiently this time. “Katie? Did you hear me? I need to get some sleep.”

“Yes, Yes, I heard you. Left side is great. Thanks.” Kaitlyn tried to ignore her brother and Adam giggling like schoolgirls into the phone.

“Just Luke,” Noah gasped with glee. “As in just Luke Andrews? Our Luke?”

“No, not our Luke, but yes, Luke Andrews, and I don’t want to talk about it. I need to get some sleep.” So I can erase his half-naked body from my mind.

“Oh, we’re going to talk about it.” Noah used a stricter tone this time. “But since you’ve been up all night, not sleeping, we’ll let you catch some shut-eye with our Luke first.”

“He’s not our Luke.” She hissed into the phone. He’s probably somebody else’s Luke by now.

“Wait, not that Luke?” Adam began to catch on.

Kaitlyn tried to redirect them. “So, will you go to the condo for me or not?”

“Right now?”

“Yes, please.”

“On my way. I want front row seats for this drama. Kiss, kiss, Katie girl.”



Kaitlyn hung up the phone and studied her naked body in the mirror. Without the crazy costume, she looked like herself again and it felt right. She needed to brush her teeth, but she couldn't borrow Luke's toothbrush. Steal his toothpaste, yes, but she would use her finger to brush. She opened up the counter drawers. They were empty except for one with a compact hotel hair dryer. She picked it up, turning it over in her hand. She should blow dry her hair so it wouldn't be knotted in the morning. She flipped her hair, reached over to plug the dryer in, and turned it on.

"Owwww!" The exhaust fan of the cheap dryer immediately sucked in her hair. "Oww!" she screamed again, trying to turn it off before more of her hair got tangled in it.

The door swung open and Luke stood there bleary-eyed in his penguin boxer shorts, looking hotter than hell. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Luke." Shit. Why didn't I lock the door? "Get out of here. Stop staring at me."

He didn't stop.

"Close your eyes and hand me a towel." She tried to pull her hair out of the dryer and yelped. Luke closed his eyes but kept a grin on his face. "Keep your eyes shut. And damn it, stop smiling."

"Where did you put the towel?" He started walking toward her with his eyes shut. "Uhhhhh..."

"Ahem. Those are my breasts, not a towel."

"Oops. Sorry. And wow."

Kaitlyn smiled despite herself. "Never mind. I'll get the towel." She tried to untangle her hair from the dryer, but it wouldn't come loose. She turned around to unplug the hair dryer when two large hands skimmed across her butt. "Luke."

He snickered with his eyes still closed. "Sorry, but nice ass."

"I told you to stop walking." Thank, thank, thank all the tacos in heaven I do squats after every run.

“You told me to stop smiling.” He did not stop smiling.  
“You still have a great ass.”

“Luke,” Kaitlyn said exasperated. “Just don’t move again.”

“My eyes are closed, and I swear I have no idea where I am in this bathroom. I tried to hand you a towel, which is what you asked me to do in the first place.”

Kaitlyn unplugged the hair dryer and walked over to the shower door where the towels hung on a rack. She wrapped one around her body and sat down on the edge of the bathtub. “Okay, you can open your eyes, now.”

His eyes opened, and Kaitlyn watched them drop to her small hotel towel.

“What happened here?”

“The dryer sucked up some of my hair. Can you help me pull it out?”

Luke walked over to the tub and examined the tangle of strands caught in the back of the hair dryer. “I think we might need to cut it out.” He held up a sizable chunk of her hair. “This piece, especially.”

Kaitlyn shuddered and pulled away. “No way.” Her eyes widened with terror. “Not right before my wedding day.”

“Oh, Katie, no. I’m sorry. That was an awful joke.” He pulled the golden strands loose, careful not to tug hard.

When he reached up to brush her face, though, she stopped his hand. “It’s Kaitlyn, remember?”

“I remember.” He stared at her a beat too long.

“Thank you.” She stood up, putting the hair dryer back in the drawer. “I think we need to go to bed. I’m tired and emotional.” Luke nodded and closed the bathroom door behind him so she could get dressed.

Focus on Neil. Neil and I are meant to be together. I shouldn’t let Luke get into my head. If we weren’t trapped together, none of this would be an issue now. His familiar

touch put some kind of spell on me. Neil makes me happy. Luke's moan in my ear, his breath ... wait. Stop. No. I love Neil. Ridding Luke from her head proved difficult. If only she hadn't kissed him. Touched him.

When she emerged wearing Luke's Oregon State shirt, he gave her sad puppy dog eyes. Don't look. Averting her eyes, she pulled down the covers. Without saying a word, Luke plunged his head into the pillow as Kaitlyn climbed into the empty spot he left her on the right side of the bed. She turned her head away from him to make it easier to ignore the feelings threatening to resurface from the past. "Goodnight."

Luke reached over to turn out the light. "Goodnight, Katie."

## Chapter 8 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn leaned into the pillow as a toasty body shifted closer to hers, creating the perfect-sized niche for her to fit inside. She scooted back into the warmth and sighed as a hot breath hit her neck. A little moan escaped her lips. She nestled in farther, soaking up the cozy spot. She suddenly stilled with the realization she wasn't dreaming. A sliver of sunlight coming from the open curtains slashed across her face, forcing her eyes open. Fully awake, she tensed with panic, trying to remember where she slept last night and who laid next to her in bed. Squinting, she took in the room. The memory of the night before flashed before her eyes. Luke spooned her. Her Luke. Kaitlyn tried not to move. His steady breathing meant he hadn't woken up yet. She needed to untangle herself somehow without waking him. An awkward morning conversation all knotted together would not do.

Trying to slither down the bed away from him, Kaitlyn froze when Luke grumbled and tightened his arms around her in an embrace. What is he doing? But she leaned back into him again. Wait. What am I doing? She didn't want to move. She closed her eyes and nuzzled into his arms. Kaitlyn wanted to stay in bed forever with his muscular arms wrapped around her. She opened her eyes, ashamed of herself. Nope, not Luke's arms. I don't want Luke. It's Neil I love. I want Neil's arms around me. What's happening to me?

Kaitlyn moved Luke's arms down to her hips, and the weight of his hands pressed into her. Feeling guilty, she rolled toward him in order to scoot out of the bed backward. As she rolled, though, Luke opened his eyes. They faced each other, their lips inches apart. He didn't seem confused or disturbed about waking up next to her. His breathing slowed, and he grabbed her hips a little harder. His eyes dilated and he bent toward her. She had the briefest of pleasant thoughts, Luke is going to kiss me, when there was an eager knock at the hotel room door. Kaitlyn wriggled out of the bed and sprinted to the door.

"Hello," she yelled as she opened the door wide.

*“Bonjour, ma chérie.”* Emile matched her enthusiasm.

The breeze from the hall brushed against Kaitlyn’s bare legs, and she tugged her shirt down. “Monsieur Flaubert, so nice to see you this morning.”

“Nice to see you as well. However, it is no longer morning. You two slept straight through breakfast.” He gave her a teasing wink and pointed to the untouched breakfast tray on the floor.

“I know. I know. This did not go as planned. I should have listened to you. You were right.”

*“Ce n’est pas une bonne surprise?”*

“No,” she whispered. “This is not a good surprise.”

*“Je suis désolé.”* Emile stepped into the room and spotted Luke still in bed. “Are you sure, *ma chérie?*”

“Yes, totally sure.” Her voice rose an octave at the end. “Is there any new information? Will the CDC release us today?” Please say I can escape this suffering.

“I regret to inform you the CDC has not given us any test results yet. However, we expect to hear from them sometime later today. Happy news, though, no one reported any new illnesses last night.”

“That’s good news, right?” Kaitlyn hoped Emile had more to share. She needed to find out how long she would be trapped here. The Spider-Man descent down the side of the building began to sound like a reasonable plan.

*“Oui, ma chérie. D’accord. I’ll leave you two alone to eat your food.”*

Kaitlyn walked him to the door. Luke said nothing while Emile gave his report, making the whole bedroom meeting even more awkward. “Thank you, Monsieur Flaubert.”

*“Bien sûr.”* Emile stopped before she closed the door. “You two should eat lunch out on the terrace. There is a beautiful view.”

Kaitlyn closed the door and turned to Luke. “You could have said something.”

“Like what?”

“Hello, for starters.” She put the food boxes on the desk by the window.

“I’m sorry about—”

“About what?”

“About what happened in bed.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. Nothing happened.”

“It seemed like something happened.” He pulled the sheets up over his bare chest.

Kaitlyn walked over to the sliding glass door and pushed the curtains back. “Nothing happened.” She opened the door and stepped outside, trying to shake off the unsettling rumble she had in the pit of her stomach. Luke would never stop calling her Katie, and every time he said it, butterflies fluttered in her heart. She shook her head again to clear her mind and opened her eyes. The white beach sparkled in the sun, and the waves crashing against the rocks sounded incredible.

“Monsieur Flaubert spoke the truth.” She grabbed the two boxes. “We should eat out here.” She pulled out the heavy chair and sat down at the wrought iron bistro table.

Luke pulled a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt out of his bag by the closet and put them on. He joined her on the terrace and took in the view. “Wow.” Luke craned his neck at the breaking waves near the shore. “Neil sure picked an impressive place to get married.”

“Yes, he did,” Kaitlyn said. “Wait, why do you think Neil picked the hotel?”

“Easy. I know you, and you would want to get married at the vineyard.”

“You don’t know ... I want—” Kaitlyn took a breath. “Sunny Vines is too small. It couldn’t accommodate the

Connor's extensive guest list. This place is perfect like you said." Luke smirked at her, and she knew he noticed the lie.

Fine. Whatever. So what if she dreamed of a wedding on the vineyard her entire life? Can't she forge a new dream, one with sparkly white sand and a gorgeous ocean view? She squinted her eyes in a *don't challenge me* stance, getting ready to defend her wedding venue, then remembered the heated tension of their previous disagreement over the sleeping arrangements. God, fighting and making up was one of their favorite distractions. Stop it. Enough. She straightened her face, noticing that Luke appeared disappointed their exchange was over. That's right. No more sexy fighting for you.

Luke sat down opposite her at the tiny table, like a giant in the bistro chair, and opened his boxed lunch. A grilled chicken and pimento cheese wrap lay folded inside wax paper with a bag of Kettle chips. "Remember when your mom made us pimento grilled cheese sandwiches?" He took a bite of his wrap. "Those were the best." He stuffed his mouth full of food. "Especially after two bottles of wine."

Kaitlyn laughed despite herself. "They were great sandwiches for hangovers." She opened up her own lunch.

"They were great any time of day." Luke finished his wrap and opened his chip bag.

"She made those especially for you." Kaitlyn took a bite of her wrap and grimaced. "I hate pimento cheese."

He laughed. "What? That can't be possible. We ate them all the time."

Kaitlyn loved his hearty laugh. "Yes, because you loved them, and you were always asking for them." She put her unfinished wrap back in the box, grabbed her bag of chips, and pushed the box in his direction.

Luke picked up her wrap and popped it in his mouth. "You want my chips?" He offered her the bag, swallowing.

"Okay. Thanks."

"We can ask Monsieur Flaubert to bring you something else."

“No. It’s okay.” She turned to the ocean. “I’m not hungry.” The constant trips down memory lane wrecked her appetite. They were wrecking everything.

“How are your parents?”

Kaitlyn, glad to change the subject, replied, “They’re fine.” She ran her hands through her hair and sighed. “Ugh, I need to call Noah. Mom might panic if the wedding venue shuts down.”

“I’m sure Noah took care of it since you never heard from her.”

She crunched on a chip. “You’re right. Noah will explain the circumstances.”

“So, your parents are well, then? Still hard at work at the vineyard?”

“They’re thinking about selling the vineyard.” Kaitlyn put her chip bag down on the table and turned away, afraid he would see the sadness in her eyes.

“What? No way. I can’t imagine that.”

“Yeah.” She focused on the ocean, avoiding his face. Can’t he see I don’t want to talk about it?

“Did you end up working there?”

Kaitlyn kept her face turned. “After Oregon State, I put ten years into Sunny Vines. I hired a permanent cultivation team and created an e-commerce site. It’s been extremely successful.”

“But you dreamed about taking over the vineyard when your parents retire.”

Kaitlyn twisted around toward Luke. She saw the shock on his face but pretended not to notice. “They still plan to retire. Well, after they sell it.”

“But—”

“Listen, I know what you think, but I’m fine with it. My parents are fine with it too. They want me to be happy, and



Neil makes me happy. We came up with a plan and selling the vineyard works.”

“So, Neil created this life-changing scenario for you?” Luke winced when he said Neil’s name.

Kaitlyn didn’t like how Luke asked the question. It was her decision too. “No. We agree on our vision for the future. We both want to start a family right away, and Neil conducts his business here on the coast, not in the countryside.”

“Why not run the vineyard part-time for the new owners?”

She suggested the same option to Neil, but he reminded her how time-consuming designing a nursery and playroom would be. “The vineyard doesn’t work for the life we’ve created.”

“What work will you do?”

“I’m not going to work.”

“You? Not work? You want to give up your dream job for Neil?”

“I’m not giving up ... I’ll still make a ...” She blew out her breath in exasperation. “It’s the right thing to do,” she said after a few awkward silent minutes. And I don’t have to explain myself to you.

“The right thing, Katie?”

She shrunk at the sound of her name, but she couldn’t correct him anymore. She would always be Katie to him. “Yes.” A phone rang inside the room. “I think it’s your cell,” she mumbled, happy to move on from this conversation.

Luke walked inside the room and grabbed his phone. He leaned out the sliding door and said, “Bollocks. Neil’s calling me”

Kaitlyn pushed him back inside the room. “Remember, I’m not here.” She pointed a commanding finger at him and closed the sliding glass door on his face.

## Chapter 9 - Luke

Luke answered on the fourth ring, right before voicemail picked up. "Hello."

"Luke, old buddy." Neil sounded jubilant on the phone.

The hairs on the back of Luke's neck rose, giving him the creeps. He paced the small room, taking large wide steps around the bed over and over again.

"Yep." Luke waited for Neil to start the conversation.

"Seems you got screwed by taking my room."

"Yep."

Neil barked a loud laugh. "Glad it's you and not me. I dodged a bullet on that one."

"Yep." Afraid to show his derision fighting its way to the surface, Luke responded with monosyllabic words.

"You aren't sick, are you?" Neil's voice changed to something more professional. "I assume it's the measles from what I heard on the news, though no one said it outright. You didn't catch it, did you?"

"Not sick." He spat out a two-syllable answer this time.

"Good. Good. Well then, did they give you any news?"

"Nope." I wouldn't tell you if they did.

"Really? You must know something they aren't sharing?"

"Nope." But I know you are a lying sack of shit. God, so am I. And that's your fault, Neil. I would tell Katie all about your devious deeds, but it will break her heart.

They were both quiet for a full minute.

"Dude, we moved the rehearsal dinner," Neil said, breaking the silence. "I originally booked it at the resort. Well, I guess you figured that out. We had a hard time finding a place at the last minute, but Mother called in a favor at her country club. Many of the guests are stuck in the hotel like

you, so they won't be able to make it, but the show must go on, right?"

"Uh-huh." Luke peeled back the curtains on the sliding glass door to watch Katie. She stood at the railing, gazing out over the ocean with the wind blowing her hair back behind her. He didn't turn away. She deserved better than Neil.

"The irony is my fiancée, Kaitlyn, has a stomach bug. I'm sure it's just wedding jitters, though. She's that type."

"What type do you mean?" Luke didn't take his eyes off of Katie. She was even more beautiful than when they dated in college.

"You know. The nervous type. The kind of woman who likes things to be a certain way. Kaitlyn needs reassurance, told it will be okay. She needs a little handling."

Luke saw Katie step up onto the bottom of the rail and lean into the wind a bit more, looking happy and free. "Does she now?"

"Yeah, she's a high-strung woman. She'll relax after the wedding."

"Uh-huh." Luke only half-listened as Katie's hair blew in the breeze. Maybe a sinkhole will swallow Neil after the wedding and there won't be a honeymoon.

"So, you won't make it to the dinner tonight since you scored lockdown time?"

"Doesn't seem like it." Luke tried to disguise his annoyance.

"Well, listen, I left my tux hanging in the closet."

And finally, the actual reason Neil called. Luke stayed silent.

"Luke? Are you there?"

"Yep."

"We have to wait and see what happens, but I need my tux for the wedding tomorrow. We might need a new location

too. I'm sure Mother has talked to the country club already. Thank God, she dealt with all the tedious planning."

"Uh-huh." Luke let go of the curtain and paced the room again. "So, Neil, where did you stay the night? Or did you party all night at the club?"

"Ha. Mostly. The boys did it right. You wouldn't believe the trouble we found."

"I bet."

"The party rocked, totally epic. We partied at the club until they forced us out around four, then I took the nurses to Candy's house. We played naughty nurse and doctor until an obscene hour this morning. I've had no sleep. You should've been there."

Thank God, I missed that spectacle. "Guess last night marked the end of wild times?" Luke's voice dripped with sarcasm. He caught his mistake immediately. Why did I ask such an idiotic thing? He regretted guiding the conversation in this direction. He didn't want to keep any more secrets from Katie.

"Yeah." Neil didn't hear Luke's contempt. "Kinda sucks, but I can't subject Kaitlyn to any of my funny business. She's a sweet girl."

"Sweet?" Luke couldn't believe Neil finally had something cordial to say.

"Yeah, sweet. Wait until you meet her. She exudes sincerity, kindness, and beauty. Man, she's the real deal. Just the kind of girl you want to marry, you know."

Yeah, I do know, asshole.

"Hopefully, I can rescue my tux out of confinement soon. I gotta go. You hang tight in there, alrighty."

"Okay, yeah. Bye." Luke ended the call and sat down on the bed. The tux hanging up in the closet taunted him. He tried to erase the image of Neil in a tux marrying Katie. He understood what Neil saw in Katie, but he couldn't imagine what she saw in Neil. How did she end up dating a self-

centered prick like Neil in the first place? Luke should tell her everything he knew about Neil. She deserved the truth. He stretched his arms high above his head and headed to the terrace.

“How did it go? Did he ask about me?” she said the moment he stepped outside.

“What? No. He has no idea you’re here.”

“Why did he call then?”

“He needs his tux in the closet.” I should throw it off the balcony into the ocean.

“Aww, that’s so thoughtful. He’s worried about the wedding.” Katie peered down at the beach below them. “I hope everything works out, and we can exchange our vows on the sand tomorrow. Neil will be so disappointed if we cancel the wedding.”

“I’m sure.” He’d probably relish another night as a bachelor.

“Did he sound worried? He must be if he thought ahead about his tux.”

Luke lifted his eyebrows and took a deep breath. It’s time to tell her. He gathered strength from a few slow breaths. Do it now.

Katie turned back to the beach, gazing at the horizon. “His romantic proposal taught me a lot about him. He always thinks of others before himself.”

Luke walked up to the railing next to her. “Really?” Luke fake smiled at her, but she didn’t notice. She examined her huge rock of an engagement ring on her tiny hand.

“Really.” Katie had such a serious expression on her face. Luke wondered if her statement rang true. Was she sincere about Neil? Luke once saw Neil charm a respectable doctor into giving him extra lab space during a practicum. Katie wouldn’t be the first person to fall for his act.

“Neil created the perfect date the day he asked me to marry him,” she continued. “He worked twelve-hour shifts for

six days straight, and we didn't see one another at all during that time. He showed up at my house early on a Saturday morning and told me to put on my bathing suit and hiking shoes and to bring an extra change of clothes." Katie raised her eyes up at Luke to check that he still listened. "He wouldn't give me any hints about where we were going. I kept asking, but he gave me silly answers. First, he told me zip-lining at the zoo and then swimming with great white sharks. Eventually, I gave up asking when we turned onto the highway heading out to Seven Falls. Remember how I love it there?" Luke nodded at her, crying inside. "It was strange," she said. "We had the entire place to ourselves, and the fickle spring weather cooperated. We ended up at the waterfall where we took a lengthy swim. The only noise came from the gentle breeze through the trees and the water splashing against the rocks. He even had my favorite chocolates for a treat after our swim."

"You love your Godiva." Luke reached out to touch her arm, but she tucked it into her side. Should he blurt out, "I hate Neil?" Or would he sound like a total jerk?

"Neil talked about the future and his plans. You know, a wife, kids, a house on the beach. It all sounded fantastic, but I didn't think he meant us. He couldn't want those amazing things with me. I thought we were just sharing our life dreams. We hiked back to the car and changed clothes, then Neil drove to Toma for Italian food." Pausing, Katie spun her engagement ring. "You would love Toma. The food melts in your mouth."

Luke didn't have any words except "don't marry Neil," so he said nothing.

"I ordered eggplant, of course." She pulled on his shirt, acknowledging their shared joke. Her finger grazed the bare skin of his stomach and electric shocks ran down his spine.

"Yes, eggplant for sure." Luke smiled, remembering the time her dad used an eggplant emoji in an Instagram photo of the vineyard because he thought it represented a grape on a vine. Instagram shut down his account, blocking him from Instagram forever. Katie's mother begrudgingly opened up her own account to continue with their marketing.

“A trio of violins came to our table during dessert, and he got down on one knee and asked me to marry him.” She twisted her engagement ring again. “I couldn’t believe it. The proposal surprised me. I said yes, right away.”

“You said yes because he surprised you?”

“No. I said yes because I love Neil. His parents threw us an engagement party the same night.”

“That night? What if you said no?” Damn it. Why didn’t you say no, Katie?

“Why would I say no?” She put both hands on the railing and swayed when the waves crashed against the rocks. “Neil picked out the most beautiful cocktail dress and shipped it to his parents’ house for me. He thoughtfully planned every single detail. His parents invited over a hundred people to celebrate the news. I dreamed of evenings that wonderful. After the party, on the way to take me home, we stopped here at the hotel and walked on the beach.”

Luke observed her staring at the ocean, deep in thought. He didn’t know how to respond. He couldn’t tell her the truth about Neil now, but he couldn’t keep it a secret any longer either. She turned around to face him, her back against the railing. Their eyes met, but they were both silent. Luke cleared his throat. “Sounds like quite the day.”

Katie’s face creased in thought. “I don’t know why I told you all that. I suppose I want you to know I’m happy.” She relaxed her shoulders. “Are you happy?”

“Katie, I—” A hard knock sounded at the hotel room door. Damn it.

“Did you hear that? Is it our room?”

## Chapter 10 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn put her ear to the door. “It sounds close, but it’s not our room.” She opened the door and peered out. “I see a man in nothing but a hotel bathrobe three doors down.” She poked her head back in. “He’s pounding on the door with his fist.”

“Katie, shut the door.”

“Do you think he needs help?”

“Katie, quick, shut the door. Don’t let him see you.”

She didn’t like the fear in his voice and followed his instructions. “Do you think he’s dangerous? Wait, Luke, are we safe in here?”

Luke took three big strides to the door and opened it a crack and then closed it. He leaned his back on it and waved to Kaitlyn with his finger to be quiet. Moments later, a knock sounded on their door. Luke turned to grab her hand, and they both faced the door. The knocking continued. Luke glanced at her again, signaling to stay quiet. She nodded and put her eye to the peephole. The knocking got louder. Kaitlyn whispered into Luke’s ear, “That’s him. Oh, my God, he must have seen you.”

“Hello? Hello in there?” More knocking. “Can you open the door?”

Kaitlyn pressed her body against it. “Luke, you can’t open the door.”

“I’m not. Don’t worry.”

“I saw you, man. I know you’re in there. Just open the damn door.” He knocked again.

She gestured at Luke and signaled for him to say something.

“Sir,” Luke called through the door. “I can’t open the door because Dr. Roe has informed us it’s not safe to leave our rooms.”



“Forget Dr. Roe. Just open the door and talk to me.”

“Why are you out of your room? What do you need?”

“I can’t stay in my room a moment longer. I need to get out of here.”

Kaitlyn put her eye to the peephole again. “Ask him why he is in a bathrobe?” Luke gave her a stern expression. “You’re right, I don’t want to know. There can’t be a decent reason.”

“Sir, I understand you are under stress and experiencing claustrophobia, but you need to calm down and go back to your room. Are you sharing your room with someone?”

The man peered down the hall before placing both of his hands on their door. Kaitlyn backed away from the peephole. “He probably murdered his roommate, and that’s why he is in his bathrobe. His clothes must be covered in blood.”

“Shhhhh, Katie.” Luke stifled his laugh with his hand. “He might get us next.”

“What?”

“Joking. It was a joke. The man feels afraid and alone. Nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, I understand his fear.”

The man knocked again. “Please, open the door.”

“Sir? Are you ill?”

“No. I’m not sick. I want you to open the door.”

“I understand and hear you. Staying healthy and strong during this time will make the quarantine easier.”

Luke seemed unfazed by the situation unfolding in the hall. How can he be so calm? She watched him talking to the man behind the closed door, and she remembered years before when her Gran got sick.

Noah put Gran on a pedestal, so he couldn’t cope with her possible death and fell into despair. It surprised her because Noah usually kept the family’s sanity together in

times of crisis. They depended on him as the emotional rock. At the time, she couldn't figure out what to do and her parents hadn't arrived at the hospital yet. She didn't need to worry though. Luke took charge that awful night. He handled the check-in and got her Gran situated. Luke calmed her and Noah when they needed it the most.

"Yes, I'm alone in my room." The man pulled on the door handle and Kaitlyn stepped farther away, clutching her arms to her chest. "Please open the door," he said.

"What if he gets the door open?" She eyed the balcony, wondering if she could jump from there. Better yet, maybe they could push him over.

"No, I won't let that happen." Luke wrapped his arm around Kaitlyn's shoulder and pulled her body flush with his, then he turned back to the door. "Sir, what's your name?"

The restless man stopped pulling on the door handle. "Donald Jones. I go by Donald."

"Donald, it's nice to meet you. I'm Luke. I'm a doctor, so I understand your anxiety under these circumstances."

"A doctor?"

"Yes. I understand you feel scared, but the best place for you to be is in your room. We need to stay safe."

"We might die."

"No, Donald. Dr. Roe does not expect any deaths. The CDC wants to keep us safe, but we need to help them."

Luke said the same thing to Noah when he wanted to criticize the doctors and their treatment of Gran. Noah wanted absolute answers, but Luke said it was our job to wait for the answers and then to ask smart questions. She warmed at the memory.

"Donald, can you help Dr. Roe keep us safe?"

"What can I do? The silence in my room makes me nervous."

“I understand, but you need to go back to your room and wait for Dr. Roe to visit you. She should be on our floor again soon. She’ll answer your questions and ease your mind.”

“I don’t want to go back to my room. I’m scared.”

“Listen, Donald, I hear you, but we need to be safe and the hall is not safe. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’m glad. Go back to your room, Donald, and find a funny movie on TV to keep you busy and distracted.”

“Okay.”

Kaitlyn inched her way back to the peephole. “He left.”

“Thank goodness. Poor guy is afraid and lonely. Quarantines make people do nutty things. The confinement can mess with your mind.”

Kaitlyn’s joy at seeing Donald walk away left her unguarded, and she turned and put her arms around Luke’s neck. “Thank you. You amaze me.”

His gaze landed on her lips. She leaned in to kiss him but caught herself and rested back onto her feet. “You knew how to talk to Donald and pacify him. Thank you.” That was a close call. What came over me?

“Sometimes people need help sorting things out in their heads before they can think straight.”

Kaitlyn thought he was talking about her, but before she asked, there was another knock. She froze. “It’s our room again.” She saw an exhausted Dr. Roe through the peephole. Disheveled, her oversized hair clip no longer held the grey strands now falling into her face. Kaitlyn opened the door. “Dr. Roe, are you okay?”

“I am fine, just tired.”

Kaitlyn saw she had dark circles under her eyes.

“I had no rest. The hotel guests call me at all hours, worried they contracted the virus even though they show no

symptoms. People panic in situations like this, as I am sure you know.”

“Yeah, we know. Did you happen to pass Donald Jones down the hall in his bathrobe? I think he killed his roommate.” Dr. Roe gave her a horrified expression.

Luke sidled up beside Kaitlyn and elbowed her. “Katie, stop freaking her out. Donald didn’t kill anyone.”

“That we’re aware of.” Kaitlyn remained unconvinced, but she would let Dr. Roe find out for herself.

Luke raised an eyebrow at her. “Donald appeared very stressed, Dr. Roe. He doesn’t seem capable of handling the pressure of the unknown.”

“Oh, my.” Dr. Roe clutched the collar of her coat. “I better check on Mr. Jones next. He is one of the guests who keeps calling me. He thinks everyone is dead and frets about being next. Why would we withhold that kind of information?”

Kaitlyn shuddered at the thought and studied Dr. Roe, trying to determine if her face betrayed any truth in Donald’s accusation. It kind of made sense. Luke gave her a funny face and elbowed her again.

“You should’ve called me,” Luke said.

“Thank you, but I cannot take the chance you are infected.” She gave him a wry smile. “As a doctor yourself, you are familiar with the drill.”

Kaitlyn juttled her head in between Luke’s arm and the door. “He can always talk to the guests through their doors. That’s what caused Donald to calm down.” Luke closed the gap, catching her head in an awkward headlock. “Luke?” she protested and stole a glance down the hall to check if there were other half-dressed guests mutinying. Thank God, only the one.

Luke loosened his hold of her head, giving her space to stand up. “Yes, Dr. Roe, I know the drill, but I’m more than happy to help in any capacity if I can be useful to the other

guests.” Luke stepped away, allowing Dr. Roe to move farther into the hotel room. “Please, come in.”

Kaitlyn rushed across the room and dragged a chair closer to the bed so Dr. Roe could sit. She collapsed in the chair with a heavy sigh and closed her eyes for ten seconds. Luke and Kaitlyn sat in front of her on the edge of the bed. They stared at her until Dr. Roe opened her bloodshot eyes, but before she began her questions, Luke blurted, “Is anyone else sick? Is the infection spreading?” Kaitlyn cast a glance sideways at Luke, seeing his nervousness. This made her tense again.

“Sadly, yes. Because of patient/doctor confidentiality, I cannot discuss specific cases or names with you.”

“Can you tell me if anyone presents with a high fever?” Kaitlyn watched Luke replace his nervous face with his professional doctor one. She immediately felt better. It must be a doctor trick.

“Yes. Unfortunately, a case of high fever exists.”

“How high, Dr. Roe?”

“104 last time I checked, though the symptoms appear different from patient zero.”

“Damn. I feared that symptom would present itself.” She saw Luke trying to hold back his concern. “Have you considered the measles as a possible diagnosis?” Kaitlyn’s panic surged through her body. She gripped Luke’s arm, waiting for Dr. Roe to confirm the diagnosis.

“Patient zero flew in from the UK. His symptoms are severe and his vaccination records are incomplete.”

“What a disaster.” Luke threw up his hands.

Dr. Roe nodded her agreement. “We plan to take great precautions in isolating him from the rest of the hotel guests.”

“But where else has he been in the resort?” Kaitlyn stood up in her excitement then quickly sat back down.

“Yes, you point out our exact problem. However, we contacted everyone on his flight, and no one seems to be displaying symptoms yet. That good news reassures me.” She

sat up straighter as she discussed the more positive details. “We took his blood late last night. Well, actually, early this morning, so we should receive the results later today. I am waiting until then to make the diagnosis. As of right now, everyone needs to stay in place. The CDC has the hotel on lockdown until we get further information.”

“But our vaccinations are up to date,” Kaitlyn said to Dr. Roe.

“Yes, and the shots help, but it does not mean you cannot get the infection or spread it. While vaccines work well, they do not guarantee your safety. We need to wait for definitive results.”

“I see.” Kaitlyn twirled her hair. What if I contract the measles? I’ll never leave here. My wedding won’t happen. I’ll probably die here with Luke. Donald made complete sense the more she thought about his suspicions. Her anxiety bubbled up, and she willed herself to calm down.

“Okay then, how do the two of you feel? Any symptoms developing?” Dr. Roe eyed each of them in turn.

Luke squeezed Kaitlyn’s shoulder and then answered for them both. “No symptoms, we feel great.”

“Great?” Kaitlyn couldn’t help the edge in her voice.

“Oh? Not great?” Dr. Roe zoned in on her. “Do you have any symptoms?”

“No physical ones, but emotional ones. Tonight is my rehearsal dinner.”

“Congratulations.” Dr. Roe clapped her hands together in joy. “I did not realize you two were engaged. You make a beautiful couple.”

Kaitlyn leaped from the bed and stood a noticeable distance from Luke. “No, not us.”

“Forgive my mistake,” Dr. Roe apologized. “I thought. Well, I see.” She fell silent.

Why did Dr. Roe assume they were together? God, she needed to get out of this room. She cleared her throat and

regained her composure. “My fiancé and I booked the main dining room and back patio for the dinner tonight. I chose peonies as my centerpiece for the tables and—”

“Beautiful flowers,” Dr. Roe said and glanced at Luke for help. Kaitlyn followed her glance. What did he know about flowers? “Umm,” Dr. Roe stammered. “All the dining facilities will be closed until the blood work results come back.” She spoke as if calming a small child.

Am I the child? Kaitlyn wrinkled her face.

“Everyone has to stay in his or her quarantine space,” she said in the same soothing voice. “We cannot allow guests to mingle, especially with the population outside the resort.” When she finished, Dr. Roe tucked a pen behind her ear.

“So, no rehearsal dinner?”

“Katie, I wouldn’t worry about the rehearsal dinner.” Luke placed his hand on her arm. “Neil said his parents moved it to their country club.”

“What? He did? But I hate the country club.” Luke pressed his lips together, saying nothing more. She hated he knew her so well. Kaitlyn turned her attention back to Dr. Roe. “Do you think the CDC will release me in time to make the rehearsal dinner at the club?”

“Well.” Dr. Roe stared at the hotel carpet for a beat then met her eyes. “I can’t provide any definitive answers until I hear from the CDC. Is your fiancé in the hotel?”

“No.”

“I see.” All three were silent for a second time. “Perhaps the results will come back soon and show something other than the measles. It could be a benign viral infection. I would not rule out the possibility.” Dr. Roe’s eyes shifted from Kaitlyn to Luke and back again.

“Katie,” Luke said, stepping in. “We need to wait for the test results. Everything could turn out fine.”

Hope surged through Kaitlyn as she turned to Luke. “Do you think it could be a simple virus?”

Dr. Roe and Luke shared a glance with one another. “Sure,” they said in unison.

Her body relaxed with relief and then tensed up. “What about the wedding tomorrow? It’s supposed to be here.” She heard her voice rise an octave.

Dr. Roe stood up and backed toward the door. “How about I send up Monsieur Flaubert? He can discuss all the wedding details with you. I need to get back to my room rounds.” She seemed relieved to suggest a replacement for Kaitlyn to interrogate.

Emile’s insight into scheduling and coordinating the caterer and flowers would be helpful. At this point, Kaitlyn would question whomever if it got her off of this train-wreck sooner, even sweet Emile.

Luke opened the door for Dr. Roe. “Who knew when I was in residency I could do rounds in a hotel.” Dr. Roe threw in an awkward laugh.

“Thank you, doctor, and please notify me if I can assist you in any way.”

“Thank you. I will.” Dr. Roe turned and knocked on the next room down the hall.

Luke closed the door. “So, we’re still stuck together.”



## Chapter 11 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn wiped her eyes, trying to hide the tears, but Luke turned too quickly.

“Oh, Katie. Tell me how I can help.”

“You can’t. This hellish nightmare won’t end. I’ll have to tell Neil I’m here, and he’ll be so upset. It’s the day before our wedding. And I got myself stuck here with you of all people in the world. I can’t believe this screwup.”

“Oh, wow. Stuck with me, of all people? That kinda hurts.”

“I don’t mean it like that. Sorry. Us alone together in this hotel room seems like a punishment or a terrible joke.”

“Okay, you’re making it sound worse.” Luke rubbed his face up and down in a frustrating way and plopped down on the bed next to her. They turned their heads toward the low murmurs from the room next door and sat together in the quiet.

“What else did Neil say?” Kaitlyn finally asked.

“When?”

“On the phone before Dr. Roe came in? You said he moved the rehearsal dinner to the country club. What else did he say?”

Luke shook his head no.

“Nothing else? Really? You were on the phone for longer than a few sentences. He said nothing else?” Why am I acting paranoid? Wow, Donald’s breakdown did a number on my sanity.

“I told you everything. He needs his tux and he changed the venue for tonight.”

“He didn’t say where he went last night? Did he try to get back into the hotel?”

“Uhh, he didn’t say. I forgot to ask, I guess.” He trailed off.

Kaitlyn placed her hand on his leg. “Luke, I am sorry if I hurt you earlier. I didn’t mean to be unkind. I can’t get my mind around this mess.”

“It’s okay, Katie. I get it.”

She noticed her hand on his leg and pulled it back. They were both silent again, listening to the murmurs from next door.

“Is that *Who’s the Boss?*” Kaitlyn grinned, remembering the two of them binging on episodes during college.

“Ha. No way. I thought the network canceled the show ages ago.”

“Must be reruns.”

They both turned their heads to listen better and ended up facing one another, their lips inches apart. “Sorry,” Luke apologized, turning to face forward again. “How about we find something to watch?” He got up to turn on the TV.

Kaitlyn moved to the far side of the bed. They had to stop almost kissing. Maybe she felt paranoid because of the guilt stirring in her stomach. “Okay, yeah. Might as well.” Anything to distract her naughty lips. Her phone chimed on the end table. She reached over and checked it.

**Neil:** Thinking of you. Hope your stomach troubles cleared up. Can’t wait to see you tonight, baby. Love you.

“Anything important?” Luke asked.

Kaitlyn’s face flushed. “Just Neil checking on me.” And he should because I crawled into bed to have sex with you, and I keep trying to kiss you. If this is a test, I’m failing.

“Oh.” Luke found a place to sit on the opposite side of the bed. “I’ll flick through the channels until we agree on something. Okay?”

“Sounds harmless.” They went through 35 different channels. “I had no idea there were so many cops and murder shows on TV these days.” Is this another ominous sign?

“Not sure who watches them in the middle of the day. Kinda scary.” He continued to flick.

Kaitlyn’s stomach growled. “I wish we could order a pizza from Rusty’s. I’m hungry.”

“Rusty’s is the best. Thin crust?” Luke turned with a mischievous glimmer in his eye.

“Of course, and olives.”

“Always olives. Now I want pizza too.”

“Wait. Stop. Let’s watch this.” She grinned at the TV screen.

“Is this—”

“Yep, an oldie but a goodie. *When Harry Met Sally.*”

“I remember this scene. This is the wagon wheel scene, right?” He laughed and pushed his hand through his hair.

“This episode reminds me of the stinky, nasty sofa you found in college. You kept the damn thing forever, even after I begged you to dump it. The thing reeked, so horrible.”

“Hey! I loved that old sofa.”

“I remember. Didn’t you pick it up off the curb in your freshman year?”

“Yep. We found it one night after a Halloween party. My dorm buddies and I dragged it home. God, the beast clashed with the walls, but we had some fun times on that sofa.”

“You didn’t keep it after all?” The thought made her sad for some reason.

“No, I had to let it go. I had to let a lot of things go after you decided you were done with me.”

“Done with you?” Kaitlyn jumped off the bed. “You must be joking. You were done with me.”

“Me? What do you mean?”

“Yes, you. You left me. What did I do to deserve such horrible treatment from you?” Discarded like the old couch.

“Katie, you don’t understand I wasn’t done—”

She held up her hand to stop him from talking. “No, you don’t understand. I was confused. I made terrible decisions after our sudden breakup.”

“We never broke up, Katie.”

“Exactly.” Kaitlyn threw her hands up in the air and gave him a hard-right hook with her words. “Because of your disappearing act, I dated Avery.” If that didn’t prove her point, nothing would.

Luke swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “No. Not Avery Lawson. The pretentious prig from Vintage Wines?”

“Yep. After you left me without another word, I lost my mind. Avery picked up the pieces. The man swooped in at my weakest moment. He pampered me with flowers and a charming smile. His visits increased and before I knew it, we started going out.”

Luke’s eyes widened in disbelief. She understood how he felt. She hardly believed it herself. “You went out with Arrogant Avery? You dated him? I can’t believe it.”

Kaitlyn didn’t want to say another word. There was no other explanation other than a broken heart. A heart he broke.

Luke choked on his sentence. “While I waited for you, you dated Avery?”

What was he talking about? He didn’t wait for her. He abandoned her. What a liar. “Avery boosted my spirits. He was kind and generous when I needed it most.”

“That doesn’t sound like Avery. I bet he flaunted his expert skills in cooking or something ridiculous.” Her face got hot. “Shit. He did, didn’t he?” Luke said, pointing his finger at her like he had cracked a cold case. “What a jerk.”

Kaitlyn wanted to wipe the smug look off Luke’s face, but he was right. God, how annoying. “Avery’s cooking impresses everyone with taste buds.” She put her hands on her hips in an authoritative stance to hide the embarrassing shudder. She hated defending pompous Avery.

“No way your dad fell for his phoniness.”

“Dad doesn’t think anyone is good enough for me.”

“He thought I was good enough for you.” Luke’s eyes met hers.

Kaitlyn glared back at him. “Look how that turned out.”

“Katie.”

“Keep your excuses, Luke. It’s too late.” She saw him swallow hard. She enjoyed seeing him squirm. Luke left her to fend for herself. So what if she stumbled along the way back to health? If not for her many dating disasters, she wouldn’t be engaged to Neil. Neil saved her.

“Why aren’t you with Avery now if he’s so perfect?”

She heard the pettiness in his voice and resented it. “I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

His face fell. “You’re right. You don’t.”

Kaitlyn regretted the sharp turn in the conversation. “I’m not together with Avery because ...” The lie emerged before she stopped herself. “Because his penis was too big.” Did I say that out loud? She watched Luke’s face go white. She wasn’t telling a total lie. His balloon dick was too big, like the girth of a child’s baseball bat. The first time she saw it, her stomach twisted in a painful knot. How was his thing going to fit? And it didn’t fit, not really. She spent the entire relationship avoiding intimate moments. Her anxiety caused stomach issues. The man made her physically ill, but she wasn’t about to tell Luke.

“You’re saying that to irritate me,” Luke said.

“Does it irritate you?” She hoped so.

“Nope.” The squeak in his voice betrayed his crushed ego. “So,” he said, a satisfied grin slowly spread across Luke’s face. “I guess you’re with Neil because he has a small prick? Totally makes sense.”

Kaitlyn bit her tongue. Maybe Neil did have a small dick. She didn’t even know. What if it was another mammoth one

like Avery's? Sweat puddled in her armpit, a slow dribble making its way down her arm. "I'm done with this conversation."

Luke's smile faded. "Yeah, like you were done with me ten years ago. You'll do anything to avoid dealing with the real issue. That's probably why you're marrying Neil."

"What did you say?" Kaitlyn looked at him with a horrified expression, but it didn't faze him. Luke got up, walked into the bathroom, and closed the door.

## Chapter 12 - Kaitlyn

A knock on the room door stopped Kaitlyn from pounding on the one Luke just shut. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter what you think,” she muttered at the bathroom door. As the knocking became more persistent, Kaitlyn turned off the TV and threw down the remote.

“Yes?” She swung the door open.

“Oh, so sorry, *ma chérie*. Is this an inconvenient time?” Emile backed away from the room.

“No, sorry. I, well, I started to dance with crazy.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s my roommate. He’s driving me nuts.” She made quotation marks with her fingers when she said, “roommate.”

“Dr. Roe said you needed to speak with me about your wedding?”

“Yes.” She ushered him in with her hand. “Thank you for coming. You must be swamped with guests needing you. I don’t want to seem rude by asking you this, but do you think there will be a wedding for us to discuss?”

“Have you lost Dr. Andrews?” Emile joked, looking around the empty room.

Kaitlyn relaxed and eased into a chair. “Luke’s in the bathroom, hiding from me.”

“And your crazy dancing?” Emile grinned wider as he sat across from her at the small wooden desk in front of the window.

She matched his warm smile. “Exactly.”

“So, the wedding? I don’t know the answer, *ma chérie*.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we must wait on the CDC results, no?”

“Yes, of course. I meant will the hotel be able to host the wedding if the test results come back negative? If it isn’t the

measles or some other virus keeping us locked up in here, can the wedding happen?”

“Will the wedding take place?” He raised his eyebrows at Kaitlyn just as Luke walked out of the bathroom.

“I didn’t realize we had a guest,” Luke uttered as he sat on the bed, facing the two of them. “Glad to see you aren’t sick, Emile. Do you have additional information? Any more guests with symptoms?”

“No, sir. Nothing new to tell you. Ms. Thompson requested a house call. We need to discuss her wedding plans and alternatives.”

Luke’s phone beeped with a text, and he pulled it out of his pocket. “Oh, I have to make a phone call. Please excuse me.” He stepped out onto the balcony and shut the door behind him, leaving Emile and Kaitlyn alone again. She watched Luke go, not taking her eyes off him until the balcony door shut. She turned to find Emile staring at her.

“Do we still want the wedding to happen?” he asked in a low tone of voice.

“I ...” Kaitlyn glanced at Luke through the window. “I want the wedding to happen.” He was the one who left her. She wasn’t avoiding anything. She was over Luke. She clenched her fists. What was he talking about? What was wrong with Neil?

Emile made a small cough, breaking the silence. When she turned back, he stared at her as though he saw into her soul. “*Ma chérie*, do you want to get married?” Neither spoke for a beat. Kaitlyn didn’t understand why her mouth couldn’t form words. Emile cleared his throat again. “Since you arranged a sunset wedding, my staff and I will have plenty of time to get the hotel prepared for your event,” he said, reverting to a professional tone. “Not to worry. The catering department planned the dinner menu months ago. The preparation part of the wedding should not be a concern to you, *ma chérie*.”



“Okay. That’s fortunate. Thank you.” She moved her mouth and words came out, but she couldn’t hear them over the pounding in her ears. Kaitlyn peered around Emile’s shoulder to see if Luke was on his phone. *Done with you?* Those painful words echoed in her brain.

Emile placed his hand on hers. “Would you care to discuss anything else? I am an excellent listener and the resident amateur therapist.”

She looked down at his hand covering hers and up at his thoughtful face. Kaitlyn couldn’t keep her emotions in a second longer. “Luke was my college sweetheart, my first love. He was my first ... my first everything. I didn’t think I would ever see him again. It ended terribly. And now, here he is.”

“I see.”

“I didn’t know he socialized with my fiancé. Apparently, they went to medical school together. We broke up before he began his graduate studies. Well, sort of broke up. It’s complicated.” *Done with you?* She pulled her hands away and rubbed her forehead. How could Luke think such a terrible thing about her?

“I see,” Emile said again, nodding his head.

Kaitlyn leaned back in her chair and let out a long sigh. “Being stuck in here with him is utter torture.”

“Oh no, he behaves unkindly to you? Why didn’t you tell me? I didn’t know it was an abusive relationship. Unacceptable behavior will not be tolerated.”

Emile’s horrified expression made Kaitlyn grab his hand. “No. No, it isn’t like that at all. He’s a wonderful man. The best. Ten years ago, I thought we would get married. We were ...” She squeezed his hand and continued, “He would never hurt anyone. I didn’t mean to misrepresent him.” How much should she tell him?

“I understand the situation now.”

“Can you find me another room? Somewhere by myself? I don’t think it’s a prudent idea to be alone with him for an

undetermined period of time.” Kaitlyn didn’t know whom she trusted least, Luke or herself?

“I am afraid not.” Emile closed his hand around hers in a sympathetic gesture. “There is no available space. The hotel filled to capacity long before the illness hit. Your wedding plus a few other events in town left no open rooms. I apologize, but there is nowhere for you to go in the building.”

“I figured you would say that.” Kaitlyn stood up and peered out the window at Luke. “What should I do?”

“I fear you must stay here and face the situation. You say he is a kind man. Perhaps, you two can talk through your past and all will be well. You might get some closure.”

Closure? She leaned against the doors. Is it possible at this point?

“The universe puts us in odd predicaments, does it not? I often think things happen for a reason. You must resolve this strange coincidence.”

“You sound like my Gran.” Kaitlyn gathered strength at the memory of her Gran giving her life advice. “Thank you for listening to me, Emile. I hate to go on about my personal problems when you have a hotel full of guests and a million things to do.”

“*Ma chérie*, it is no problem. I am happy to help.”

Kaitlyn stood to walk him to the door and quickly sat again. “Whoa, the room’s spinning.”

“You went white in the face. Do you feel well?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh my. Why don’t you lie down, and I will send Dr. Roe to your room? She should investigate this.”

“Thank you. I think that’s a wise idea.”

Emile helped Kaitlyn climb into bed. “Stay here. I will let myself out.”

## Chapter 13 - Luke

Outside, Luke paced the small balcony, talking to his sister. “Mia, you will not believe who I’m quarantined with. You couldn’t guess if you tried. I’m in total shock.”

“Wait. What? Quarantined? I thought you went to Santa Barbara for a wedding of some rich guy? Are you okay?”

“I did and I’m fine. I’m in a hotel in Santa Barbara. Neil Connor is the groom. Remember him? I think you met him at my med school graduation. He thought you were my date and tried to pick you up?” He was a douchebag back then too.

“Right. Yuck. Now I remember. You’re quarantined with him? Awkward.”

“No, not with Neil.”

“What? I’m confused? Why would you fly down for his wedding? I sort of remember you didn’t like him, right?”

“It’s a work obligation. Neil’s parents contribute money to many charitable organizations, including mine. The Connors already donated a significant sum and are seriously interested in the foundation’s long-term success. Plus, they’re considering board positions. I came because they invited me. You’re getting me off topic.”

“You’re the one off topic. Who’s quarantined with you?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Oh shit, are you sick?”

“Mia, you’re driving me crazy. Listen, I’m not sick but there’s a likely measles case in the hotel where I stayed last night. We don’t have the results yet, but that isn’t the important part. Guess who’s stuck with me?”

“Just tell me. You have me worried.”

“Come on, guess.”

“Uhh, the scary barista who stalked you last year? What’s her name? Sarah? I swear, you get a stalker from smiling at

someone once, and I have to sacrifice my liver to get a decent date.”

“Mia—”

“Remember Dr. Jim? I helped him set up his practice and who does he marry? My resident, Lucy.”

“Mia—”

“Lucy is a dear, so it’s not all bad, not like being stuck in a hotel room with your stalker. Yikes.”

“Mia,” Luke shouted into the phone. “Hello. Stop talking. It isn’t Sarah. I would risk measles to get away from that woman.”

“I give up. Who is it then?”

“I’m here with Katie.” The love of my life. And I’m freaking out.

“Katie? No,” his sister gasped. “Holy shit, Katie Thompson? How is she? God, I miss that girl. Did you work things out with her and not tell me? Shit, I swear, I’m the last one to know anything. I bet you even told Mom and Dad before me.”

“Listen to me. The hotel locked us inside together. Just the two of us in a bedroom alone.”

“What? I don’t get it. Why didn’t you tell me you two were talking again? I’m hurt.”

“No. We aren’t—weren’t. She’s the one marrying Neil.”

“Katie’s getting married? Did you know? Oh, smashed tomatoes, Luke, did you go there to crash Katie’s wedding? That doesn’t seem like something you would do.”

“It’s not. I’m not crashing—”

“Wait, how did she end up with your sleazy med school friend?”

“Neil’s not my friend.”

“I’m lost. Tell me everything or I’m making up some seriously wacky shit.”

“Shit, I will if you let me talk. I didn’t know Katie and Neil knew one another. I didn’t even look at the stupid invitation. My bad.”

“Yes, it sounds pretty bad. Or good? I don’t know what to say.”

“Yeah, me either. What should I do?”

“Okay. Give me a minute to wrap my brain around this.”

“The whole situation’s bizarre.” Luke turned to see Emile helping Katie into bed. “I better go. Emile’s leaving.”

“Who’s Emile? You said you were locked up alone with Katie.”

“I’ll call you later and explain it all.”

“Call me back as soon as you can. I need more information. This could be your chance, Luke. Right?”

“I—”

“Come on. You’ve always loved her. So, go for it. You’ve got this. Let the measles work their magic mojo.”

If only it were so simple. “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later. Love you. Bye.” Luke hung up before she could say another word and shoved the phone in his pocket. Stepping back inside, his heart raced.

“Katie, are you okay?”

“Not so much.”

“What happened? Where’s Emile?”

“My vision blurred and the room started spinning. Emile left to get Dr. Roe.”

## Chapter 14 - Mia

Mia dialed Noah's number the second she got off the phone with Luke. His phone rang once and went straight to voicemail. "Damn it, Noah." She hit call again. Rejected. "That little bitch." She redialed and said to her phone, "You will answer this phone, eventually."

"Hello?"

"About time you answered your phone, bitch!" Mia glared at the other coffee shop patrons, daring them to tell her to keep her voice down.

"Uhhhhh."

"How are you, love?"

"Uhh, I'm fine. Who is this?"

"Noah, it's me, Mia."

"Mia? Mia Andrews?"

"The one and the same."

"Mia! I am so happy to hear your voice. It's been too long. Is this a new number? How are you?"

"We can discuss my life later, but right now, we need to deal with a serious problem."

"Are you talking about Katie and Luke? It's an insane situation, right? But how do you know about it?"

"I just got off the phone with my idiot brother. I can't quit laughing over the shit show that is his life right now."

"Girl, I hear you."

"Not sure exactly what happened, but the universe has spoken. We need to give them a little nudge in the right direction."

"Damn right, we do."

"Is Katie really getting married tomorrow?"

“Well, with the lockdown at the hotel, that remains to be seen, but yes, it’s the plan.”

“Tell me the truth. Should I mind my own business and stay out of it?”

“Hmm.”

“Noah. Come on. It’s me. Please don’t hold back. Tell me everything.”

“So, Katie is marrying this doctor guy, Neil, and he’s kind of a dick.”

“Who are you talking about dicks to?” Adam’s voice vibrated in the background.

Noah barked out a laugh. “I’m talking to Mia.”

“Mia?”

“Yeah, Mia, as in Luke’s sister.”

“What? No way! I love that girl.”

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Memories of the first time Mia met Noah and Adam came flooding back. Katie invited her to work at the vineyard for the summer. Attending school in Arizona, she hadn’t met Katie’s twin brother, but she had seen pictures of Noah, and he was Apollo incarnate. Mia knew nothing about him, but she didn’t need to know shit for a summer fling with a Greek god.

Her first day at the vineyard, she wore white denim shorts showing a sliver of her ass and a halter top accentuating her full cleavage. She didn’t care about her inappropriate shoes. Platform sandals made her legs appear a mile long, and it was worth any blisters she would get if she nabbed herself some hot summer sex with a god.

The visions of beauty awaiting her when she stepped outside the guesthouse that first morning proved worthy of any physical pain she would experience in her arches. Noah

embodied every woman's fantasy. He wore yellow canvas shorts, faded from the sun in all the right places, and no shirt, revealing the most sculpted abs Mia had ever seen. He looked like an airbrushed model. His tanned skin glowed and the sweat on his chest shimmered. This guy oozed sex and beauty. Even his coiffed hair lay in perfect thick brown layers falling over his eyes as if hiding delectably perverse intentions.

As Mia walked over to introduce herself, another man came jogging around the corner. He resembled a younger version of Ryan Reynolds. His sun-bleached hair stood up in flawless disheveled waves, a cross between a surfer and a soccer player. His bare-chest glistened in the sun. Mia wondered if this might be a brothel in the guise of a vineyard. She didn't care, but the choice would be difficult between Apollo and Ryan Reynolds. She shivered at the thought and started toward them.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Mia."

"Oh, you're Luke's sister?" Noah asked. "Katie told me you were gorgeous, but she didn't do you justice."

Mia wanted to seem cool, but the flattery overwhelmed her, especially coming from a man fit to walk a runway in his grape pruning outfit. "I could say the same about you."

The Ryan Reynolds look-alike stood beside Noah and kissed him on his bare shoulder. "Hey, babe, who is this beautiful creature?"

Mia waved a finger between the two of them. "Damn. I wasted my booty shorts on you two, didn't I?"

"No way," Noah said. "I love a woman with a tight ass. I'm Noah, Katie's brother."

"And I'm Adam, Noah's hot boyfriend." Mia snorted out a laugh, and Adam hugged her. "I promise, you will love me."

"Ha. I suspect you won't give me a choice."

"That's right." Adam winked at her.

"Enough boring introductions. The sooner we prune the vines, the sooner we can start drinking the vino." Noah handed



Mia some shears and walked over to the closest vine. A swarm of bees lifted from a nearby post, and Noah jumped back, dropping his shears and barely missing Mia's foot. He grasped his shoulder where a red, swollen lump already formed.

"Oh, my God, a bee stung you." Mia immediately tapped into her pre-med brain. "Are you allergic?"

"Yes, and it hurts." Noah sat on the ground.

"Do you have an EpiPen on you or Benadryl?"

"It's in the main house." He sounded ragged.

"I'll get it." Adam ran toward the house.

She sat down next to Noah. "Everything will be fine. Take deep breaths." Noah nodded his head and fell against her.

In less than a minute, Adam ran back outside with Katie following close behind. "Noah." She dropped to the ground next to him. "It will be okay."

Adam handed Mia the EpiPen. "I'm about to stick you. Take another deep breath."

"Hit me, baby," Noah wheezed. With a quick motion, she pushed the epinephrine into Noah's thigh.

"All done." Mia turned to Katie. "I passed my job interview, right? Too fucking scary for a pruning orientation, don't you think? Next time, train me on uncorking the wine, please."

Katie laughed and hugged her tight. "Thank goodness you passed."

Adam threw himself on top of them both. "Oh, Mia, too late, I already love you first."

The rest of the summer, Noah, Adam, and Mia remained inseparable. She didn't get her summer romance, but she found lifelong friends.

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“Hello? I am still on the phone here,” Mia hollered into her cell. “Do I hear Adam? God, I’m glad that beautiful man has continued to put up with your shit. Now, put me on speaker so I can say hi.”

“Okay, you’re on speaker. Watch what you say, woman.”

“Well, shit. Is this your way of telling me you have kids now?”

“Hahaha. Hell no. You never mince words, Mia darling, and Adam’s sensitive ears might not be able to take it.”

“My ears are completely desensitized, thanks to you and your dirty mouth. Hi, Mia, sweets,” Adam said.

“Hello, love. God, I missed you two.”

“How is life in Monterey? Why don’t you ever come South?”

“I love it up here. I bought a badass condo on the beach a few months back. Haven’t wanted to leave my back porch since.”

“We have beaches here too, you know. Come visit us,” Noah begged.

“You can see our new revival show.” Adam spoke so close to the receiver that his voice sounded like a fuzzy microphone.

She pulled the phone away from her ear for a moment. “I would love to, but right now, we have bigger problems. I can’t envision Katie marrying someone other than Luke. I always thought those two would find their way back to each other someday.”

“I didn’t think you were a sappy romantic. Did you trade in your black combat boots for kitten heels?” Noah teased her.

“Yeah, yeah. Shut the hell up. Tell me the truth. Is her fiancé really an ass?”

“He’s as wonderful as an okra dick can be,” Noah quipped.

“Okra dick?” Mia spat out her tea. “And you know this for a fact?”

“No, of course not. Gross. I’m guessing it’s okra sized.”

“So, why don’t you like him?” Mia opened her car door and then slammed it shut.

“Where are you?” Noah asked. “I just got back in my car. I had an appointment in Cambria this morning.”

“Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I got a cup of tea and I’m heading home. Why?”

“Come to Santa Barbara. Come here tonight,” Adam shouted in the phone.

“Yes,” Noah agreed. “You are only two hours away. Come tonight and crash the rehearsal dinner with us. You can be our plus one. Katie and Luke probably won’t even be there.”

“You want me to come?” Mia couldn’t believe she even considered the idea. Luke would kill her. “I’m in jeans, and I only brought ugly green scrubs with me.”

“Girl, we’ve got you covered.”

“Oh yeah? You own a dress for a short black girl that doesn’t make me look like Donna Summer?” She doubted those two leggy Amazons had anything to fit her small frame.

“What are you talking about? Donna Summer’s hot. But yes, we can find you the perfect dress in the next few hours.”

“Come. Don’t you want to see me dance? Please come,” Adam shouted again. “It will be so much fun. We can all witness Neil’s freak-out when his blushing bride no-shows on him.”

“Are you for real? You want me to come to Katie’s rehearsal dinner? The rehearsal dinner for a marriage to some other guy when I think she should marry my brother and become my sister-in-law? That doesn’t seem right.” Yep, Luke would kill her for sure.

Neither Noah nor Adam answered. Mia knew she had a valid point but when had the two of them ever listened to reason. They would do anything for Katie and she supposed she would do the same for Luke. “Will they serve decadent food at least? I don’t want to be murdered by my brother on an empty stomach.”

“That is a definite no. Neil’s parents moved it to the Oceanside Country Club at the last minute since the hotel is in quarantine. Mass-produced rubbery chicken and frozen vegetables are on the menu for sure.”

“Sounds delicious,” Mia said without enthusiasm.

“There will be premium booze.”

“Hmm. Expensive cocktails on okra dick’s dime with you two sounds interesting.”

“Pleeeassee?” Noah and Adam sang into the phone together.

“We need your relationship expertise to break up this wedding,” Noah said.

“I’m the mastermind in your breakup plan and the token minority?”

“Please, girl, don’t you know, we’re the token minority.”

Mia had a hard time imagining Adam and Noah as a “token” anything. They were bigger than life.

“Noah is the drag queen twin brother, and I am his gay lover. Wait till the stuffy country club gets a load of us,” Adam said.

“We might break the Country Club rules with all our diversity. God forbid I have to explain, once again, I am indeed Luke’s real sister.”

“Oh, Mia, give me a break, like people don’t know how adoption works. Look at the former Brangelina. Didn’t they adopt 24 kids from 24 different countries?” Noah’s snarky response made Adam giggle in the background.

“Ha. Okay then.” She pulled her seat upright and turned on the ignition. “I’ll come, but you must find something fantastic for me to wear. If we bust up Katie’s rehearsal dinner, I need to be glamorous doing it.”

## Chapter 15 - Noah

Noah ran into the living room. “Turn the TV up.”

*“Breaking News: The Pacific Palms Resort is under a mandatory lockdown during the busiest wedding season of the year.”*

Adam was already punching buttons on the remote. “I’m trying. This fancy remote doesn’t have any labels on the buttons.”

“Give it here.” Noah grabbed the remote and frowned at the mini-computer in his hands. He hit a button and the lights went out.

“What are you doing?”

Noah hit the button again and the lights turned back on. Adam glared at him. “Okay, okay. You’re right. I’m useless too.” He handed the remote back to Adam who pushed the up arrow.

*“Se aparece que el departamento de CDC no nos está dando un mensaje claro y directo. Al mismo tiempo es aparente que una cuarentena como esta simboliza que estamos en una Pandemia.”*

“Now it’s in Spanish.”

“But it’s louder.”

Noah took the remote again and held down the arrow button. A menu popped up. “Thank God.” He changed the language to English and set the volume level.

*“We have Emile Flaubert, the manager of the resort, with us on the phone. Mr. Flaubert, how are guests reacting to the shocking news that they are stuck indefinitely with no details about the deadly unknown disease spreading rapidly down the halls?”*

*“Excusez-moi, monsieur, but there is not any spreading of disease as you call it. The CDC has been professional with containment and respectful of the guests’ needs.”*

Adam feigned fainting. “Oy vey. This French guy is dreamy.”

“Right? We have to ask Katie about him.” The doorbell rang, waking Noah from his French fantasy. “Turn off the TV. That must be Mia.”

Adam pushed the biggest button on the remote, and a beautiful abstract painting replaced the TV. “You’ve got to see this.”

“In a second.” Noah opened the door, expecting Mia. “Well, hello. What are you doing here, Neil? Shouldn’t you be imprisoned at a luxury beach resort?” Hands on his hips and dressed as Jennifer Lopez in her Flashdance remake video, Noah opened the door wider.

“Wow. That’s an impressive get-up. Maybe Kaitlyn can borrow it after the wedding?”

“You wish.”

Neil chuckled, not recognizing Noah’s snide tone. “I’m glad you’re here with Kaitlyn. I can’t believe she has food poisoning.”

“Yes. Well, she does.” As if you care.

Adam, styled like Madonna from her Blonde Ambition tour, complete with cone boobs, came up behind Noah and put his arms around him. “Hello, Neil, funny to see you here. Tell me, how did you escape the hotel of doom?”

“Ha. Ha.” Neil’s laugh sounded forced. “Those costumes are something else. You two look amazing.”

Noah spun on his heels. “Of course, we do.”

Adam leaned against the door. “We’re rehearsing for the revival tour at the Hot Topic Lounge. What can we do for you?”

Neil walked closer to the open doorway and poked his head inside. “Um, where’s Kaitlyn? Is she available to talk?”

“Katie is asleep, honey.” Adam stepped an inch nearer to Noah, closing the gap in the open doorway.

“Oh, of course, she is.” Neil took a clumsy step back. “I’m glad she’s resting. I don’t want to disturb her, but I came by to see if she needs anything. I want her to be her best self by tonight.”

“We’re taking excellent care of her. Don’t you worry.” Adam sneered.

“Yes, I’m sure you are. I know she’s in capable hands.”

“So, you never explained how you escaped the contaminated hotel. Didn’t you book a room there for the weekend?” Noah glanced sideways at Adam, but Neil didn’t notice their exchange.

Neil swallowed hard. “Yeah, I had a room, but I gave it to my buddy from out of town. Luke wanted to ...” He looked between the two men before saying in a clearer voice, “You know, have a night in with a hot chick.”

Adam shot Noah a hard glance before walking back inside. “How nice of you to give up your room.” Noah leaned against the doorjamb to adjust his leg warmers.

“Luke always hooks up with random girls. He’s a total player. I figured he needed the room more than I did.”

“Sounds like a winner. You know him well?”

“Yeah. He’s an old med school buddy.”

“Where did you sleep last night since he had your room?” Noah noticed a trickle of sweat running down Neil’s forehead. That’s right, you lying douche. We’re on to you.

“The Radisson had a room available, lucky for me.” Neil pushed back his hair again, wiping the sweat on his pants. “I mean, really lucky, now that Luke is trapped there and not me. Right?”



Noah narrowed his eyes at Neil. “You were at the Radisson, huh? Yeah, lucky for you.”

He cleared his throat, not answering the question. “Can you tell Kaitlyn I stopped by and I hope she feels better?”

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks, Noah. You’re really sweet to watch Kaitlyn like this.”

“What’s a brother for if not to take care of his favorite and only sister.”

Neil wore an annoyed expression for a moment and then flashed his trademark toothy smile. “Right. See you tonight at the rehearsal dinner.” He waved as he turned back to the driveway where he parked his Tesla.

“What was that about?” Adam asked as Noah walked back into the condo.

“Someone covering his tracks, I think.”

“Aren’t we covering Katie’s tracks?”

“Yes, but something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

“You’re not kidding, Horatio, but what is our role in all this Shakespearean shit?”

Noah snuggled up against Adam. “We need to protect Katie.”

“From which jerk this time?”

“That’s the big question, isn’t it? Luke broke her heart, but what about Neil? Something feels off to me.”

“He acted super shady.”

“Yeah, I agree. Our Katie’s dated some doozies. You never know when someone might start barking.”

“Barking? What are you talking about? Neil barked at you?”

“Not Neil. Remember the guy she dated, James?”

“The one we called James Dean because he drove the classic mustang?”

“That’s the one.”

“Ooh, he exuded testosterone. Whatever happened to him? I thought he might stick. Wait, he barked at you?”

“No, not at me.” Noah sucked in his lips and grinned.

“Who then?”

Noah shook his head.

“Tell me.”

“I’m not supposed to tell. Swore on the twin bond.”

“Does this bond last until the end of time?”

“Well, maybe?”

Adam tucked a piece of Noah’s hair behind his ear. “But did she tell you to keep the secret forever?”

“Nooooo.”

Adam planted his hands on his hips. “Tell me, honey. You know you want to dish.”

“Okay, but you have to swear on our costume box you will never act like you know a thing.”

“I swear.”

“You swear on Beyoncé plus the costume box?”

“Holy shit, this is serious.”

Noah nodded.

“I swear forever and on all the Greats. Now tell me.”

“Remember Katie and James dated for months before things got serious. Katie wanted to take the relationship nice and slow after the Avery joystick disaster.”

“Yes, I remember. We cooked chicken teriyaki for them and walked on the beach.”

“That’s right. We went at a snail’s pace because he stopped to talk to every dog in sight.” Noah paused with raised

eyebrows. “Well, things got heated one night at his place.”

Adam clapped his hands. “Oh, a sex scene. Keep going.”

“Do you remember he called himself a dog daddy?”

“Nope. I would remember something so strange.”

“He did. He owned three chihuahuas and according to Katie, he doted on them. He dressed them in colorful sweaters on chilly nights and the two of them often walked the dogs on the beach. He loved those dogs. She found it endearing.”

Adam pouted his lips. “I thought you were telling me a sex story.”

“I’m getting there. You need the backstory. One night, they end up at his place, making out in the bedroom. Katie undressed while he excused himself to the bathroom. She assumed he needed to get a condom. She laid there for what felt like ten minutes, enough time to wonder if she should leave. When he finally came running into the room wearing elaborate dog ears and nothing else, she laughed and made some silly joke. I don’t remember the joke, but whatever she said, he asked if his little kitty wanted some petting.”

“Is he one of those ‘furrries’ who dresses up in animal costumes for sex?”

“Not sure, but that’s not the important part. Wait for it. They continued kissing and getting into it, though at one point her hand found his ass and it seemed super hairy.”

“Poor guy. Someone should tell him to wax that shit off. I know an exclusive esthetician who could fix him up.”

“Adam, stay with me. His hairy ass doesn’t matter.”

“Well, it sorta does.”

“Pay attention. The kissing and touching ramped up and the three dogs jumped on the bed and began to howl. Katie pulled away and when she did, James started howling with the damn dogs.”

“Like joking, right?”

“No, not a joke. It gets worse.”

“Worse than a hairy ass? I don’t think anything is worse than a butt afro.”

“Worse. The dude started barking and licking her, and not sexy-time licks.”

“Holy shit. Barking? And licking? What did Katie do?”

“Kooky girl jumped out of bed and barked back at him, grabbed her clothes, and left the house in her panties and a T-shirt with the three dogs running behind her. She couldn’t tolerate a dog fetish.”

“Oh my. I couldn’t do it either.” Adam put his hands over his mouth. “No wonder he disappeared.”

Noah clicked his tongue. “Poor Katie. No one wants to date the doggy daddy.”

“I’m hurt you never told me this story.”

“I promised Katie. Plus, it was during one of our tiffs, so I was withholding.”

Adam frowned. “You’re not holding back any other stories, are you?”

“Now, you know everything. I think.”

Adam leaned in for a quick kiss. “Dog sex, huh? Pretty sick dude. I wonder how far he goes with the animal routine. Our Katie should write a book, although her stories might be too crazy for anyone to believe.”

“Speaking of crazy, do you believe what Neil said about Luke?”

“Not for a minute. Luke couldn’t have changed that much. Even with all his faults, he was always a genuine guy.”

“I didn’t believe him either. Neil’s shifty behavior bothers me. Text Katie and tell her he stopped by. We should let her know he came sniffing around.”

“On it.”

**Noah:** Neil came by. Call me when you can.

“Remember love,” Noah called out to Adam’s retreating back, “you know nothing about the doggy daddy.”

“I won’t say a word. Though, there might be some barking tonight,” he said with a growl.

## Chapter 16 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn sat up in bed when she heard the text come in but couldn't decide if she wanted to deal with it.

"Is it Neil again?" Luke asked.

"It's Noah." She flashed him the phone screen. "He wants me to call back."

"Now? Maybe you should rest a bit."

"What if Neil's bugging him?" What if he found out I'm alone with you?

Luke took a deep breath. "Call him back then."

She looked long at Luke, hoping he would take the hint. When he didn't, she asked, "May I have some privacy?"

"Sure." Luke walked toward the balcony doors. "Whatever you want."

She called Noah as soon as he stepped onto the balcony. "I'm seriously losing my mind," she whispered into the phone when Noah answered.

"Because of 'he who should not be named'?"

"Voldemort?"

"No, you big dork, Luke. Who else?"

"Yeah, this entire ordeal stresses me out, Noah."

"It might be worse. You could be stuck in there with Neil."

Kaitlyn didn't answer. Noah's words stung. What did he mean?

"Just kidding. Sorta. Neil's as stressed out as you sound."

"He is?"

"Yes. So, you were saying you're trapped in a bad movie scene?"

"I'm freaking out. I nearly fainted a couple of minutes ago."

Noah's voice turned serious. "Oh, no. You're not sick, are you?"

"Yes, but not from the measles. This turn of events is making me sick. I'm super strung out because I am stuck in a hotel room with Benedict Arnold, and my wedding is a catastrophe. Not to mention all the guests in town who I don't get to greet."

"Benedict Arnold? Really? That's where you went?"

"Yes. It's the best I can come up with at the moment." Kaitlyn squeezed the sides of her head. "I can't think straight, Noah."

"Well, hell, of course you can't."

"Thanks for feeling my pain, dearest brother."

"Uhh, I hate to bring this up, but Neil thinks he's meeting you tonight at the rehearsal dinner."

Kaitlyn yawned into the phone, feeling exhaustion taking over her body. "Yeah, that's not happening."

"What do you mean?"

"They aren't letting us leave. We don't have any new information, so we're in limbo. I can't believe no one is rioting in the hotel. Well, there was Donald."

"Donald? Who's Donald?"

"Never mind about Donald. Luke took care of him. The point is I'm stranded here with my ex-boyfriend."

"So, you get to spend another night alone with Luke?"

Her belly twisted in knots at the thought. "Don't say it like that."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sleeping with Luke."

"I didn't say that, but where are you sleeping, dear sister?"

Kaitlyn didn't want to answer his question. She closed her eyes and tried to use Jedi mind tricks on Noah. Don't ask.

Don't ask. Don't ask.

"Katie? Where are you sleeping?"

"There's only one bed and he wouldn't take the floor or the bathtub."

"Why didn't you take the floor or the tub?"

"Both are hard and gross?"

"It's no wonder Luke didn't take those options."

"Are you on his side or mine?" This argument with her brother felt like *deja vu*. Didn't she say the same thing ten years ago when Luke broke her heart?

"Yours, always yours, dear sister, but I wonder why the stars aligned to put you two together like this and in a king bed no less."

"To punish me."

"You did nothing wrong." Noah's voice turned serious.

"I did. I am. I'm doing lots of things wrong." Kaitlyn huffed into the phone.

"Like what?"

"For starters, I'm lying to my fiancé the day before our wedding."

"Neil's the one who is—"

"Neil's doing what?"

"I meant the situation is out of your hands. You can't blame yourself. It's not your fault you are stuck with your ex-boyfriend."

"But it is. I feel like I'm cheating."

"Is it because you still have feelings for Luke?"

"No. Of course not." Kaitlyn's anger festered to the surface. She was over Luke. Her confused emotions were a byproduct of stress. "You know how it turned out."

"Okay, okay. Calm down. I asked a simple question."



“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. I love you. I’m tired, and I have a headache, and I am stuck here.”

“It’s okay. I get it.”

“Thanks, Noah.”

“Get some rest. Things will look better in the morning.”

“You always say that.”

“And I’m always right. Kiss, kiss.”

“Kiss, kiss.” Kaitlyn hung up the phone and closed her eyes. Her head pounded. Maybe I am sick?

After five quiet minutes, Luke poked his head back inside. “Is the coast clear?”

She kept her eyes closed. “Yep. Come on in.”

“Katie, you look terrible.”

Kaitlyn opened one eye, hoping she conveyed her discomfort. “Gee, thanks.”

“Dr. Roe is coming to check on you, but you know, I am a doctor. I have my medical license and everything.”

“Yes, smartass, I’m aware.” He climbed into bed with her and stroked her forehead like he did when she had migraines in college.

“You don’t feel feverish.”

“Luke?”

“Shut your eyes. Total darkness is the best remedy for the beginning of a headache.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been hard on you. I can’t believe these insane circumstances. What are the chances? I can’t wrap my brain around it.”

Luke spread her hair out like a fan on the pillow and gently massaged her head. “It’s rough for me too.”

“I didn’t think I would see you again.” With her eyes closed, the words came easily.

He paused his massage. “I know. You made sure of it.”

Kaitlyn twisted her head so their faces lay inches away. “I don’t know why you keep saying that. I became a different person after everything fell apart. Didn’t you?”

Luke slowly massaged her head again, making her relax farther into the pillow. “Yes, but we could have worked it out. What did you expect me to do?”

Kaitlyn sat up a little and propped herself on a pillow. “You seemed so relieved when I went home.” She hesitated for a moment, swallowing back all the emotions she had walled inside of her for these years, then her phone beeped, startling her.

She rolled over to her side to read the text.

**Neil:** Stopped by the condo. Madonna and Jennifer Lopez said you were sleeping. Can’t wait to see you tonight. Love you, baby.

“It’s Neil.” She showed him her display. Luke got out of bed. “You don’t need to leave. I’m sending him a quick text.”

Luke opened the balcony doors. “I need some fresh air, anyway.”

And to escape me. Kaitlyn opened her text again.

**Kaitlyn:** I just woke up. Thanks for checking on me.

**Neil:** I wish I could have seen you and given you kisses, but your celebrity nurses wouldn’t let me in.

**Kaitlyn:** I’m feeling better, but I don’t want to risk getting anyone else sick before the wedding.

**Kaitlyn:** I don’t think I’ll make it to the rehearsal dinner tonight.

**Neil:** Are you serious? You're that sick? I'm coming back over right now.

**Kaitlyn:** Don't come. I don't want you to get sick too. I'm sure it's a 24-hour bug or maybe it's food poisoning, but I should lie low. Maybe I will be fine by tonight.

**Neil:** Call me. Let's talk about this.

**Kaitlyn:** I need to sleep more. I'm sure it will all be fine after a little rest.

Kaitlyn went to put her phone down when she had a second thought.

**Kaitlyn:** BTW, I heard about the outbreak at the hotel. How did you avoid getting trapped there?

**Neil:** I gave my room to one of my med school buddies from out of town. He wanted to hook-up with a girl he met at the hotel bar. So, I stayed down the street at the Radisson. Can't get in the way of a man and his girl.

**Kaitlyn:** ... ..

**Kaitlyn:** ... .

**Kaitlyn:** That was nice of you.

**Neil:** You know me, always looking out for others.

**Kaitlyn:** Going to sleep now.

**Neil:** Get some rest. I'll text you later, baby. Love you.

**Kaitlyn:** Okay. Love you too.

Kaitlyn put down the phone, fuming. So, Luke shacked up with another girl before she got there. Well, so what? She took a deep breath. Who cares? None of my business.

Luke poked his head inside. "All done?"

When he climbed back into bed next to her, she stiffened. "Why did you say you were in Neil's room again?"

"Why do you want to know?" Luke pulled the blankets up to his chin. "What did Neil tell you?"

"I guess it wasn't such a surprise to find yet another girl in your bed?"

"Listen, Neil's the one—wait—what? Another girl in my bed? What are you talking about?"

"Neil's the one who gave up his room so you could have sex with some random girl you picked up last night."

"You're not some random girl, and I didn't pick you up."

"Not me." She struggled to her feet, trying to gain control. "Some floozy at the hotel bar. And to think I was—" Kaitlyn fell in a heap on the floor.

"Katie," Luke called out, rushing over to her side of the bed and scooping her up. "Are you okay? Do you feel dizzy?"

"I don't feel very well."

"I'm calling Dr. Roe. This is more than a migraine."

## Chapter 17 - Luke

Luke paced the hotel room waiting for Dr. Roe. Katie insisted on talking to her rather than him. As if I don't have a clue about medicine.

On the first knock, he swung open the door and Dr. Roe rushed in. "How is she?"

"Upset and not well." Luke wrung his hands, feeling like a bystander at an accident. "I don't think it's the measles, and she doesn't seem to have a fever."

Dr. Roe walked over to the bed. "Ms. Thompson, how are you?"

Katie opened her eyes to slits. "Nauseous, dizzy, and I have a splitting headache."

"Luke is right." Dr. Roe felt her head. "You do not feel feverish, but you are cold and clammy." She placed a thermometer in Katie's mouth. "I will check anyway. It could be a mild temperature. Keep this under your tongue."

"Do you think the virus is measles? She doesn't have a rash. Is there something you aren't sharing, Dr. Roe?" As a doctor, he didn't enjoy feeling out of control during a medical crisis.

"I am not sure about the diagnosis yet. I am waiting for the results from the CDC. How are you, Dr. Andrews? Any dizziness or hot flashes?"

"No, none. I mean, it's a little stuffy in here, but I've been going out on the balcony a lot to get fresh air."

"Good. Fresh air is healthy." The thermometer beeped, and Dr. Roe took it out of Katie's mouth. "97.6, so no fever." She examined her neck and chest. "And no rash." She took out her clipboard from her bag. "Can I ask you some additional questions, Ms. Thompson?"

Katie scooted up a little in bed. "Okay."

"Do you want Dr. Andrews to leave the room? Do you need privacy?"

She grasped for Luke's hand. "No. It's okay. He can stay."

"I'm right here." Luke took hold of her hand and sat at the edge of the bed. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Ms. Thompson, are you anxious or experiencing any pains in your stomach?"

"Yes, worse than I've ever felt. My stomach's in knots."

"Well, I have to ask because of the symptoms you describe. Do you think you might be pregnant?"

"No, it's impossible." Katie snorted.

"Birth control can sometimes fail." Luke pushed a strand of hair off her forehead. "The pill is only 99% effective." God, please don't be carrying Neil's baby.

"I'm not pregnant." She sounded embarrassed.

Luke put on his best bedside manner. "If your stomach bothers you, we should rule out pregnancy with a blood test. It's a wise course of action."

"I'm telling you both. I'm not pregnant. It's impossible."

"I can give you a quick blood test to rule it out." Dr. Roe reached for her medical supplies in her big black bag.

Katie grabbed her wrist, halting her movement. "A test isn't necessary, Dr. Roe. I'm positive I'm not pregnant."

Dr. Roe lowered her voice. "How can you be certain?"

"Because I haven't slept with anyone for almost a year." She put her head back down on the pillow, averting her eyes.

"Are you saying you have not had intercourse with anyone in a year?" Dr. Roe placed her bag on the ground. "Is that correct?"

"But Katie—" Luke stammered. "You've been with Neil for a year." How is that possible? Neil wouldn't pass up an opportunity for sex.

She stared at the ceiling. "Yes, Dr. Roe, that's what I'm saying."

“Katie.” Luke lowered his voice. “I’m sure you and Neil did it at least a few times. All it takes is once.”

“Do I need to explain the birds and the bees to you, Luke?” She rotated away from him, hiding her face.

Stunned silent, understanding crept over him. They haven’t had sex? Best news ever.

Dr. Roe cleared her throat. “So.” She cleared her throat a second time. “Since you are not pregnant, Ms. Thompson, I suspect you had a minor panic attack. When one is thrown into unknown and stressful circumstances, it can be hard on the body.” She removed a foil wrapper out of her pocket. “I have given these to a couple of guests who were overwhelmed or suffering mild claustrophobia.” She handed Katie a Xanax. “You can take one if you cannot sleep. Rest is the best medicine for panic attacks.”

She took the foil package. “A panic attack?” She flipped the pill wrapper over in her hand. “I don’t like to take medication. Ever.”

“I understand. You can take one tonight to help you unwind.” Dr. Roe patted her arm gently. “I think once you are out of this stressful environment, you will feel more like yourself.”

“Thank you, Dr. Roe.” She leaned back into her pillow, clutching the pill in her palm.

“I’ll walk you out, Doctor.” When Luke opened the door, he hesitated in the hall. “I’m relieved it’s only a panic attack. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize the symptoms.”

“Sometimes an event can have a triggering effect.” She placed her hand on his shoulder. “It seems like you know Ms. Thompson well. Has she ever experienced a panic attack before?”

Luke tried to remember, but Katie had always been capable under pressure. Well, except for when— “Maybe, in her early twenties?” When everything went to shit.

“Is there anything about the previous event that resembles this one?”

Yeah, me. "I'm not sure."

"Well, the Xanax will allow her to get some sleep and should help her mental state. Please alert me if she has another episode."

"I will. Thank you for your help. I'll keep an eye on her."

Dr. Roe nodded and he closed the door behind her. He looked over at Katie in the bed, and a wave of comprehension came over him. She freaked out because of me, not the virus or the wedding. He took a glass off the tray and went into the bathroom to fill it up with water. Glimpsing himself in the mirror, he shuddered. Ten years. It had been ten years since they last saw one another.

When Luke walked back in, she gave him a sheepish grin. "You probably think it's weird I haven't had sex with Neil, huh?"

He lowered his eyes to hide his joy. Could he fist bump the sky without her seeing? "Not weird. I'm a little surprised though." And relieved. And happy. He sat down on the edge of the bed and handed her a glass of water. "Okay, maybe it's a little weird. I always thought you liked sex. Or at least it seemed like you did back in the day." They couldn't get enough of each other in college. He pushed his hair back and looked at her. "Yeah, it's very weird the two of you didn't ..." They sat in uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Luke finally broke. "Do you want to talk about it?" Did he want to hear about her sex life with Neil?

"No. I don't want to talk about it."

"Do you want to take the Xanax? It'll calm your nerves."

"I probably should, right?" She looked at Luke as if asking for permission. "I've been feeling a little crazy."

"You're not crazy. You're under mental duress. Planning a wedding is challenging without the extra problems like a hotel virus and being stuck with me added to it." I am such a jackass, going on about her sex life when she is distressed.

"It sounds like you think I'm crazy." She unwrapped the pill, put it in her mouth, and took a big swig of water to



swallow it down.

Luke climbed into bed with her. “Never. Now, scoot over.”

She moved over, and Luke put her head in the crick of his arm. “I should have been there for you.”

“You are here for me.”

“Not now, back then. I should’ve never quit chasing you. I regret giving up on us.”

“Luke, we just weren’t meant to be together.”

“And you and Neil fit better?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? What do you mean by maybe?”

“Neil wants to start our marriage right. He wants to do things the traditional way.”

“And not having sex is the right way?”

“I think so. Maybe.”

Give me a break. That dude might not be sleeping with Katie, but he’s probably sleeping with everyone else. “Do you think we didn’t start our relationship, right?” Please don’t say yes. My heart can’t take it.

“No, it wasn’t that.” Katie’s shoulders crumbled a little, and Luke gathered her to him. “But I feel like I messed up another relationship all over again.”

“Because of me?”

“No, because of me. I shouldn’t have come here last night.”

“Why did you?”

She hesitated. “To see if Neil and I have sexual chemistry.” She chuckled, putting her forehead in the pillow. “It sounds so silly, now.”

“It’s not silly. That’s important in a marriage.” We were fucking great together.

“But not the most important thing.”

“So, you don’t think you have sexual chemistry?”

She faced him. “I’m not sure.”

Luke stared at her. Was she asking him a question with her eyes? He answered by putting his lips against hers. She parted her lips to join his and they kissed. His tongue tasted hers and he drew her near. It felt like coming home. They were joined together and the relief overwhelmed him. They had sexual chemistry for sure. She sighed into his mouth and Luke made the kiss deeper in response. He wanted this woman with every cell of his being. Her body responded, sliding closer. He rolled her onto him, holding her face in his hands. His heart expanded as his body melted into hers. Katie moaned and his excitement grew, and then she suddenly pulled away.

“Wait. This is a mistake.” She sat up, still straddling him in the bed.

Luke opened his eyes. “It is?”

Katie uncoiled and lay on her back. “Yes,” she said between gasps.

“Okay. We’ll stop, but I’m holding you until you fall asleep.” I’m not letting you go this time. Luke brought her back into the curve of his body in a comforting embrace.

“Okay.” She relaxed into him.

“Why don’t you rest? I’ll be right here.” Luke wanted to say more but held his tongue.

“Thank you.”

“Everything will be better when you wake up.”

“That’s what Noah always says.”

“And Noah is always right.”

“That’s what he always says too.”

Luke let out a soft laugh and settled farther down into the bed next to her. “Shh. Get some sleep.”

Katie wriggled around until she was facing him again. “Wait. I almost forgot. Was there another girl in this bed with you last night?”

“What do you think?” He searched her eyes, but she said nothing. She turned around and nestled back into his arms.

Luke felt Katie’s body slacken, and he flashed back to when he came to see her at the vineyard for the first time after she left school.

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Noah hung from a ladder dressed like Marcel Marceau in a black and white striped shirt and white pants. “Katie’s not seeing anyone today. I’m sorry.”

Luke crumbled to the ground by a basket of grapes. “She won’t answer my calls or respond to my texts.” He looked up at Noah. “What should I do?” he pleaded.

Noah climbed down the ladder and sat next to him. “I see dark circles under your eyes. Are you sleeping?”

“No. Of course not. How can I sleep when I don’t know what’s inside Katie’s head?”

Noah put his arms around his shoulders and gave him a tight squeeze. “Things always look better after a night’s sleep. Go to bed and everything will be fine when you wake up.”

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But Noah was wrong. Things did not get better. They got worse. This time Luke would listen to his heart. He closed his eyes and tightened his arms around her.

## Chapter 18 - Noah

Noah did a chasse, paused, and sat on the marble floor in Katie's spacious front hallway.

"And a 5, 6, 7, 8 ..." Adam stopped counting beats. "Hey, earth to Noah." His voice echoed in the cavernous space. "What's going on, my love? Do you hate this new move?"

"I can't function right now." Noah picked at his bright pink manicured toes.

Adam plopped down next to him. "I thought you wanted to rehearse one more time?"

"My hips do, but my heart doesn't agree." He nuzzled into Adam.

"Tell me what is going on in your pretty head."

"I'm too worried about Katie to get into our dance number. I understand we need one more run-through, but I'm creatively blocked. I can't believe this rehearsal dinner mess, and I don't know how to help. Do we have the right to interfere with the wedding if this is what she wants?" They sat in silence for a few moments.

"I honestly can't say."

"She says she loves Neil. I should use my super twin power for truth. All these lies sicken me. Can I plow through her rehearsal intending to destroy the wedding? Do I have the right?"

"It isn't like you're summoning the Dark Lord. We plan to divert Neil, not stage a coup." Adam massaged Noah's shoulders, making him exhale. "Here's what I know. You love your sister, and she's about to make the biggest mistake of her life. We hate Neil, and we suspect Katie still loves Luke. Right?"

"But is she still in love with Luke? That's the part I struggle with here. Her relationship with Luke is a disaster too. Hell, they need to deal with some big issues before they can have a healthy relationship. I'm fairly certain they haven't

talked in ten years before this weekend. Who am I to say she loves Luke or belongs with him? Maybe I want her to be with Luke. Is my hatred of Neil enough to ruin their wedding?"

Adam leaned his head on Noah's shoulder. "Trust your instincts."

"Katie says she loves Neil, or the guy she thinks Neil is. He has been the perfect boyfriend in her eyes. What if we're wrong and Neil isn't the worm we think he is? Maybe he's a commendable guy after all?"

"Come on, Noah. That man is definitely sleeping with the Barbies. Why would he quit after the wedding? He wants Katie to be the perfect little wife at home, making dinner and taking care of him. He doesn't want her to be independent. He won't even let her keep the vineyard job she loves. She deserves much better than the future he's planned for her."

"Yeah, you're right. Neil is the worst." He grinned at Adam who matched it with his own. "Thank you. You always help me shake off the yuck. I got too in my head about the situation. We'll figure it out. Mission to destroy Neil is back on." He leaned in and smacked Adam hard on the lips with a wet kiss.

"Plus, we have Mia on our side," Adam said. He jumped up and held his hand out to Noah. "That brilliant woman will find a way to take Neil down."

Pulling himself up with Adam's assistance, he leaned in for a hug. "Let's run through this dance again and then figure out Mia's dress. I'm so glad we brought over the costume trunk. It was a smart call."

"Thank goodness I'm brilliant," Noah said without humor, making Adam laugh. "I thought the orange and yellow butterfly dress would be lovely on her."

"Oh, the Gaultier knock-off? Yessss," Adam hissed. "She would be a goddess in the dress. Or, we could put her in the Ginger Rogers feather dress." Adam wiggled his fingers wickedly.

“Only if we want Mia to murder us with ostrich feathers.” Noah laughed at his own joke.

“Ohh, do you think she will let us do her hair and makeup? To get my hands on that woman’s face would make my year.”

“If you go near her with your makeup kit, she might bite those hands off.” Noah’s cell phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out. “Sorry, gotta check this text. It might be Katie.”

“Is it her?”

“Yeah. I wish she would talk to Luke and get everything out in the open.”

“We tell each other everything, darling, but not everyone is comfortable with over-sharing.” Adam pushed a stray hair behind Noah’s ear.

“But this isn’t a minor issue.” He grabbed Adam’s hand. “I should have said something about Neil a long time ago. I got caught up in our busy life, and I didn’t pay enough attention to Katie’s. She stands in our corner whenever we need her. I want to support her too.”

“Yeah, I know. I know.” He kissed Noah’s forehead. “It’ll be okay. Give Katie some time. She’ll get there.”

“I hope so.” Noah picked up his phone to text her. “Let me reach out to her and then we’ll polish our number.”

## Chapter 19 - Kaitlyn

**Kaitlyn:** Hey, just woke up. Had a short nap and feel so much better. Now, I've got to escape this room in order to make it to the rehearsal dinner tonight. Can you meet me outside the hotel in ten minutes? I'll be the girl dangling from the second-floor window!

To her relief, Noah responded right away. She could always depend on him to keep his phone attached to his hip.

**Noah:** Haha! You mean the girl with broken legs and ribs, lying in a disheveled pile on the ground? Please don't jump.

**Kaitlyn:** Seriously, I don't know what to do. Neil thinks I'm coming tonight. Help.

Kaitlyn laid her phone down and watched Luke sleep next to her in bed. He wore a small smile. His chiseled features and strong jawline stirred a muscle memory inside of her. She clutched her chest to calm the sensation. How have the last ten years made him more handsome? Not wanting to disturb him by getting up, she moved carefully to pick up her phone and see if Noah texted her back yet.

**Noah:** Adam says he can go to the dinner as you. He can be your doppelganger tonight.

**Kaitlyn:** Ha. Ha. I think someone might notice the difference. He's only a foot and a half taller than me.

Luke moved and Kaitlyn stilled, watching him kick some blankets. When he didn't wake, she checked her phone.

**Noah:** Adam says he can pull it off. Your dress will just be a mini one.

**Kaitlyn:** I wish! Adam is an incredible impersonator, but he can't pull that one off.

**Noah:** So, what's the plan? You gonna tell him the truth?

**Kaitlyn:** Who? Luke?

**Noah:** No, Neil.

Of course, he meant Neil. What was she thinking? There was nothing left to say to Luke.

**Kaitlyn:** Neil's my fiancé. I have to tell him I won't be there. He'd notice if I didn't show. Don't you think?

**Noah:** Orrrrr ... you could be too sick to call him right now and let him know after the dinner starts? Just sayin' it's an option that buys you time.

Time? If only she could rewind back time.

**Noah:** Think about it, Katie girl.

Kaitlyn sat up farther in the bed, careful not to move the blankets. Noah was right. If she told Neil now, he would want an explanation for her presence at the hotel. Telling him would be beyond mortifying. Then, he would ask about her current location, and she would have to tell him about her isolation in the room with Luke, which would lead her to reveal her past with Luke. The whole conversation created more problems. Nope, not an option. I'm not discussing that over the phone. She looked over at Luke and felt her chest clench again. Guilt? Desire? She couldn't hold down a single emotion.

**Noah:** Does he know about Luke?

**Kaitlyn:** Know what?

**Noah:** KATIE.

**Kaitlyn:** No.

**Noah:** Nothing?

**Kaitlyn:** Yes. Nothing.

**Noah:** You mean to tell me he knows nothing about Luke? Your first love? Your first everything?

**Kaitlyn:** Nothing.

**Noah:** HE DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED??? NOT EVEN THAT????

**Noah:** ??????????

**Noah:** Katie???????????? HELLO?????



Luke snorted in his sleep and Kaitlyn put the phone down. Shouty caps meant she was in trouble with Noah. She couldn't deal with his disappointment. Shit, I can't have him mad now too. She picked up the phone and saw one last text.

**Noah:** Don't worry. We'll keep covering for you, sweet girl.

Relieved, she laid back down and tried to sleep, but a memory of Luke fluttered to the surface of her brain.

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Luke kissed her closed eyelids. "Morning, beautiful."

Kaitlyn loved this part of the day. She faked sleep so he would keep going.

His kisses continued down the nape of her neck to the sensitive part behind her ear. When he got to her collarbone, she giggled. He knew her ticklish spots. "So, you're awake?"

"Nope," she said with her eyes closed and added a snoring sound for safe measure.

He reached up and playfully poked her in the ribs. "Well, you aren't dreaming. I'm as real as it gets," he said, biting her neck.

She opened her eyes and met his deep brown ones. She loved this man with all her heart. They froze, melting into each other. Luke grazed her lips with a whisper of a kiss. Her heart fluttered, and in an instant, she felt as though she couldn't be any happier.

Luke inched lower, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses between her breasts and down her abdomen. She exhaled, feeling the words he said with his body. "I love you, Katie," they said. "I want you, Katie." The heat in her body responded. "I want you too. I love you too." His silent appreciation sent tingles straight to her toes. When she felt his hot breath against her sex, a whimper escaped her throat. She

felt him smile as his tongue lingered there, the motion soft and gentle until she quivered in ecstasy.

He raised his head. "I love seeing you come apart on me."

Holding his hair in her clenched fists, she pulled him up to her. "I'm glad I wasn't dreaming, Mr. Andrews."

"We're not done yet."

"Thank goodness. I want you inside of me," she moaned, stroking his face.

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Kaitlyn's eyes flew open. She tried to shake off the vivid memory, but it stuck in her bones. Luke slept like the dead next to her, the heat coming off his body, arousing her senses. Delving into the past made her heart ache. She couldn't get caught up in memories if she planned to move forward. She closed her eyes again and tried to focus on Neil. Only Neil.

## Chapter 20 - Mia

Mia climbed the steep concrete steps and checked her phone for the address again. The text matched the condo number, but the condo didn't match Katie's cheerful personality at all. Even though it was a beautiful building, it felt cold. Mia shook her head, wondering how much Katie had changed. "Ugh," she groaned. After the long car ride, Mia had a slight kink in her neck. Still standing on the steps, she tilted her head into the warm sunlight and took a deep breath, trying to relax her neck muscles. The smell of the ocean never got old, and she instantly felt calmer. She straightened up and rang the bell. A delicate chirp chimed inside.

Adam flung the door open. "Mia, darling." He grabbed her small hand, pulling her inside the entryway. "She's here," he screamed over his shoulder. Adam squinted his eyes at her. "First hugs, then food. You look fabulous, as always, but hungry."

Mia laughed and folded Adam into a warm hug as Noah came running down a glass staircase. "Mia, we're so happy you are here to save the day," he sang, grabbing her from Adam and wrapping his arms around her in a tight hug. "It has been too long."

"I agree. I've missed you too." She smiled, taking in their outrageous outfits. They were wearing matching luminescent short overall jumpsuits, revealing their bare muscular chests, and sporting expertly slouching beanie hats.

"I see those jealous eyes of yours. Why are you ogling us?" Noah placed his hands on his hips and sashayed back and forth. "Few can pull off this kind of style."

"Okay, I'm a little jealous but also a little scared. You didn't pick a matching metallic jumpsuit for me, did you? I don't think I can swing the topless look."

"Of course not." Adam sounded indignant, and Mia released a held breath. She did not have the nerve for metallic anything. "We've changed clothes seven times, trying to figure out the best outfit for you this evening," Adam continued. "We

picked out a couple of options, but before we get to that,” he paused, taking Mia’s small backpack out of her hand, “let’s get you something to eat and make a plan.”

Noah signaled Adam with his hands to slow down.

“What?” Adam said.

“I thought we would ease her into this, not pounce on her at the door and order her to fix everything.” Noah ran his hands over his head. “I was going for the art of subtlety.”

Mia snorted. “As if you could ever be subtle for a moment in your entire life. And yes, I could use a snack and a huge glass of water, please. Then you can tell me all about your maniacal plan.”

“Yeah see, that’s the problem. We don’t have one.” Adam smirked at Noah and led Mia into the large open living room connected to the all-white gourmet kitchen. A giant silver Viking stove with a French design hood served as the centerpiece.

Mia climbed up onto the barstool at the counter and surveyed the kitchen. The counters were bare, not even a coffee maker in sight. “This place is something else.” She gave Noah a thumbs up to a tub of hummus and carrots.

Noah poured the carrots onto a delicate white plate. “Neil’s parents bought it for them last month as a wedding gift. Katie moved in last week. Neil was supposed to be at the resort this weekend so their first night together at the condo would be as a married couple, but because of the quarantine, he’s at his parents’ estate.”

“Oh, they haven’t moved their things in?” She took a sip of the water Adam handed to her.

“Yeah, they did. All of their stuff is here and unpacked.” Adam frowned at the blank walls. “Neil doesn’t like things to be on display. He keeps the counters clear at all times, and he doesn’t like personal touches. Katie says he helps keep her organized and tidy.” Adam spooned a dollop of hummus next to the cut carrots, smirking as if no one could ever believe such nonsense.

Mia grabbed a carrot and shoved it in her mouth. “Thank you. This is perfect.” She waited for them to fill her in, but Adam filled his mouth with an olive he pulled out of a jar, and Noah fiddled with his phone, both of them trying to avoid talking. “Okay boys, spill it. You are too quiet. What the hell is going on?”

Adam and Noah looked at each other. In the silence, the ticking of the kitchen clock got louder by the second. Mia cleared her throat as if preparing for a long speech. “Start at the beginning. Why do we hate this Neil guy and how long has Katie been with him? Is he really that terrible?” Noah took a deep breath, but before he answered, Mia blurted out, “Oh shit, she isn’t pregnant, is she?”

“Ha. As if.” Adam snorted and almost choked on the olive he had in his mouth. “I would rather that as an excuse.”

“What do you mean?” Mia made a strange face. “How would a baby make things better?”

“We fear Katie might actually love Neil.” Noah rolled his eyes. “He’s a total dill weed. And we know he screws around.”

“Know?” Adam cocked his head at Noah.

“Okay, we don’t know, know. You know?” Noah stuck his tongue out at Adam.

“No, I don’t know,” Mia said. “I have no idea what you are talking about. Are you saying he isn’t faithful to Katie? Why is he marrying her if that’s the case?”

Adam jumped up and sat on top of the marble countertop. “He’s a jerk. We don’t have proof he sleeps around, but we’re pretty sure it’s true. He isn’t a stand-up guy.”

“What do you mean? Is he screwing around or do you just not like him? Oh shit.” Mia pivoted, taking in the room where nothing stood out of place. “He isn’t a control freak, sleeping with the enemy kind of man? She wouldn’t be involved with someone deranged?” Would she? Mia didn’t understand this new Katie. The old Katie always had her head on straight.

“I think he likes Katie’s purity or whatever,” Noah said.

“What? She isn’t pure.” Back in the day, Katie and Luke never took their hands off each other.

Adam and Noah burst out laughing. “We know,” they yelled at the same time.

“You said she loves this guy?” Mia wanted an honest answer.

“She says she does. We don’t think she would feel the same way if she knew the real Neil.”

“So, you witnessed the real Neil? You’ve seen him cheat on Katie?”

“Not exactly.” Noah put a carrot in his mouth. Still chewing, he added, “But I feel it in my bones.”

“I met him once at Luke’s medical school graduation. I can’t remember a damn thing about him except he thought I was Luke’s date.”

“Gross.”

“Right? Luke said Neil’s parents gave a large financial contribution to the foundation. The funding means a lot to Luke.” Mia didn’t want to jeopardize Luke’s financing. “Neil can’t be all bad if his parents give money to charities. Maybe you read him wrong?”

“Girl, Neil hasn’t given a dime to Luke. His parents are the ones with the money. They are loaded and make huge donations to all sorts of charitable associations for tax reasons. They might like Luke’s foundation, but I doubt it has anything to do with Neil.” Noah crunched hard on another carrot.

“I see.” Mia stayed quiet for a moment. “And Katie and Luke are confined together in the hotel? How did that happen? Did they arrange to meet there? Luke didn’t explain. I wasn’t aware they talked. Ever.”

Adam put the olive jar down. “Okay, quick recap: Katie went to the hotel to be with Neil for sexy time. Neil had no idea. Luke took Neil’s room earlier in the night and was sound asleep when Katie snuck in. Then, the virus arrived. Tada. They are trapped together. Neither knew the other was

acquainted with Neil. It's all a crazy coincidence." Adam took a huge breath.

"Or is it Kismet?" Noah wiggled his eyebrows at Mia.

She laughed. "This is truly insane. If she can't come to the rehearsal dinner tonight, why are they holding it?"

Adam laughed with Mia. "Ahh, there's the rub."

"Katie can't tell Neil she's in the hotel room with Luke. She's embarrassed about sneaking in there for sexy time, and Neil doesn't have a clue about her past with Luke."

"Wow. This is heavier than I thought." Mia ate the last carrot and picked up the hummus container. When she opened the fridge, it surprised her to see a vast space devoid of food. Does no one eat in this mausoleum? "Are we telling Neil that Katie can't come tonight?" She closed the fridge and whipped around. "Wait, no, is she telling him?"

"Nope. Not until it is too late."

Mia caught on quickly. "Where does he think she is if she isn't at the hotel?"

"Here. Sleeping off an illness." Noah rinsed the plates.

"And he hasn't come by to check on her?"

"Oh, he has, but we wouldn't let him see her. That's why we're here. We're running interference. We're supposed to be her caretakers."

Mia couldn't help but giggle again. "Damn, this is a bloody mess. What's our plan?"

"We could set the country club on fire?" Adam said in a Count Dracula voice.

"No, not gonna work." Mia dismissed him, ignoring his overt silliness. "They will have sprinkler systems and detection all over the place." No one spoke and the clock in the kitchen ticked louder. Minutes went by before Mia broke the silence. "If we expect to crack this case, I think we need to open a bottle of wine."

“On it.” Adam jumped up and headed to the wine cellar in the basement, turning before going downstairs. “Red or white?”

Noah didn’t hesitate. “Ohh, bring the Crocus Malbec I saw down there. Neil will never miss it.”

“Yesssss!” Mia squealed with joy. “Perfect.”

“On it.” Adam ran down the stairs.

“Let’s go sit over there.” Noah walked them over to the living room with an ocean view.

Mia kicked off her shoes and curled her legs under her on the white leather sofa. “How about we call in a bomb scare at the country club right as the dinner starts?” She tucked herself into the corner of the sectional, trying to get cozy.

“I thought of that, but Neil would come over to the condo right away. He’d want to see Katie after something so frightening. Plus, I don’t want to get on the FBI’s most-wanted list. I can’t add any more life issues.”

Noah smiled at Adam as he clambered up next to him with an open bottle. “Perfect timing.” Adam filled all of their glasses. “Cheers to Neil’s downfall,” Noah toasted, clinking his glass with each of them.

“To Neil’s downfall!” Mia and Adam sang in unison.

“Okay, so no bomb threat.” Noah maintained a completely straight face. “How about we put castor oil in everyone’s drink? It would make for a quick exit. Pun intended.” Adam batted him lightly on the arm.

“That’s not nice,” Mia scolded and took another sip. “This wine is delicious.”

“It should be for 100 bucks a bottle.” Adam licked his lips and drank more. “How about we say Katie scored some last-minute Hamilton tickets?”

Mia almost choked on her wine. “While I admit I’d be more than tempted, I doubt seeing Hamilton would be a big enough reason for Katie to miss her own rehearsal dinner.”



Noah grunted in agreement and poured himself another full glass of wine. “How about we rent a big bear costume and tell Neil it’s Katie.” Adam and Mia looked at each other and gulped down more wine. “Okay, okay, that was a lousy one.” Noah waved his hands in front of his face as if erasing the suggestion from the room. “Wait, I’ve got it,” Noah continued. “Katie had to turn in her library books and is running late, really, really, really late?”

“Or she had to finish her book club book?” Adam added to the theme of ridiculous book excuses.

“No, she rushed over to the Metroplex to see the newest Star Wars movie coming out?” Mia smirked. “Cause ya know, there’s always one of those.”

“Right, girl?” Adam leaned in to pour her more wine. “What’s the deal with all those damn Star Wars movies?”

Mia held her glass out for Adam. “Shit, beats me. I don’t get it.” She drank the small drop he poured.

“Emergency appendectomy?” Noah stood up. “I’ll go get another bottle of wine.”

“I left a second bottle on the kitchen counter, Ahuva,” Adam said, placing a hand on Noah’s arm.

“Ahuva? What does that mean?” Mia asked.

“It means ‘dearly loved’ in Hebrew.” Adam made a crazy face at Mia. “Don’t tell me you forgot I’m Jewish.”

“Maybe. Give a girl a break. Will you?” Mia lifted her empty glass so Adam could refill it with the new bottle.

“For shame.” Adam waved his finger at her like she was naughty. “And you claim to know me.”

Mia pecked him on the cheek. “It’s been ten years. Forgive me. I adore you.”

Noah sat down with another bottle, looking at Adam and Mia. “What’d I miss?”

Adam kissed Noah. “Oh, nothing. Mia was trying to seduce me.”

“Seduction, now that’s a superb idea.” Mia took a sip of wine, savoring the taste of quality wine. “I could seduce Neil. He can’t possibly remember me from the graduation ceremony, and if he did, he would never suspect my wicked intentions.”

Noah dismissed the idea. “He’s too well mannered. He wouldn’t go for it in front of family and friends. He’s an expert game player.”

“I offered to play Katie, but she shut me down.” Adam placed his wine glass on the coffee table in front of him.

“I’m guessing Neil would recognize you.” Mia giggled, shaking out her hair. “Why don’t we tell him she has cold feet. Won’t that revelation be a valid reason for a wedding cancelation?”

“Nope. He would rush over here to talk her out of it. Then we’d all be screwed.”

“Okay, then what?” Mia’s frustration flared. She couldn’t come up with a decent solution. She solved problems all day in the ER and those were much more complicated than this one.

“I think we get Katie to put off telling him as long as possible,” Noah said. “Maybe she never texts him? Or, I know, she could send a text saying she’s late, or she has to blow dry her hair. We can all go to the rehearsal dinner as planned, and maybe do the dance number, and ten minutes into it when she hasn’t shown up, we tell him she called and is too sick and might spew green diarrhea.”

Mia frowned and shifted on the sofa. “Uhh, gross. Wouldn’t he leave the dinner to check on her? He’s a doctor, so I doubt an illness would stop him, even if she oozes green fluids.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Noah matched her frown.

“Wait. I have the perfect idea.” Adam stood up and danced, spreading his arms wide. “This is the solution. I feel it.”

Mia threw a pillow from the couch at him. “Tell, tell.”

“You said you only met Neil once, right?”

“Yes, at Luke’s graduation.”

“What if you showed up separately from us and claimed to be Neil’s wife? As soon as you got there, you could create a huge hissy-fit. Ask him about the poor kids he abandoned and all the back child support he owes.” Adam jumped around in excitement. “Ooh, and tell the Connor’s how happy you are to meet them after all these years.”

Noah cracked up. “Holy shit, Neil would freak out.”

“Perfect,” Adam screeched. “Accuse him of polygamy and demand a divorce in front of everyone.”

“Hmm, this sounds like a fun acting job.” Mia smiled. “I haven’t pulled one of those off since The Music Man in high school.”

Noah nodded his head. “I like it. I like it a lot.”

“And if he doesn’t buy your act, we can run out of there, claiming we snagged those coveted Hamilton tickets, right?” Adam plopped down next to Noah on the sofa and smack kissed him on the cheek.

Mia ran her fingers over the soft leather cushions. “I need a small nap before our dramatic performance tonight. Am I staying here with you two and fake, sick Katie?”

“We thought you might like to stay at our place. It’s empty, and we filled the fridge full of food.” Adam gave her a toothy grin. “You’ll be more comfortable there. Plus, Neil might keep dropping by here. I’ll give you a key. It’s only a few blocks away. You can walk there in your wine stupor.”

“So gracious. Thank you.” Noah got up and headed to the kitchen drawer for the key, but Mia stopped mid-pace behind him. “We need to get Neil to confess to cheating tonight, but if he won’t take the bait, I can still be a handful for him to manage. And if he tries to bail for some reason, I can remind him it’s super rude to leave all his guests unattended, all the while manipulating him and keeping him busy. Would that work?”

Adam spoke first. “He does like to keep up social appearances. This plan might work. And if everything falls apart, then plan B. Mia gets an emergency text saying they need all medical personnel to the hospital ER due to the virus outbreak? Neil would leave too. Right?”

Mia pointed at him, staggering a bit. “That’s not a terrible plan either.”

“He would definitely go,” Noah said, handing her the key. “His general narcissism couldn’t keep him from the news coverage.”

“Shit, worse comes to worst, I can get frisky and grab his wanker if necessary.” Mia flung her dreadlocks behind her. “I can be very persuasive when needed.”

“Of that, I’m certain.” Noah walked back to the sofa and rested his head on Adam’s shoulder. “What do you think, honey? Can we pull this off?”

“I think we have to try,” Adam said with a serious expression.

Mia met his gaze. “We must save Katie from okra dick.”

## Chapter 21 - Luke

“What’s wrong?” Luke asked, detecting Katie’s mood change. Without answering him, she rushed outside to the balcony. He counted to ten then followed. Deciding to keep quiet, he pulled a chair next to her. They sat in silence and listened to the ocean waves for twenty minutes before Katie spoke.

“I keep saying this, but I can’t believe this is happening. I’m missing my rehearsal dinner. We planned all the wedding details for months. I picked out the centerpieces, the entertainment, and the menu.” She slumped in her bistro chair. “I feel responsible. I haven’t even told Neil I’m standing him up yet.”

“It’s not intentional, Katie. Standing him up implies you can get there. You can’t physically go to him right now. There is a huge difference.” Luke’s voice cracked on the last word. They sat for a few minutes more before Luke finally broke. “You must truly love him.”

“It’s not—” She spun away from him. “I mean—”

“I get it.” Luke clenched his jaw, trying to keep his real thoughts inside. Tell me what you want to say. Quit holding back.

“No, I don’t think you get it.”

She was right. He didn’t. Luke pushed away from the table, needing to escape this conversation. “I’ll run you a bath. You need some time to yourself. Are long, hot baths still your favorite way to clear your head?” Motionless and staring at the ocean, she didn’t meet his eyes. He wanted to say, look at me. I’m right here wanting you. Instead, he said, “I don’t think the hotel provides bubble bath, but I’ll start your water and find you some clean clothes in my luggage.”

“That’s thoughtful of you. Thanks, Luke, but you don’t have to run my water. I can do it.”

“Yeah, I know. I want to.” He walked inside, pulled his iPod from his duffle, and headed into the bathroom. Luke saw

his reflection in the mirror. His body looked deflated and shattered. This is driving me crazy. Katie is right here, but I can't tell her how I feel. Maybe I should blurt it out? Nope, she loves Neil. Neil. Why does it have to be stupid Neil? He straightened his back and refocused his attention on preparing a relaxing bath experience for her.

The bathroom was spotless except for a million little bottles of shampoo and conditioner. There were no bubble bath containers. He tried the bar soap by the sink, but it barely foamed. Luke opened up one of the blue bottles of shampoo and sniffed. He ran the water and dumped all the bright colored liquid in, kicking up a whiff of mint. A blue fluffy layer formed on top of the water. On the counter, he plugged his old iPod into a tiny wall speaker and set it to her favorite spa soundtrack, Bach. When Katie walked in, Luke glanced up. "The water is hot and minty."

"Minty?"

"The hotel only provided mint shampoo." He gave her a weak smile. "At least it's not coconut scented."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Thank goodness."

"I put on Bach. You still like classical, right?"

"Yes, thank you." Before closing the door, she popped her head outside.

"Any chance you brought a novel with you?"

Luke froze with a guilty look. Why didn't he bring a Pulitzer prize-winning novel? Or a historical biography on Lincoln?

"What's that face?" She took a step closer to him. "Did you bring porn or something scandalous? You always keep a book on you. Hand it over."

Without a word, he pulled a worn paperback book out of his duffle bag and gave it to her.

"The Hating Game? You're kidding me?" She burst out laughing. "I didn't know you read romance books. I'm not sure what to say."

“In my defense, Mia gave it to me,” he said. Katie continued to giggle.

She opened the bookmarked page. “You’re almost finished.”

Luke felt like his face must be bright red. “Enough with the questions. How about heading back to your bath before the water gets cold?”

“I’ll be in there for a while. I wanted to read this one. It’s on my list. We can have a book club discussion later,” she said, returning to the bathroom.

Luke couldn’t tell if she was joking, but if it meant spending more time with her, he would suffer through an embarrassing book discussion. He heard her laugh through the wall, and all thoughts ran to her naked sudsy body. Luke threw himself on the bed, taking up every inch of space, and rubbed his face. The image of Katie in the bathtub rushed to the forefront of his mind and lingered. He wanted to be in the bath with her. To distract himself, he picked up his phone. There were a few work texts but nothing urgent. He threw it down and grabbed the surprisingly old-fashioned white push-button phone on the bedside table. He dialed the front desk.

“Bonjour. Pacific Palms Resort, Emile Flaubert speaking. How may I help you?”

“Emile, it’s Luke Andrews.”

“Hello, Dr. Andrews. Is everything all right?”

“I have an idea, and I need your assistance. Since Katie will miss her dress rehearsal and dinner, a special meal would be a nice surprise. Can you send something a little decadent up? I understand resources are limited, but can we get a couple of candles, a tablecloth, and maybe a chocolate sweet for a dessert? I’m asking for a lot under these circumstances, but I just thought...” He was rethinking this whole idea. What if she doesn’t like it?

“No, no bother at all,” Emile said. “I think it is an excellent idea. Parfait. Is she feeling better?”

“Yes, I believe so. Well, physically she seems better.”

“D’accord. I see.”

Soft violin sounds wafted from the bathroom. Bach was the perfect choice. “Emile, I really would appreciate your help. I want to cheer her up.”

“I know just the thing, monsieur. My catering crew has been bored out of their minds all day. I’ll call down and have something sent to your room. One romantic dinner on its way.”

“Wonderful. Wait, no. Not romantic. We’re friends. I only want to cheer her up.”

Emile dropped his voice an octave. “Okay, not romantic. A friendly dinner?”

He wasn’t sure “friendly” was what he wanted. Luke eyed his suit slung across a chair next to his luggage. “Emile, is there a gift shop downstairs?”

“Yes, sir. We not only have a gift shop, but also a clothing boutique and a newsstand. Do you need an item from either?”

“A clothing boutique? Any chance I can get you to send up a dress and strappy shoes as well? Katie didn’t bring any, uhh, luggage with her. It might make her feel better to put on clothes of her own.”

“Bien. Bien. I’ll pick an outfit and send it with the catering cart. I presume she is a size 4?”

Luke hesitated. “I have no idea. I will take your advice on the matter.” Luke picked up the high-heeled shoe left on the floor. “She wears a size seven and a half shoe.”

“Any color or preference, sir?”

“No, Emile, I trust you. Charge it to me. Well, the room number for now.”

“Not to worry, sir. This is a gift from me.”

“Thank you, Emile.”

“May I be frank for a moment, Dr. Andrews?”

“Of course. You think the dress is too much?”



“No, I think the dress is just right. However, I believe tonight would be an ideal time to explore why a man, only a friend as you say, would order a romantic dinner for another man’s fiancée.”

“What do you mean?” He knew exactly what Emile implied. This was no friendly dinner.

“I mean, Dr. Andrews, she’s a beautiful woman and you seem to care for her.”

“I do. We once ...”

“I see. Maybe tonight is the time for closure?”

A giggle coming from the bathroom distracted Luke. “Hmm. Maybe.” Closure sounded like a finale.

“Bien. I will send all the items you requested in the next twenty minutes.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. And Emile, thank you for the advice. Letting go is difficult.” Especially when I want to hold on.

“Yes, sir. You’re welcome. I hope it all works out. Enjoy your night, Dr. Andrews.”

Twenty minutes later, Luke knocked on the bathroom door. “Katie, I have some clothes for you. I’m opening the door, now.”

“You already gave me clothes. I grabbed your UCLA T-shirt and sweatpants.” She chuckled. “I guess it’s college spirit wear weekend.”

“No, these are real clothes.” Luke opened the door a small crack. “I’ll put them on the counter.”

“Real clothes? Okay, but no peeking.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Luke tried to reach past a puddle of water on the counter but couldn’t. He pushed the door open a little wider and stepped inside.

“Luke!” she cried out. “Don’t come in.”

“I don’t want the clothes to get wet. I’m not looking.” He kept his eyes on the counter and then made the small mistake of glancing in the mirror. He saw his Katie in the bath, her breasts barely above the waterline and a small grin on her face. She was beautiful, exactly as he remembered her. He wanted to turn and look at her fully but cast his eyes down at the counter instead. “Okay, I’m going, now. They brought up dinner. No hurry. Come out when you’re dressed.” Luke rushed out and sat on the bed. So much for closure. He wanted her and not in a friendly way.

Luke pulled on his suit, leaving the collar open without a tie, then he straightened the room a bit. Too much nervous energy had him pacing from the bed to the balcony and back again. He couldn’t shake the visual of Katie in the bath. He needed a jog around the hotel to release this involuntary force driving him toward her.

The hotel staff member who dropped off the cart created a lovely dinner scene outside on the bistro table. A white tablecloth, flowers, small votive candles dispersed around the balcony, and a four-course meal with two bottles of wine set the scene. Luke had no idea how Emile pulled it off with the virus chaos happening.

When he heard the blow dryer turn off, he headed back into the room. The door opened and Katie stepped out. Luke caught his breath. She stunned him with her beauty. Her shiny hair danced on her bare shoulder, and the slinky blue dress fit her curves perfectly. The open-toed shoes accentuated her toned legs. “It all worked? And no hair drier troubles?” He hoped his amicable tone disguised his sudden urge to pull her into him.

She gestured to his suit, not meeting his eyes. “You’re dressed up as well. That navy suit fits you perfectly.” Luke noticed how her eyes lingered on him. Maybe this evening would be more than friendly after all?

“Thanks.” He took a deep breath instead of commenting on her appearance. If he started listing all the ways she looked gorgeous, he would never stop talking. Luke hoped he wasn’t staring at her like he wanted to rip her dress off. “Since you

don't get your rehearsal tonight, I thought a nice dinner could be arranged at least."

Katie took stock of the bedroom. "Did they send up another disgusting box lunch to share?" She ran her fingers down her intricately embroidered sundress. "I think we overdressed."

"No, much better than boxed lunch this time." Luke gave her his arm, and she looped hers through. "Right this way."

Pushing open the balcony doors, Katie stopped at the door frame. Wordlessly, she turned to Luke and hugged him. He hesitated to embrace her back, afraid he would pull her in and not let go. Feeling embarrassed by his awkward restraint, he stepped away from her and walked to the table.

"It's beautiful, Luke." She seemed embarrassed as well.

"All Emile's doing. Please, have a seat." He pointed to the serving table. "They left everything in the warmers so we can start with our appetizer." Luke picked up the open bottle on the table. "How about a glass of cabernet?"

"Yes, please." She raised the crystal glass. "This is exactly what we need tonight, wine and delicious food. Thank you."

Luke held up his glass in a toast. "To old friends and good wine."

Katie touched her glass to his. "To old friends and good wine. And to Emile."

"Yes, to Emile."

They each took a sip and then went silent. Neither had any words. They stared at each other until Luke tore his eyes away. "You must be hungry since you didn't eat much for lunch." He lifted the lid of the first dish, revealing bruschetta and mozzarella. "It's Italian, your favorite."

"Wow. This is impressive. I can't believe we get all this gourmet food in the middle of a viral outbreak. Is Emile preparing dinner for everyone in the hotel?"

“Uhh, no.” Luke shoved a piece of bruschetta in his mouth, hoping she wouldn’t ask any more questions.

“What do you mean? Only we get the royal treatment? Why?”

Luke pointed to his mouth to indicate full. Still chewing, he fake smiled at her.

“Luke, what did you do?”

He fake smiled again and pretended to chew.

“Luke Andrews. What part did you play in this?” She leaned forward and gave him a threatening look.

“I called down to Emile and asked for a nice dinner. He said he was happy to do it. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal. This is an exquisite meal.” Katie swirled the wine in her glass and took another sip. “Nice cab. May I see the label on the bottle?”

Luke turned the label toward her and gave her a mischievous grin. She burst out laughing and clutched Luke’s arm holding the bottle. “I should’ve known. It’s our wine. No wonder I love it.”

“The best wine in California.” Luke took a big gulp, careful not to move his arm away.

“Damn, I love our vineyard. Dad’s working on a new blend, and I can’t wait to see how it turns out.”

“Yeah?” Luke placed the bottle down on the table between them.

“He spliced two grapes for a new crop a few years back, and they are just coming to fruition. It won’t be ready to drink for another few years, though.”

“Isn’t he selling the vineyard?” Luke poured them both a second glass.

“Well, yeah.” Katie’s hand still rested on Luke’s arm. She looked down as if noticing it for the first time and pulled back. “We hope the people who buy the vineyard will want to keep

moving in the same direction. The recent advancements we made are exciting.”

Luke lifted his eyebrows, encouraging her for more details. Instead of continuing, she picked the largest piece of bruschetta and shoved it in her mouth in the most obvious display of avoidance. Luke didn't call her on it. He suspected Neil was behind all of Katie's uncharacteristic life decisions. “You obviously love Sunny Vines. I thought your parents expected you to take over someday? Did something happen? You once wanted to work there too.”

“That's right, ‘once.’ Neil doesn't want to live out in the country away from everything. He says family should be our priority, and I agree with him.”

“I agree with him too. Family is important, but why can't you have both?” It was no surprise Neil would want her to quit the only job she loved. Luke forced his face to remain calm, but anger boiled inside of him. “Why not keep working the e-commerce side of things at least?” He took a bite of his food. He didn't want to push her too hard. This evening was an opportunity to resolve some issues, not create more of them.

“I don't want to talk about it, okay? Let's move on. I've had enough conversations about me to last a lifetime. I want to hear about your life. How's your family? Is Mia married yet? Did she finish med school? I miss her. How is your work? Do you love it? I can't believe you chose the ENT field. I thought for sure you'd be a pediatrician. How did you start the Foundation?” She grasped his hand. “Did you go abroad to work for Doctors Without Borders like you planned?”

“Whoa! That's a lot of questions all at once.” Luke gripped her hand and then let it go, remembering how she rebuked their earlier contact. He plowed a hand through his hair, deciding what to answer first. “Let's start with the easy questions. My family is wonderful. Mom and Dad travel a lot and help me with the Foundation. They love a worthwhile project to dive into now they are retired. They hate to sit still. I swear those two will be ninety-five and running around trying to save the world.”

“Your parents are the best.” Katie poured them both more wine. “And Mia?”

“Mia is the same. Med school was a breeze for her. She’s the kooky ER doctor who everyone loves. She bought a beautiful condo on the beach. She’s not married, and I don’t think she dates much, but she has a close circle of friends. She has fun and enjoys life. We see each other at least once a week.”

“I’m glad to hear about Mia. She couldn’t decide what to do for a while. I bet she’s a skilled doctor.”

“The best. That girl is crazy smart.” Luke, the proudest big brother on the planet, could go on and on about Mia. “I’m sure when she gets bored with the ER life, she’ll find a new thrilling career. Remember her freshman year when she raised money for an orphanage in South America? Her goal was a few thousand dollars, but she exceeded it by so much that the organization invited her to sit on their board. She still serves on the same board, you know? She’s loyal to a cause. I admire her for it.”

“Me too.”

Luke heard the sadness in her voice. He wanted to comfort her, but he feared touching her. She might reject him again. “Katie.” He wanted to say more but he didn’t have the words.

She pushed her chair back as if to leave. Luke panicked and reached forward to stop her, but she seemed to change her mind and pulled the chair close to the table again. Luke raised an eyebrow in question, but Katie shook her head to stop him from asking any more questions. “And you, Luke? Do you have a significant other? Ever get married?”

Luke averted his eyes and looked over the balcony. The darkness obscured the ocean, but he needed a moment to collect an honest answer.

“Too personal? I’m sorry.” She opened up the salad dishes and began placing them on the table in front of them. “These smell delicious.”

Luke took a bite and wiped the corner of his mouth with his linen napkin. “It isn’t too personal, but I’m not sure how to answer without it being awkward.”

“Only a few wives?”

He wasn’t sure, now, if he wanted to answer. “No wives.” Luke put down his fork and looked Katie right in the eyes. “I’ve dated, but I haven’t met anyone who could erase you from my heart.” Luke’s voice broke, but he continued, “I gave you my heart ten years ago and it still belongs to you.”

“Luke, please don’t.” She dropped her gaze to her salad plate. “I can’t believe you haven’t met someone in ten years.”

“It’s true. Sorry, but not sorry,” Luke joked half-heartedly. “So yeah, I have no personal life. I hang out with my sister and work all the time. It’s lucky I love my work.”

Katie finished her salad in record time. “Ready for the main course?”

“Sure.” She kept eating to avoid talking, so he moved on to the main course. Lifting the silver lid, the sweet smell of the tomatoes and the sharpness of the parmesan cheese filled the air. “Eggplant Parmesan.” Still holding the lid, he looked over at her. “Your favorite.”

“How did Emile know? Did you tell him?”

“Emile has a unique gift for guessing exactly what you need at the right time.”

She gave him a bashful smile. “Yes, he does.”

Luke put the lid on the cart and dished out a serving for Katie and himself. “So, my job.” He paused, not wanting to discuss work but sensitive to the fact Katie didn’t want to talk about their relationship either. “Starting this foundation has been transformative.” He saw her shoulders relax, so he continued, “It’s a lot of work figuring out the whole non-profit world, but it’s worth it. We can impact many children’s lives.”

“That’s admirable.” She sounded genuinely happy for him. “You found your niche in the world.”

“Yes, for sure in the work world.” They each took a giant bite of their eggplant. The painful silence set in on them again. They chewed, avoiding one another’s gaze. Luke couldn’t stand it a minute more. Emile was right, he needed to say goodbye. He put down his fork hard against his plate. “Why did you drop off the face of the Earth? I never stopped wondering what happened to you, Katie.”

“Luke, don’t.” She shot forward as if ready to restrain him physically if he continued.

Luke placed his hand on hers, hoping to steady her. “I wanted to give you space afterward, but you never came back. I figured you hated me and wanted to forget what we had together.”

“What do you mean? You never came back. You’re the one who dropped off the face of the Earth.” Katie’s phone started ringing from the other room.

“Katie, please, just ignore it.”

“I can’t. That’s Noah’s ring. If he’s calling, something must be going on at the rehearsal dinner.” She rushed inside and answered. “Noah, what happened?”



## Chapter 22 - Mia

“Shouldn’t I be Beyoncé?” Mia stepped out of the bright red Uber SUV in her butterfly dress.

“Hell, no.” Noah followed behind her in a black one-shoulder leotard and the longest legs made even longer by strappy red high heels. “Adam and I practiced this dance routine for months.”

“You can’t be Beyoncé just because you’re black.” Adam stepped out next, wearing a matching leotard and heels. “Beyoncé is an attitude, not a skin color.”

Mia flipped her hair at him. “You’re just saying that since your Beyoncé is white.”

“Wait until you see me dance, Mia darling. I will transform right before your eyes.”

“I’m sure.” Mia pinched Adam’s arm. “You two never fail to impress me.”

“Oh, you’ll be impressed.”

Mia put her game face on, trying to silence shaky nerves. “So, do we head in separately?”

“That’s probably best.” Noah followed suit and put on his best showbiz smile.

“We’ll go first.” Adam adjusted his leotard. “No one will even notice you coming in behind us.”

“Excellent point,” Noah agreed.

As Noah and Adam walked around to the front entrance ahead of her, Mia heard gasps from the lobby. She snickered, imagining the shocked faces on all the conservative golfers having their 5:00 drinks. It’s now or never, she thought as she made her way to the front door. Operation take down Neil begins now.

“Are you here for the Connor/Thompson party?” asked a man in a well-tailored Italian suit standing inside the banquet room doors.

Mia panicked. “Yes.” Please, sweet baby Jesus, don’t keep a guest list.

“Right this way.”

Whew. Mia stood straighter and followed the man through the country club all the way to the back ballroom. “This room is huge.” Mia teetered on her high heels.

“The Connors associate with a lot of important people.”

Mia wondered what he thought about Noah and Adam when he showed them to the same room. “Yes, I’m sure they do.”

The man left her at the open doors, and she quickly stepped inside, searching the room for Noah and Adam. She found them standing next to more Italian suits. How can you tell the staff from the guests? When she caught Noah’s eye, she moved farther into the room on the opposite end near the bar.

“May I have a gin and tonic?” Mia tipped her head to the bartender, who looked suspiciously like the man who walked her to the ballroom. Maybe the staff members are all clones? She chuckled out loud at the idea of a cloning factory for country club staff. The bartender didn’t blink, further confirming her cloning conspiracy theory. He didn’t even crack a smile. “Thank you.” She took her drink from the bar and headed toward the large ballroom.

A tall beautiful blonde woman glided in next to her. “Hello.”

“Christie Brinkley?” Mia asked before she could stop the words from leaving her mouth.

“I wish. I’m Neil’s mother, Ellen Connor.” The Christie Brinkley look-alike tossed her golden tresses behind her just like the real Christie Brinkley did in the L’Oréal commercial Mia saw earlier that day on TV. “I love your dress. You look stunning in it.”

Mia blushed, forgetting this was not actually the supermodel complimenting her. “Thank you and nice to meet you.”

“Are you a friend of the groom or the bride? Or both?”

Here was her chance to implicate Neil. “I’m Neil’s estranged wife,” she was about to say to his mother when Neil appeared out of nowhere beside her, smelling of winter pine.

“What a beautiful dress,” Neil said.

Ellen hugged her son. “I thought so too.”

“I’m Neil’s estranged wife,” Mia started to say again but no words came out. It seemed like such a mean thing to say to Christie Brinkley. “Thank you,” she said again.

“Oh, no.” Ellen pulled them both close to her. “Abigail Weston cornered your father again. That woman will stop at nothing until we name the hospital wing after her dead Shih Tzu. Can you imagine a hospital wing called Scully?”

“You better go rescue him, Mother.”

As Ellen quickly strode over to her husband, Neil focused his attention on Mia. “Scully sounds like a disease you catch staying there.”

Mia laughed. “That’s what I thought too.” She didn’t expect Neil to have a sense of humor.

“Are you a friend of Kaitlyn’s?”

Thank goodness, Neil didn’t recognize her. Quick, new plan. “I’m, uhh, Jennifer, one of the doctors working for the Foundation for Hearing Impaired Children. I, uhh, know your parents.” Geez, that’s what I went with? I get my one chance for a secret identity and I pick a boring one?

“Yes, of course.” He smiled at her, showing his perfect white teeth. “You’re an ENT then?”

“No, I work ...” Mia struggled to remember Luke’s staff list, “... on the pediatric side of things. I adore kids.”

“I loved caring for the little ones too. When I worked with Operation Smile in Nicaragua, I wore a pirate’s eye patch with a fake parrot on my shoulder. It was nice not to take myself so seriously back then, you know?”

Mia did know. “I get it. During my fellowship at LA County General, I did rounds on the pediatric floor. I wore my braids on top of my head like Susie Carmichael from the Rugrats and bright purple tie-dye scrubs I made myself.” Wait, am I relating to Neil? This isn’t supposed to happen. He’s an okra dick.

“I’m ashamed to say I followed the money, unlike Dr. Luke Andrews, who established his own charitable organization.” He paused. “I assume you work with him. He and I went to medical school together. He’s a stand-up guy who always follows his heart.”

Neil piqued her interest. Praise for her brother and a love for children? Is this the right Neil? “What are you doing now?”

“I do cosmetic surgery for celebrities. It’s great money, but I envy Luke. He created this wonderful foundation for children who are hearing impaired. He gets to be a part of something worthwhile.” Neil shook his head. “He’s a better man than I. It’s a wonder a woman like Kaitlyn wants to marry me in spite of my flaws.”

This can’t be the same Neil that Noah and Adam despise. This guy is modest, sincere, and charming. “I’m sure Kaitlyn has some flaws too.” Mia took a deep sip of her drink, hoping he would mess up and show his true colors.

“Nope. None. She’s perfect. You’ll see. Everyone loves her.”

Was this guy serious? Or seriously lying? Or, are Noah and Adam delusional? “I’d love to meet her. Where is she?”

“She should have arrived by now.” Neil searched the room. “Wait, there’s Kaitlyn’s brother Noah and his partner Adam. Wow. Their outfits are even better today than yesterday. They always wear something fantastic.”

Mia had nothing to say. Neil didn’t act like the evil two-faced person she expected. “Yeah, they look great.” She threw back the rest of her drink. Shit, what have Noah and Adam gotten me into here?

“Excuse me, Jennifer. I better go check in with them about Kaitlyn. I don’t see her.”

Mia stood there, mouth agape, watching Neil stride toward Noah and Adam. Maybe I’m being punked? Would they do that to me? She shook off her misgivings and moved closer to Noah and Adam’s table so she could focus on their conversation with Neil.

“Hey guys,” Neil said. “Did Kaitlyn ride with you here? I can’t find her.”

“Oh, hi, Neil, we’ve been searching for you,” Adam said with a pout.

“Oh, no. She still has stomach trouble?”

“I’m afraid so.” Noah put on his best frown. “She wanted to call you, but we told her you would want her to get some rest.”

“Of course, although everyone here will miss her.” Neil patted Noah on the back. “Thank goodness my parents hired a videographer for the rehearsal dinner. We can record the evening so Kaitlyn can watch it when she feels better tomorrow.”

Noah stepped away, letting Neil’s hand drop off his back. “She worried entertaining the guests alone would upset you.”

“That’s Kaitlyn. She always considers other people before herself.” Neil pulled out his phone. “You put her cell on ‘do not disturb’ before you left tonight, right?”

Noah shot a quick glance at Adam. “Yes, why?”

Neil rotated his phone around to face him and turned on the camera. “I’m so sorry you’re sick, baby. Don’t worry about missing tonight, though. We’ll run through the rehearsal and have Noah stand in for you. My parents and I can handle the social side of things. I miss you, and I’ll call you tomorrow. Love you.” He put the phone back in his jacket pocket. “Noah, Adam, why don’t you introduce yourselves to Jennifer.” He pointed in Mia’s direction. “She doesn’t know many people here, and I don’t want her getting stuck talking to a stiff in a suit. You’ll love her. I promise.”

Mia fiddled with her phone, pretending not to notice Neil pointing at her. When she looked up, Adam and Noah were making their way over to her, leaving Neil to talk to another Italian suit. My God, an Italian suit must be the dress code requirement for dinner. The ballroom looked like a promotional commercial for Brioni. She wondered if all the black cocktail dresses were from the same fashion house as well.

“Jennifer is it?” Noah picked up a strand of Mia’s hair and tugged. “Neil took the news about Katie not coming tonight better than expected and told us to introduce ourselves to you. He thinks we will looove you.”

“You do looove me.” Mia smirked and finished her drink.

“This is so disappointing.” Adam ran a finger down Noah’s bare shoulder. “I thought for sure he would freak out and make a scene over her no-showing.”

“Really?” Mia narrowed her eyes at them. “I think his rational response is predictable after speaking to Neil for the past fifteen minutes.”

“What are you talking about?” Noah moved in front of Mia, blocking her from the rest of the guests.

“I think that’s the question I should ask you,” Mia said in an angry whisper. “Neil matches none of the horrible characteristics you described. He’s a decent guy. I mean, I think Luke’s a better man, but so does Neil.” She put her empty drink on a passing server tray and put her hands on her hips. “I can’t find anything wrong with him.”

Adam furrowed his brows in her direction. “This is what Neil does.”

Mia didn’t appreciate Adam’s lecturing tone. “What does Neil do? Be charming?”

“Yes.” Noah pulled on the strap of his leotard.

“He’s excellent in social situations.” Adam turned Mia’s head toward the cluster of suits talking to Neil. “Especially when all-important eyes are on him.”

“Wait until we do our dance number.” Noah threw his long black hair over his shoulder. “He won’t be able to hide his embarrassment.”

“He doesn’t know about your dance performance?” Mia pointed to their outfits. “Why does he think you’re in this getup?”

“He’s used to us wearing costumes. He probably already prepped his important guests for our arrival. The dance was supposed to be a surprise from Katie. We cast her as the third ‘single lady.’”

Mia’s eyebrows rose. “He has no idea you two are performing?”

“Nope.” Noah turned his mouth up into a fiendish grin.

“Interesting.” Mia walked back over to the bar. “Another gin and tonic, please.” She couldn’t wait for the drama to unfold.

Noah and Adam followed her. “Make it three more, please.”

“Do you get a strange feeling the entire staff is genetically identical?” Adam whispered to them, taking his drink and handing Noah one.

“Yes.” Mia placed a five-dollar bill in the tip jar and grabbed her own gin and tonic.

“I mean, is there some kind of factory in the basement churning them out?” Noah turned up his nose in disgust and took a large gulp of his drink.

“And let’s talk about all the Italian suits in the room.” Mia took a small sip of her cocktail and placed it back on the marble bar. She needed to pace herself. She didn’t want to miss any of the upcoming drama.

“Neil doesn’t have any friends without money. I think it’s the Richie Rich’s standard uniform.” Noah swirled his finger around the room. “Being poor is harmful for his image.”

“I see.” Mia swiveled, eyeing the room. “You guys certain you don’t want me to stand in for Katie during the

dance?”

Noah and Adam glanced at each other and then at Mia. “Mia, love, if I were in a car accident, you would be the only person I’d want, but for a dance number you didn’t rehearse for, no thank you, girl. You can watch.”

Mia swatted Adam on the arm. “Fine, but I’m not convinced this Neil guy is a total jerk.”

“Don’t worry.” Adam chuckled. “Neil’s true nature will be revealed after our surprise performance.”

Mia couldn’t wait to see what would happen. “Let’s get a good seat for dinner before we’re placed next to the Shih Tzu dog lady.”

“Yeah, she’s the worst,” Noah and Adam chimed in at the same time.

“The Scully Infectious Disease Wing? Gross. Who would want to stay there?” Adam laughed, splashing part of his drink on the floor.

Mia laughed with him, remembering Neil made almost the exact same joke. She took a swig of her drink and sat down next to Noah and Adam, far away from the Shih Tzu lady.



## Chapter 23 - Mia

Mia was digging in her purse when Ellen Connor sat down next to her. “This looks like the fun side of the ballroom,” she said. Noah and Adam stopped whispering to one another and smiled at her. Ellen waved at her husband. “Phillip, over here, darling.”

“Thank goodness there’s no more room at our table.” Phillip sat down next to his wife. “Abigail made a move like she was following me over here.”

Noah turned in his seat. “What? You don’t think the ‘Scurvy’ wing is a good idea?”

“Ha!” Phillip guffawed. “So, true, Noah. Too bad Abigail Weston doesn’t share your sense of humor.”

Noah flipped his hair and re-crossed his long legs. “Few people do, I’m afraid.”

“Jennifer,” Ellen said, rotating her chair toward Mia. “Neil says you are a pediatric ENT with Luke Andrew’s foundation. Tell me how you got involved.”

Mia felt her face and neck flush red. She hated to lie to this nice woman. She tried to steal a glance in Noah and Adam’s direction, but they were engrossed in a hilarious exchange with Phillip. “Well, uhh...” Mia couldn’t pretend to be an ENT. She did help Luke with his foundation sometimes, though. “I’m actually an ER doctor.” She went with the truth since she already lied about her name. After a few more drinks, I won’t be able to remember who I’m supposed to be tonight.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ellen said.

“I think Neil misunderstood me when we swapped pediatric war stories.” God, I’m such a liar.

“How does an ER doctor get involved in pediatric hearing loss?”

Ellen touched on a subject Mia could happily talk about. “You would be surprised by how many children suffer hearing

loss from traumatic head injuries. Most of the time, the hearing loss is temporary, but sometimes it can be permanent.”

“That’s terrible.” Ellen started to tear up.

“It is, but what’s worse is many of the children who suffer from permanent hearing loss come from food-insecure families. They don’t have the income or the means to find resources to help their children.”

“So, Luke’s foundation will help match them with children in need?”

“Yes. I connect the families with Luke, and with the help of a grant, his foundation absorbs the cost of whatever treatment options are best for the child.” A wave of pride washed over Mia as she talked about her brother’s work.

Ellen tapped Phillip on his shoulder. “I told you Luke’s foundation was a smart choice for us.”

Phillip turned to face his wife. “You have a special talent for making wise investments, my dear.” He kissed her on the cheek.

“After talking with Jennifer”—she motioned to Mia, who felt the color rise in her cheeks after being called Jennifer—“I think we might want to take on a larger responsibility than a check and a board position.”

“I’m all ears.” Phillip beamed at the table.

“That’s a funny one.” Adam slapped him on the back.

“Hearing loss is no laughing matter, gentlemen.” Ellen scowled at them.

Mia could see how Mrs. Connor was very effective at getting people to hand over their checkbooks for a cause she cared about.

“Of course not, dear.” Phillip laid a hand on top of hers. “What do you have in mind?”

“A clinic for disadvantaged children to receive their hearing loss treatment as well as a place for the families to receive ongoing support.”

Standing, Phillip spread his arms out. “We can call it the Connor Hearing Loss Clinic.” Everyone smiled at his dramatic antics. “Yes, I like the sound of it.”

“No, silly.” She waved her hand, dismissing her husband as he sat down. “We’ll need a better name than the Connor Clinic.” Ellen scratched her head as if a name would fall out. “Jennifer, you should think of a name befitting the center. You work with disadvantaged families all the time.”

Mia gasped and placed her hand over her heart. “Me?” Noah and Adam gawked at her with wide eyes. Shit. I keep digging a deeper hole for myself.

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t mean now, dear. You have time. I’ll be in touch after the wedding.”

Mia tried to find an excuse for why she wouldn’t be available when a tray of champagne flutes arrived at their table. She debated grabbing two for herself.

“Excuse me, everyone.” Neil stood in front of the room with a microphone in his hands. “Please, everyone, pick up your glasses for a toast before we begin dinner.”

Thank God for Neil, Mia thought to herself.

“My fiancée should be up here with me tonight, but she’s in bed ill with food poisoning.” The crowd expressed their remorse audibly before Neil continued, staring, now, at the video crew. “Kaitlyn loves reading the classics, so I found a quotation from her favorite novel, *Jane Eyre*. It exemplifies how I feel about her.”

Noah and Adam rolled their eyes, but Mia focused on him, interested in what Neil had to say.

Neil cleared his throat and began.

I have for the first time found what I can truly love—I have found you. You are my sympathy—my better self—my good angel—I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted, lovely: a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my center and spring of life, wraps my existence about you—and, kindling in pure, powerful flame, fuses you and me in one.

Neil raised his glass. “Here’s to an amazing woman who makes me a better man every day she’s a part of my life. To my love, Kaitlyn.”

Mia clinked glasses with everyone at the table, feeling choked up by the beautiful words. She pushed the emotion away and caught Noah whispering to Adam, “He probably has a madwoman in his attic too.” She glared at them to be quiet.

How can they still believe Neil’s a monster? Look at the beautiful quotation he found to represent his love for Katie. Hell, look at Neil’s generous parents. They’re practically saints. Why are Noah and Adam so convinced of Neil’s transgressions? I don’t believe it, and now I might jeopardize Luke’s credibility with the whole Jennifer nonsense.

They served dinner in four courses, but it felt more like twelve to Mia. When they cleared the chocolate mousse away, Mia shifted in her chair, thinking about how to make her exit, but before she could make a move, the lights went out, replaced by a spotlight aimed at their table. She almost forgot the surprise dance number.

As if on cue, Noah and Adam made their way to a platform stage surreptitiously moved to the center of the ballroom during the blackout distraction. When “Single Ladies” and the bright strobe lights started up, Noah and Adam took their spots on the stage and began their routine, hands-on-hips with the other hand outstretched, duplicating Beyoncé’s video.

The ballroom fell silent except for the music pumping through the speakers and the sound of Noah and Adam’s heels on the hardwoods. Mia stared at the stunned faces on all the suits and black cocktail dresses. Noah and Adam were right. Neil won’t be able to hide his embarrassment.

“Oh, aren’t they wonderful, Jennifer?” Ellen whispered in Mia’s ear.

Mia noticed Ellen and Phillip Connor held hands, enjoying themselves. She had a hard time reconciling who Neil was supposed to be, according to Noah and Adam, especially since his parents were so wonderful.

The song continued, Noah and Adam both doing Beyoncé's dance parts. Mia tried to find Neil, but he was nowhere to be seen. She wondered if he was hiding in the bathroom, and how he would explain this drag act to his conservative friends. The chorus started, and Mia heard the crowd gasp. She followed everyone's gaze to the side of the stage where Neil climbed up. Mia blinked, thinking she was hallucinating. Noah and Adam looked surprised to see him too, but they never broke their rhythm.

It wasn't only seeing Neil on stage that shocked her. What he wore almost made her eyes pop out of her head. Neil donned a black leotard outfit like a wrestler would wear at a meet. He didn't have high heels on, but he did all the dance steps in sync with Noah and Adam.

When the song ended, Neil slid down on his knees in front of Noah and Adam for a grand finale pose, upstaging them in the process. Ellen and Philip jumped up, clapping and hooting like teenagers as if they were at an actual Beyoncé concert. Mia clapped too because she didn't know what to do with her hands.

Neil hopped off the stage and grabbed the microphone. The camera crew caught everything and focused back on Neil. "Baby, this was for you. I wondered why you kept watching Beyoncé's video over and over again, and when I saw Noah and Adam's outfits, I knew what you were going to do tonight."

He motioned for Noah and Adam to stand next to him. "I hope you don't mind me playing Kaitlyn's role." He gestured at his outfit. "I didn't have much time to get a costume. This was the best I could get on short notice after I realized Kaitlyn would miss the performance." He clapped his hand on Noah's back. "I watched that video out of the corner of my eye for months, so I figured I could keep up with the moves." He turned back to the camera. "I love you, Kaitlyn, and I can't wait to marry you tomorrow." The crowd jumped out of their chairs and erupted in roars of approval and loud applause.

Mia made her way to the stage where Noah and Adam stood paralyzed. "That was unexpected," Noah said.

“Was it, though?” Mia scowled at them. “I think we can all agree Neil is a nice guy who loves Katie.” She put her hand on Noah’s shoulder. “I think it’s time to let this take-down Neil project go. Don’t you think?”

Adam bowed his head in resignation. “Noah, hun, I think maybe we’re wrong about Neil.”

Noah threw his arms around them both. “I can’t argue with Beyoncé. Let’s get another drink.”

## Chapter 24 – Kaitlyn

It took a few moments for Kaitlyn to collect herself after picking up her phone. “Hello?” She answered, hoping to sound put together and calm. Her emotions teetered on the edge.

“OMG, Katie,” Noah screamed like a teenage girl into the phone. “You will not believe what happened. I can’t believe you missed it.”

“Noah, where are you? Are you drunk?” She glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “Wait, it’s 10:00 p.m. already? Is the rehearsal dinner over?” Luke’s distraction worked so well she forgot about the party. She perched on the bed and cast a glance at the balcony doors. Luke sat at the small bistro table and gazed out at the ocean. He couldn’t hear her behind the closed doors, but she lowered her voice, anyway. “Tell me everything. What did I miss? Did you drink too much at dinner?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Katie girl. We’re in the car on the way home, and I did not drink too much. If I did, I’d have sobered up as soon as Neil shook that fine ass of his right in front of me on stage.”

“He shook what, where? Noah, you didn’t flirt with my fiancé, did you?” Kaitlyn teased. She knew her brother would never do such a thing.

“He’s not my type at all.”

“Neil and Noah, an item?” Adam shrieked in the background. “As if that would ever happen in this universe. But Noah’s right about his fine ass. Oh, my. It’s an exceptional one.”

“A fine-looking bum,” Noah confirmed. “Can you rate the Uber guy?”

“Are you talking to me?”

“No, Adam, but now I can talk to you. We’re home. Well, not home. We’re back at your house.”

“Thank you for staying there, Noah. It’s an inconvenience for you two, and I appreciate the help. I’ll owe you one.” And more if you can keep your mouth quiet about Luke.

“It’s no problem. As I was saying—”

“Don’t forget to tell her the ass shaking came after Mia introduced herself as Jennifer and then proceeded to flatter Neil,” Kaitlyn heard Adam yell from somewhere in the house.

“I am. Give me a minute.” Noah laughed but Kaitlyn felt like she missed the joke.

“Who did what to Neil? What happened tonight?”

“Give me one more minute.”

“Noah?” She put on her schoolmarm’s voice so he would take her seriously. “Did Adam say Mia attended the rehearsal dinner? Luke’s Mia? And who’s Jennifer?”

“I’ll tell you everything. Give me a chance. I have to take my heels off. My dogs are killing me.”

“Put me on speakerphone,” Kaitlyn demanded as she walked to the balcony doors to check on Luke. She peeled back the flowing curtain and saw him reach into his pocket for his phone. He smiled when he answered. Shit, did a woman just call him? She watched him throw back his head and laugh with his entire body. She trudged back to the bed. “And tell me about Mom and Dad. Were they upset I wasn’t there? I feel terrible I left them to fend for themselves without me.”

“Oh, they were fine. Mom acted like her extroverted self. She talked to all her friends most of the night.”

“That’s right. I forgot we invited the Harpers and the Jenkins.”

“Yeah, Mom’s out-of-town friends filled every chair at their table. Dad mostly talked to Uncle Jim. I didn’t spend much time with them. They sat a few tables away from us, so I’m sure they’ll want to rehash the night ad nauseam later. I saw their faces while we danced. I think Neil’s booty shake surprised them too.”



Kaitlyn jumped up from the bed again and peeked through the curtains. Luke still had the phone to his ear and appeared ... what? Agitated with the caller? No, excited. He seemed excited about the person on the phone. His date for the wedding, maybe? Would he confess his current roomie situation to her?

“Of course, the audience wore shocked expressions,” Noah said. “Can you believe it?”

“Wait, what?” Kaitlyn didn’t hear a single word Noah said and couldn’t muster the energy to cover it up. She paced the room to keep herself from opening the curtains.

“I said, I’m shocked. The boy can dance.” Noah’s tempo increased in obvious excitement. “I didn’t think he had it in him.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Are you listening to me, dear sister?” Noah scolded. “I thought you wanted me to tell you everything. What’s keeping you so busy you can’t pay attention to me yammer on about Neil’s fine hinny? Is Luke’s fine bum-bum distracting you?”

“No.” She answered a little too quickly and hoped he didn’t notice. “I zoned out for a minute.” Kaitlyn threw herself in the chair by the window so she could stare out at the candle-lit balcony. Luke remained on the phone. She watched him as he spoke, his gestures animated. She tried to make out his words, but as Kaitlyn leaned in closer to the glass, he turned and caught her eye. She whipped around to face the bed. Luke’s conversation seemed intimate. Maybe he’s on the phone with a girlfriend? He must have one or seven.

“Katie? Are you there?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Noah.” She couldn’t help peeking one more time to see if Luke hung up, but he had moved out of view, revealing their abandoned plates on the table. They looked as lonely as she felt. “It’s late and I’m tired,” she lied. Not tired, but what? Jealous of an unknown female caller? “Wait, did you say something about Mia earlier?”

“Yeah, but we can talk about her later. It’s a long story.”

“But, I—”

“It doesn’t matter, anyway. I’ve got juicy news about an impromptu dance. It’s something you must see for yourself. I’m sure Neil will send you the video any minute.”

“There’s a video?” What the hell is he talking about?

“Neil taped the whole thing. The entire rehearsal dinner is memorialized forever. Oh, and wait until you hear his toast to you. He had nothing but sweet words to share. Damn, he impressed me tonight. Not at all what I expected.”

Kaitlyn circled back toward the window. Luke raked his hands through his thick dark hair. “No, not at all what I expected either.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay, Katie girl. I’m gonna go.”

“Love you, Noah.”

“Love you too. Try to get some sleep.”

“I will. Oh, and Noah, thank you for tonight, for everything.”

“No problem. It’s what any perfect twin brother would do.” Noah teased and hung up the phone.

## Chapter 25 - Luke

Luke hit the talk button on his phone and heard Mia singing “Single Ladies” at the top of her lungs.

He burst out laughing. “Mia? Is that you?”

“Seriously, Luke. You won’t believe my crazy night. Neil got up on stage and played the third single lady with Noah and Adam. Hysterical. I almost peed my pants. It was so damn funny and kind of sexy at the same time. Not sure how he pulled it off. I don’t understand why no one likes Neil. He seems like a decent guy, and I don’t say kind words about random men often. Or ever. I think he loves Katie. He worried about her missing tonight’s events, and he even made a video of the night for her. The dude is thoughtful. Neil also talked about you, Luke. How he admires you and your work with the foundation. His interest in helping others seemed sincere. I couldn’t believe this was the douche bag you described from med school. I thought you told me he’s a narcissist. I found him humble and unpretentious.”

“Mia.” Luke jumped in before she kept talking. “What’s going on? You saw Neil? Where?” Luke moved his chair closer to the railing so Katie wouldn’t hear him say anything about her precious Neil.

“Well, yeah, but he only knows me as Jennifer.”

“Jennifer? Why Jennifer? Mia, what the hell did you do?”

“Don’t worry about it. He has no idea who I really am. I’d make a great secret agent. Maybe I should work for the FBI. Here’s my cover story, Jennifer works with you and is crazy great with the kids, of course.”

“What? Mia, you didn’t.”

“It’s not a big deal. I covered my ass. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Mia, darling younger sister, please tell me you didn’t—”

“Uhh, excuse me,” Mia slurred, “only younger by one year and don’t you forget it, old man.”

“Fine. Whatever. Darling sister, what in the hell are you going on about? You’re here, in town?”

“Hell yeah, I am.”

“And you went to Katie’s rehearsal dinner?”

“Yes, indeed, I did.” He heard the smirk in Mia’s sassy voice.

“What are you doing here?” Besides creating problems.

“It’s a long story, but the simple answer is that I happened to talk to Noah and Adam earlier.”

“You *happened* to talk to them? Oh, Mia, what the hell did you three do now?” Shit. Shit. Shit. This can’t end well.

“Okay, you got me. I obviously called them to find out the deal with you and Katie holed up in the love shack.”

“It’s not a love shack. It’s a hotel room, and we’re in quarantine for a possible measles outbreak,” he corrected in his doctor’s voice.

“Yeah, yeah. Call it whatever you want. Anyway, they invited me to go with them tonight to the rehearsal dinner. They intended for me to break up the wedding, but there’s no way I could do that to Katie.”

“Why not? It would solve all of my problems, Mia.”

“I will admit it should be you, not him, but Neil seems nice. If Katie loves him, they should be together.”

Luke peeked into the hotel room and hoped Katie wouldn’t catch him staring. “He isn’t.” Luke tried to refocus on Mia.

“He isn’t what?” Mia sounded like a horse chomping on food in the background.

“He. Is. Not. Nice.” Luke clenched his teeth. “Neil’s the worst kind of asshat.”

“Hun, I think you’re wrong. Even Noah and Adam sort of changed their minds about him. His parents are wonderful too.” He heard her drop something on the floor.

“Baby sister, what are you smacking on in my ear?”

“Crackers. I’m at Noah and Adam’s place. They’re at Katie’s. Maybe I had one too many drinks tonight. Adam refilled my cocktails a lot.” Mia mumbled her words at the end.

“Keep eating. The carbs will soak up your bad decisions. And yes, his parents are very generous. I agree with you. His mother has a special place in her heart for children.” Luke swiveled around in his chair and saw Katie pace the room. He watched as she turned and caught his eye. She held her gaze on him for a moment and moved away from view. “You’re wrong about Neil. He’s a douchebag bastard, and Katie can’t marry him.”

“Luke, you need to chill out. Unless you have something new to tell me, then yes, she can marry him. I like him.”

“He isn’t what he seems. She deserves better,” Luke said in a somber voice.

“Listen, you two had your chance and look how it turned out. A complete disaster.”

Luke didn’t respond. He peeked over his shoulder and noticed Katie throw her phone onto the bed.

“Luke? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Did I mention too many drinks?”

“No, it’s okay. You’re right, Mia. Look how we turned out.”

“Do you still love her?” She stopped eating crackers in his ear.

His heart ached to tell Mia the truth about his feelings, but he couldn’t. Mia would change the conversation into one of her causes on his behalf, and that was too much for him to handle tonight. If anyone should fight for Katie, it should be him, not Mia.

“Luke? You there?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t want to answer my question?”

“No.”

“Okay. I get it. But you know, it feels better to talk it out.”

“Goodnight, Mia. Let’s chat in the morning. Don’t do any more damage. Love you.” Luke ended the call before she could respond.

Luke blew out the candles and placed the dirty plates back on the rolling dining cart. The sound of the ocean waves calmed the flash of sadness he experienced. He bent over the railing and sat back down. He couldn’t fight the burst of exhaustion. This was the longest night of his life. He hated to admit it, but Mia was right. He had his chance with Katie. Their relationship ended years ago. He needed closure and to quit making a fool of himself. The waves lulled him to a peaceful place. He’d back off and let her go forever.

After a few moments, he stood up to head back into the bedroom. Through the window, he spotted Katie coming out of the bathroom. It was dark outside so she couldn’t see him, but with all the lights on inside, he could see her clearly. He froze and his heart beat at a frantic pace. She wore his favorite T-shirt. It hit at her knees like a long dress. Shit. She’s so beautiful. And sexy. He blinked and refocused his eyes. He could stare at her forever.

## Chapter 26 - Kaitlyn

Inside, Kaitlyn reeled from Noah's phone call. She didn't want to face Luke. He would ask her about the rehearsal dinner, and she didn't want to talk about Neil after the nice night they shared. She also didn't want to hear about the woman on the phone making him happy. She peeled back the covers on the bed, climbed in, and closed her eyes. She'd pretend to sleep instead of dealing with him.

Luke tiptoed into the room, unzipped his duffle bag, and padded quietly into the bathroom. Kaitlyn tossed and turned. She couldn't relax while he moved around. Noah's words weighed on her. He said Neil amazed everyone tonight. Luke amazed her tonight too. Thoughts of Neil and Luke further clouded her mixed-up brain. She turned to her other side and fluffed up the pillow, listening to the water run in the bathroom. She couldn't fake sleep if she tried. A check of the clock showed the time. Would he ever come out of there? Finally, she sat up and clicked on the bedside lamp.

Luke entered the room wearing his navy-blue sweatpants slung low on his hips and no shirt. "Hey, I thought you went to sleep?"

Damn it, his body's incredible. "I can't get comfortable." Her mind raced with a million emotions and lust topped the list. "I doubt I'll sleep anytime soon." Especially not with your warm strong body next to mine all night.

"No? Okay. Why don't we play cards or something? I don't think I can stand watching TV."

"Me either. Yeah, cards. Did you bring a deck with you?"

"Uhh, no. I'm not ten." Luke held her gaze, a silly grin on his face as if he were ten years old.

Kaitlyn loved his grin. "I can call the front desk and see if they loan out cards or other board games?" She needed to keep her mind off of Luke's lips, chest, and sculpted abs. Oh, my God. Stop staring. Maybe I should ask him to put a shirt on?

"Okay." Luke crawled into the bed while she dialed.

“*Bonjour*. Pacific Palms Resort, Emile speaking. How may I help you?”

“*Bonjour*, Emile. It’s Kaitlyn, in room 206. May we have a deck of cards sent up?”

“No, *mon chéri*, I cannot send anything up. The other guests snatched up all the cards, board games, newspapers, and any other form of entertainment. I am afraid to say everyone in the hotel is bored. We have nothing left. *Je suis désolé*.”

“It’s okay. Thank you anyway. Goodnight, Emile.”

“*Bonne nuit*, Ms. Thompson.”

She hung up the phone and arched her eyebrows at Luke. “No cards. No anything for that matter. Apparently, we aren’t the only ones unable to sleep. Wanna play Truth or Dare?”

“No way. I remember how you handle your dares. I don’t want to get in trouble with the CDC tonight.”

Kaitlyn threw back her head and belly laughed. “Remember when you and Thad had to streak through the quad in a bra and panty set, beating a giant drum? I’ll never forget that night.”

“My point exactly.” He poked her with his toe. “Afterward, all the frat boys wanted us to rush with them. It’s your fault they had a false impression of me and Thad. Well, me at least. I think Thad liked the extra attention.”

“I guess it’s the TV again?” Kaitlyn pointed at the flat screen mounted on the wall.

“Ugh, no. I’m not in the mood for another rom-com at the moment.”

She bit her lip. “How about twenty questions instead?”

“Seems harmless enough, I guess. Behave, though.” Luke stretched his arms over the fabric headboard.

Kaitlyn watched Luke flex each muscle with wide eyes. His arms were ripped. She wanted to touch each rippled muscle. Hell, she wanted to run her lips over them. “First



question.” She coughed on her words and cleared her throat. She tried to clear her mind of dirty thoughts. “Do you work out all the time?”

“Strange one.” Luke wrinkled his brow. “No. I don’t have the time or the opportunity to work out as much as I would like. I volunteer for Habitat on the weekends. It started a few years back. When they put me on the building crew, I guess that’s when I got in shape.”

Kaitlyn pictured him shirtless and sweaty, with a hammer in his hand. She ran a finger over her lips and caught Luke’s gaze following her finger. She dropped her hand to the bed so fast it bounced. “So, you don’t hang out in the gym all day?” She watched him wet his lips and felt a stir in her gut.

“Isn’t that a second question, Katie? I believe it’s my turn.”

“Fair enough. Your turn.”

“I need a good one.” Luke climbed out of the sheets and sat on top of the bedspread. Kaitlyn couldn’t take her eyes off of him. “Let’s see, what don’t I know about you?” He frowned then quickly recovered his relaxed posture. “Did you end up going to grad school? You oscillated on the idea back in college.”

“Boring,” she teased him, climbing out of the covers. “I thought you would come up with a fun question.”

“Lay off.” He knocked his shoulder against hers. “It’s my first try. Now, answer my boring question.”

“Yes, I did.” Katie rubbed her shoulder. “So, back to the gym. Are you one of those shirtless creeps who lurk around at the gym all the time now?”

“Shirtless creeps?” Luke glanced down at his six-pack abs. “You like?” he asked with a cocky smile.

Kaitlyn screeched and hit him with her pillow.

Luke dodged the blow and stole her pillow. “I go to the gym on my lunch break. It’s only thirty minutes of weight training a day.”

“I knew it,” she scoffed and punched him in the arm with her fist. “You can’t get those kinds of muscles hammering nails on the weekend. You work out every day.”

“Yes, but I don’t go to a meat market gym. It advertises itself as a dude’s gym with lots of boxing and people who train for specific sports. I think I’ve seen one or two women there ever. So, no, I am not a creepy gym guy now.”

Kaitlyn released a huge exhale. “Oh, thank God. I’m so relieved. Nothing worse than those beasts.”

Luke threw the pillow back at her. “Um,” he stuttered. Kaitlyn sensed his eyes on her legs, so she pushed them back under the covers. “Uhh, okay. Favorite band these days?”

“Easy. I play Amy Winehouse on repeat continuously in my car. I love her. Though she isn’t new or current.”

“Or alive,” Luke interjected, sounding sober.

“So sad, right? Something about her voice speaks to me lately. I can’t get enough.”

“She was a talented vocalist and songwriter,” Luke agreed. They sat in awkward silence for a moment and watched one another. “It’s your turn.”

Kaitlyn pulled the top blanket up farther. She took a moment and turned to her side so she faced Luke straight on. “Are you happy?”

“Wow, we went from the gym to that doozy?”

Kaitlyn shrugged. “You have to answer, Luke. Those are the rules.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “And be honest.” But did she want honesty?

“Of course.”

“Of course, you’re happy?” She tried to hide the urgency in her voice.

“No, of course, I’ll be honest. I always am with you.”

They sat in silence staring at one another. Neither spoke for what seemed a lifetime. The

unspoken words pressed down on the room.

“So? Happy?” Kaitlyn wanted him to be happy, didn’t she? Why did she fear the answer?

“Yeah, I am, mostly. Things aren’t exactly like I thought they’d be, but I like my work.”

“Super.” Kaitlyn tried to make her voice sound upbeat. She thought of the phone call where Luke laughed. Did the woman on the phone make him happy?

“Are you?”

“Is this one of your questions?” She recovered her cool.

Luke shook his head no as he said, “Yes.”

They both laughed.

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“*Guess?*”

“It’s my turn to ask.” She smirked, dodging his question. “Did you ever online date?”

His boyish lopsided grin hit Kaitlyn in the gut with the flutter of a thousand butterflies. “Yep.”

“No way.” She snorted. “Tell me about it. Please? Did you meet anyone special?” Did she want the truth? Why did she keep asking these questions when the answers terrified her?

“Nope. My turn.” Luke pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. They both froze. He cleared his throat. “What was your craziest date in the past ten years?”

Kaitlyn pulled her legs into her stomach and made herself small like a ball. She dated a lot of crazies over the years. Which one to pick? “Here’s one. I went on a blind date with a farmer one night. He decided we’d take chairs out onto his farm and watch the sunset. It was insanely awkward. We didn’t understand each other at all and had opposite views on politics, religion, everything. We were wrong for each other right from the get-go.”

“Sounds fun.”

“When he picked me up, crazy right-wing conspiracy theory stickers covered his muddy truck. I should’ve canceled the date immediately. Anyway, while we waited for the sunset, we sat in these ratty folding chairs, drank Sprites, and ate cold hot dogs he brought in a dirty Styrofoam cooler. We ate just the hot dog. No bun, no nothing. Cold weenies.” Kaitlyn saw Luke give her his full attention. He gestured for her to continue. “After many moments of serious, uncomfortable silence, he says, ‘If we put on tin hats, a UFO might drop to the earth and visit us tonight. It’s supposed to be a full moon.’ I, of course, laughed at his joke, but he didn’t crack a smile. He remained dead serious and pointed to a roll of foil on the ground next to the chairs. It made me laugh harder when I realized he was sincere, which was unkind of me, but geez. As expected, he got super mad and took me straight home. The next day, he called our mutual friend and told her I was a raving lunatic.”

“Yep. That’s a crazy date all right. A farmer and the winemaker. Makes for a first-rate country song.” Luke extended his arms and legs on the bed. His presence felt even larger in the room.

“A tragic country song.” Kaitlyn laughed at the memory. “First and last blind date ever. Okay, my turn. Are you swiping left or right these days?”

“Nah. Not my scene.” He rolled onto his side to face her and stifled a yawn.

“Your turn.” She nudged him with her foot.

“Did you ever tell anyone else what happened?”

Kaitlyn laid on her back so she wouldn’t meet his eyes. “What happened with what?”

“What happened with ...” He motioned with his finger between the two of them.

“No. Never. Well, my parents and brother, of course, but I told no one else.”

“Oh.” Luke rubbed his face. “Do you want to talk about \_\_\_”

“My turn.” She turned to fluff the pillow behind her head and avoided his sad eyes. “Did you ever think about me? Or even miss me after I left?” She stared at the pillow.

“Did I what?” Luke sat up and rested his hand on her shoulder.

“Did you ever, uhh, ever consider contacting me?”

Luke tightened his grip on her shoulder. “Katie, hell, don’t you know?”

“Don’t I know what?”

He turned her face toward him and stared at her in bewilderment.

“You’re freaking me out. Know what, Luke?”

“That I came for you?”

“What?” Kaitlyn shook her head no. His words made no sense to her.

“Katie.” Luke reached for her arms when her phone beeped with a blaring notification. There was another beep. Then two more. Four total.

She pulled her arms out of his reach. “Guess someone needs me.” She bent over to the bedside table and picked up her phone. There were five separate texts from Neil.

**Neil:** Missed you tonight, baby.

**Neil:** Hope you feel better.

**Neil:** Sending a big file. Text me if it doesn’t come through in a second.

**Video File**

**Neil: Can't wait to make you my wife tomorrow. I love you.**

Kaitlyn smiled at her phone and then remembered Luke sitting behind her. She turned around and held the phone up like an emotional shield. "It's Neil. He sent a video file of something." She glanced back at her phone and downloaded the file. Beyoncé started in the background and Neil appeared with Noah and Adam. She practiced the routine to death for weeks, yet Neil's performance appeared flawless. She beamed at the phone. Neil had every single dance step down, and he kept up with her brother and Adam. Luke hovered over her to get a closer glimpse of the phone. After the dance number ended, there were clips from the rehearsal dinner guests. Each one offered well wishes and hopes for a happy marriage. The last piece included Neil's thoughtful toast and a quote describing how much he loved her and how much he missed her. Kaitlyn put the phone down in her lap and bowed her head. She couldn't believe he made this video for her while she pined over Luke and their dead relationship.

"Well," Luke choked out when the video ended.

Kaitlyn leaned against her pillow. "We better go to sleep." Not waiting for a response, she turned off the lamp on her bedside table.

## Chapter 27 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn feigned rhythmic breathing when Luke's warm body rolled into her bed space.

"Katie?" he whispered into her hair.

She didn't answer and pretended to sleep. Maybe he would give up?

"Katie?" His voice echoed louder this time. Nope, not giving up.

Kaitlyn shifted in the bed to put more space between them and to send the message to quit bothering her. When he scooted closer, his masculine scent flooded her memories. An image of him hovering above her, dusting her neck with light kisses made her squeeze her eyes tighter. "Please, go to sleep, Luke."

"I can't." Luke pushed up on one arm. "I need to talk about this."

"Later."

"No, Katie. Now."

"Don't." Her voice sounded as weary as she felt. She closed her eyes to block him out, but his hot breath on her neck made it hard.

"All these years, I never stopped thinking about you, missing you."

"I don't want to talk about it. It doesn't matter anymore. It's all in the past and we need to move on." Can we move on? "Anyway, I plan to marry Neil tomorrow."

"You wouldn't have asked me the question earlier if it didn't matter still, and it matters to me."

"Fine, it mattered, but it doesn't anymore." Kaitlyn sat up to move away from his distracting body heat. "I've moved on. I planned a wonderful future, and it starts tomorrow." Luke sat up too. God, he followed her everywhere she went. Would she need to sleep on the balcony to escape him and his questions?

“We had a future too. We had a—”

“We had nothing.” She accidentally banged her head on the headboard in frustration. “Don’t go there.” She rubbed at her scalp. He reached forward and touched the injured spot. His fingers left a tingle all the way down her spine. Her head didn’t hurt, but her heart ached.

“You just left.” She heard Luke’s anger and thought he might bang his head on purpose. “You erased me.”

“You left me too.” The same anger seethed through her body.

“No, I didn’t. I came for you.”

Kaitlyn reached over and turned on the light. The outrage at his dishonesty made her want to throw the lamp at him. “You never came.”

“Yes, I did.”

She didn’t believe him. How could he look her in the face and tell such a blatant lie? “I had to leave. Everything around us reminded me of it. I needed space to feel whole again. To find some peace again.”

“Ten years of space?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. I didn’t run away forever. I ran home to Sunny Vines, not to Alaska. You could see me if you wanted.”

“You didn’t want to see me.”

Kaitlyn got out of bed and wrung her hands. “I mean, you’re right, I left abruptly, but I figured you knew I went home.”

“I did. I called Noah to confirm you arrived at the vineyard.”

Through gritted teeth, she said, “So, why put all the blame on me? I needed to be at home with my parents.”

“I’m not blaming you, but you chose not to see me.”



“What are you talking about?” Kaitlyn began pacing, confounded by the turn in the conversation. “You never came to Sunny Vines.”

“Katie.” He got off the bed and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Slow down and breathe.”

She wrenched away from him. “I’m fine. I don’t need to breathe.” Luke grinned at her and she corrected herself. “Okay, yeah, I need to breathe, but you know what I mean.”

Luke sat in the chair, staying quiet as if waiting for her to say something else.

After a few quiet moments, she found the right words. “You never came for me.”

“Yes, I did. Of course, I came for you.”

“When?”

“One week after you left.” He motioned for her to sit down in the chair next to him. “I phoned Noah, and he told me you returned to the vineyard. I called you, but you never responded, so I drove to Sunny Vines.”

Kaitlyn put her head between her legs. “I lost my phone. I got a new one, with a new number.” She raised her head. “Wait, you came to visit me at Sunny Vines?”

“Yes. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Your parents told me you didn’t want to see me.”

Kaitlyn cocked her head to the side in confusion. “They what?”

“I asked them if you had your phone, and they said yes, so I tried multiple times every single day.”

“My parents told you I had my phone? That can’t be right.”

“Yes, and you didn’t want to see me.”

“I told them I wasn’t ready to see you, yet.”

“That wasn’t the message I got. I mean, Katie, I called you every day for an entire year.” He bent down on his knees and put his hand on top of hers. “You never called me back.”

“I told you. My phone got lost.”

“I didn’t lose my phone. My number never changed. You could’ve called me.”

Kaitlyn remembered how damaged she felt at the time, how her empty heart hurt. She desperately wanted him to save her from despair. She felt abandoned, but Luke was right, she never called him, never reached out once. Did she abandon him? “You came to see me at Sunny Vines?” I thought you left me.

“Yes, more than once. Since you hadn’t reached out in over a year, Noah told me I should let you go, so I finally did. I thought you didn’t want me.”

Kaitlyn began to understand what happened back then. She was out of her mind, drowning in sorrow and hiding at the vineyard. Her parents wouldn’t want him to see her in that state or hurt her more. They wanted to protect her from the pain and Luke. At the time, she wanted to hide from him too. She understood the miscommunication now. She looked into his face. “I’m so sorry, Luke.”

Luke hugged her. “I’m sorry too.”

“I’m relieved to hear you didn’t discard me.” She untangled herself from his embrace and sat back in the chair.

“Discard you? Never. I’d never do such a thing. I suffered too.”

She sighed in relief. “Now I can marry Neil with no regrets.”

Luke fell onto the floor, shock written all over his face. “Marry Neil with no regrets? What?”

Kaitlyn couldn’t deal with Luke’s discomfort right now. She stood up and walked back to the bed. Her future didn’t involve him. She needed to tamp down her unruly emotions.

“I’m grateful our relationship meant something to you. I always wondered, but I’m on another path now, an easier one. You can see how wonderful Neil treats me.” Kaitlyn bit her tongue for a moment and gathered courage. “I’m marrying him tomorrow. Well, if we can get the hell out of this hotel room.” She crawled under the covers and reached for the lamp.

“What are you talking about?” Luke asked from the floor. “I call bullshit. You have no regrets?”

Kaitlyn moved her hand away from the light switch. “I love Neil.”

“That’s not what I asked. I think you still love me.”

She shook her head in opposition. “No.”

Luke stood up. “Well, I still love you, Katie. I always have.”

“You love the old me, the younger version of me. For the record, I do still love the old you, but this is my new life now, and it includes Neil.”

“Neil.” Luke’s voice dripped with disgust.

“What do you have against Neil? I thought he’s your friend?”

“We went to the same medical school. He wasn’t my friend at university and isn’t now.”

“But he invited you to our wedding.” If only he hadn’t. This nightmare wouldn’t exist.

“His parents invited me.”

Kaitlyn didn’t want to hear this right now. She had closure and Luke kept muddying it. “So, what, you don’t like Neil?”

Luke didn’t respond.

“Well, it doesn’t matter because I’m the one marrying him, not you.”

“Thank God. I’d never pick him to spend the rest of my life with.”

She almost laughed at the thought. “You two would make a terrible couple.”

“Me and Neil?” Luke’s voice was full of contempt now.

“You saw the video. You can’t deny his sincere gesture.”

“Yeah, I saw it. He went a little overboard, don’t you think?”

“Overboard? No, you do passionate things for love.”

“I guess,” Luke said.

“What do you mean?”

He walked over to his side of the bed. “Nothing.”

“Well.” Kaitlyn clicked the light off.

“Well,” Luke repeated from the floor.

“Let’s quit arguing and go to sleep.” She rolled to her side. If he wanted to sleep on the floor, so be it. “Why can’t you be happy for me?” I need you to let me go.

He got into bed next to her and pulled her body to his. “We could’ve been amazing,” he hummed into her ear.

“Enough.” Kaitlyn rubbed her fingers into her temple and tried to let go of the thought. “It’s too late for us. Let it go, Luke. Let me go.”

“What if we had the baby?”

## Chapter 28 - Mia

Mia read the text in her pj's.

**Noah:** We're headed your way. Be dressed and ready to party. Break Time has a band tonight Adam loves.

**Mia:** Burp. Remind me, what is a Break Time? Can I party in my pj's?

**Noah:** Not what, but where. It's a total dive bar and usually not our scene. And definitely NO pj's.

**Mia:** So, why are we going?

**Noah:** The band playing tonight is incredible. Our Uber will pick you up in twenty. Throw on some jeans!

**Mia:** Wait! I don't want to go. I had too much to drink earlier.

Mia's phone rang. "Hello?"

"Listen, love, we're going out. Eat the leftover Chinese in our fridge to sober up. We will arrive in twenty minutes. No, make it twenty-five. I need to throw on some tight dancing pants. We can't miss this band. I promise they're worth it."

"Shit. I'm too tired, Noah. Alcohol puts me to sleep. That hasn't changed."

"Mia, you never come to town. We miss you and we're going out. No arguing."

She opened the stainless-steel fridge and took out a tub of cold ramen noodles and sniffed. "Okay."

"Okay? Are you serious?"

“Yeah, pick me up.” Mia hung up and considered her snacking carnage littering the kitchen. She finished an entire sleeve of Ritz crackers and half a container of olive hummus. Maybe she didn’t need to eat these noodles after all. She put them back in the fridge and caught the time on the microwave. “Damn, I better get dressed.”

The bell rang right as Mia applied her black cat eyeliner and shiny lip gloss. “Coming!” She threw open the door to find Noah standing there in tight white jeans, about to put his key in the lock. “I said, coming.”

“Sorry. Figured you changed your mind and went to bed. I remember how alcohol sedates you.”

“I’ll power through it. I need a fun night out with my guys. The rehearsal dinner left me craving another dance party, although nothing can top Neil’s performance.”

“His surprise addition gave all those suits something to talk about for weeks to come.” Noah pointed to the black SUV. “Let’s go. Adam’s in the car and if he gets out, it’ll take forever to get on the road again.”

In the car, Mia sat between the two of them and broached the subject of Neil once more. “So, I talked to Luke.”

“Yeah? He isn’t sick, is he?”

“No, they’re both fine. I can’t believe the two of them are holed up in a hotel room together. I wonder how they’re dealing with it. He wouldn’t tell me any of the juicy stuff like their sleeping arrangements.”

“Yeah, I talked to Katie, and she didn’t tell me anything interesting, either. She wanted to hear about the dinner.”

“So, do you really hate Neil?”

“Yes,” Adam said, checking his teeth in a compact mirror.

“Hell, I don’t understand. He doesn’t seem like a terrible guy.”

“Tonight shocked me. I didn’t think he had the chutzpah to dance in front of his stuffy crowd,” Noah admitted. “You make a good point, Mia. Maybe I’ve been so caught up in

protecting Katie I let my feelings cloud my judgment where Neil is concerned. Katie loves him, so I guess we better get in line and learn to love him too.”

“For the record, I always kinda hated him.” Adam threw his arm around Mia. “He just has an icky vibe.”

“It’s been forever since Luke and Katie were together as a couple. Hell, they haven’t spoken to each other in ten years. But I hoped she would still end up with Luke? Didn’t you?” Mia leaned back and rested her head on Adam’s shoulder.

Noah shook his head. “Not me, if I’m honest. I didn’t think they would ever see each other again. At one time, I hoped Katie would reach out to Luke when there was still a relationship to save, but when she didn’t, I knew it was over. I figured she would find someone like Luke, though, someone kind.”

“Yeah, definitely not a douche like Neil,” Adam said.

Mia sighed. She wasn’t convinced Neil was a douche as Adam put it, but she did picture Katie in a different kind of relationship. The country club was never her style. I guess people change?

When the car pulled up to the curb, Mia gawked at the long line wrapped around the block. “Shit, I can’t stand in line with these shoes. She pointed down at the heels she borrowed for the rehearsal dinner. Can we go somewhere else?”

“Oh, you silly woman, you should know us better than that. We don’t stand in lines.”

Mia watched Adam walk up to the bouncer propped on a barstool at the door and tap him on his shoulder. A hulk of a man turned with a scowl on his face then jumped to his feet. Adam reached around him and the two of them hugged like long-lost friends. Mia turned to Noah. “I swear, you guys are connected to everyone in town.”

“Yep. Let’s go.”

Inside, a wall of bodies gyrated to the music. It smelled like cheap perfume, alcohol, and sweat. “I’ll get us some fun drinks.” Noah pointed to a group of women as they climbed

out of a booth. “You guys go see if those people are leaving and snag their booth.”

“Hey ladies, you headed home?” Adam smiled at them and hoped for goodwill.

“Unfortunately. This one won’t make it much longer,” one woman said as she held up her extremely drunk friend. “You’re welcome to our table.”

“Great timing,” Mia said as she sat down. “You guys treat a lady right. Front door service, an empty table at the ready,” she paused, waving a hand toward Noah at the bar, “and a handsome man to serve us drinks. This is the life.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” Adam said and bumped her shoulder. “If you come back here more often, we can take you to all the hot spots.”

“I won’t ... and I will.”

Noah put down the drinks and slid next to Adam. “One gin and tonic and two vodka martinis,” he yelled over the band who took the stage. “I talked to the waitress, and she’ll clear our table in a minute or two.”

“Thank you,” Mia mouthed to him.

“Let’s drink up and watch the band for a while before we dance the night away. I don’t want to hold my drink or the table.”

“Agreed.” Adam held up his glass for a toast. “To our beautiful Katie. May her wedding tomorrow be spectacular, if that’s what she wants.”

“Hell, may her wedding still happen, if that’s what she wants,” Noah interjected.

“To the bride and groom.” Mia clicked her glass and scanned the room. “This place is crazy packed.”

“The band’s a local one, but they’ve been on tour for a year. No one expected them to come back and play here.”

“Nice.” Mia drained her drink. “So, if Katie was supposed to do the Beyoncé dance with you tonight, how did



Neil memorize the steps?”

Noah shrugged. “I have no idea. It came as a complete shock to us. The whole evening blew me away. I thought Neil’s temper would flare over Katie’s absence, a poor attitude at the very least. Who knew he’d be so gracious about it? I don’t know what to think anymore about this pending marriage.”

“Oh my god, I love this song. I’m gonna go dance. Be right back.” Adam climbed over Noah and ran onto the dance floor.

“The wedding tomorrow will be interesting. Take detailed notes so you can give me the play-by-play later,” Mia yelled at Noah to be heard. “Wait, what will happen if the CDC doesn’t release them from the hotel in time for the wedding?”

“Originally, the wedding was scheduled at the hotel,” Noah yelled back, and scooted closer, so they didn’t need to scream at one another.

“The hotel they’re stuck in?”

“Yeah, but the Connor’s country club stepped up to host the wedding as well.”

“But what about Katie?” Mia took the last sip of her drink. “She’ll still be stuck at the hotel.”

“Katie will eventually come clean with Neil, I guess.”

Mia cringed. “Poor Katie.”

“Yep. It’s not ideal.”

“Do you think the wedding will be canceled if that happens?”

“I doubt it. Neil won’t want to advertise such an embarrassing situation.”

“Noah, I thought your impression of Neil had changed? I thought you liked him now.”

“Yeah, yeah. Can I start after the wedding?” He gave her a mischievous grin.

“Does Katie realize you hate him this much? I can’t imagine your hostile feelings for Neil wouldn’t upset her. You two are still close, right?” She leaned into Noah’s space and peered into his eyes.

“Yes, we’re close. I adore my girl. Would do anything for her.” He kissed Mia on the cheek. “I’ve never told her how I feel about him.”

“Why?”

“She loves Neil, and by the time I officially met him, they’d dated a few months. It was too late for complaints. I hadn’t seen her so happy in a long time. So, I said nothing.”

“I can’t believe you kept your mouth shut. You never do.”

“Right? I’m so proud of me.” He took a sharp breath. “However, I have a juicy secret about the two of them.”

“About Neil and Katie?” Mia snuggled up closer. “Tell me.”

“It’s a good one. Are you sure you can keep quiet? You can’t tell Luke.”

She poked him with her finger. “Now, you must share.”

“Promise you won’t say a word. Katie would kill me.”

Mia stuck out her pinky finger and linked it with Noah’s. “I promise.”

He leaned in closer. “They haven’t done it.”

“Haven’t done what?” Mia raised an eyebrow and leaned in.

“It.”

“It?”

“Uhh, it. Knocked boots, have relations, hit a home run, shag.”

Mia jumped backward in her seat. “Huh? What are you saying? They haven’t had sex?”

“Nope. It’s the reason she’s stuck in the hotel room.”

“Wait, what? She’s there for sex with Luke? That doesn’t make sense. Why would she go there to sleep with Luke?”

“No, silly. With Neil.”

“Wait a minute. Katie hasn’t had sex with the man she plans to marry tomorrow?”

“Yep.”

“Let me get this straight. She and Neil haven’t had sex? Ever?” Mia’s eyes grew plate-sized.

“Nope. Never. Katie went to the hotel to do it with him and to check out his package, but he wasn’t in his room when she got there. Luke was. That’s how the two of them ended up stuck together. Luke took Neil’s room, but Katie was unaware of the change when she snuck in.”

“Hot damn. That’s crazy.”

“Right?” Noah drained his glass.

“I can’t believe any of this.”

“Right?” He repeated with a smug expression.

“Maybe this lockdown is fate.”

Adam flew into view. “Holy shit. Holy shit.” His jaw hung open and his arms extended in the air like a bird in distress next to the table. “I’m trying not to lose my mind, but I’m totally freaking the hell out.” Adam slid into the booth, picked up his drink, and drank it all in one gulp. “Holy shit.”

“What happened? Is your ex here?” Noah craned his neck to check the club. “I told you not to be ugly to the poor man.” He turned to Mia. “The last time we ran into Jake, Adam got unnecessarily rude. Karma is a bitch.”

“No. Not him. So much worse.” Adam took a deep breath like he planned to run a mile. “This is awful.”

Noah picked up his empty glass and held it up for a refill as the waitress bussed their table. “Take a breath and tell us what happened.”

“You won’t believe this shit.”

“Tell us,” Noah demanded.

“Neil is here.”

“Where?” Mia stood up to get a better view of the room, but Adam grabbed her arm and pulled her down.

“No, don’t look.”

“Why? We should invite him to sit with us.”

“Uhh, no.” Adam shook his head emphatically. “Hell to the no.”

“What’s the big deal?” Mia tried to stand again, but Adam held her down.

“Neil is on the other side of the bar, and he isn’t alone.”

“I bet he wants to party with the groomsmen before the big wedding day. They’re probably here for the same reason you are, to get a drink and hear the band. Let’s go sit with them.” Mia gathered her purse.

“No.” Adam gaped at her with wild eyes and clasped her purse strap so hard she thought it would snap. “I saw him kiss one of the Barbies.”

“What?” Mia and Noah asked at the same time.

“I thought I imagined it at first, so I danced closer to their table. He had one arm around some blonde, and his tongue was down another’s throat.”

“Gross. You must be mistaken. It couldn’t be him.” Mia shook her head.

“I’m not blind. It’s Neil.”

## Chapter 29 - Luke

Luke repeated the question in a strained voice. “What if we had the baby?”

“But Luke, we didn’t.” Katie curled herself up tighter in the bedcovers. “I don’t want to talk about it. I’m tired and I want to sleep.”

Luke grabbed his phone from the end table and stood. “Fine, sleep. I’m getting some air.” And calming the hell down.

Out on the balcony, Luke stared at the ocean for a few quiet moments and considered calling his sister. He started to dial but thought better of it. It was 1:00 in the morning, and what would he say to her? She already suspected his true feelings. He loved Katie. No, he loves Katie. Mia would sing, “I told you so,” and then feel sorry for him. He didn’t need her pity. He leaned against the railing and listened to the waves crashing against the rocks. I can’t force Katie to talk to me if she doesn’t want closure too. Or maybe she found closure long ago and I’m alone with my feelings. I’m such a fool. He turned back toward the balcony doors. Maybe I should quit ruminating and go to bed. She’s getting married. There’s nothing left to do. He started to walk back inside when his phone chimed with a text.

**Noah:** SOS. SOS. SOS. I fucked up. Are you awake?

**Luke:** What? You’re fucked up?

**Luke:** I think you drunk dialed—texted me. This is Luke.

**Noah:** Yes. I’m not drunk. I have to talk to you right now. Call me ASAP.

Luke didn't want to talk to Noah this late, especially if he was wasted, which seemed likely.

**Luke:** Go to bed, Noah. We can talk in the morning.

A photo appeared on his screen. Luke squinted at the phone, the picture growing clearer the more he stared. Rage surged through his body and down to his fists.

**Luke:** WTF. Where are you? Is that Neil? Is that tonight?

**Noah:** Answer the damn phone. We need to talk. I'm calling you.

Luke picked up on the first ring. "Where are you? What the hell is going on?" Luke loud whispered into the phone.

"Mia wanted to call you, but I told her I should be the one to tell you. Our Mia, always gotta boss me around, but I won when we did rock, paper, scissors. She always goes with rock, so, yeah, I win again."

"Noah, stop rambling. What are you talking about? Mia's with you now?"

"Yep. She's here with Adam and me. We're at a dive bar called Break Time. Well, we're outside it now. Can you hear me? The music is even loud out here on the sidewalk. So listen, I called to apologize for—"

"Where did you get that picture of Neil?"

"I took it in the bar five minutes ago. I told you. We're at Break Time. Geez. Are you listening to me, Luke?"

"Did you tell him yet?" Luke heard his sister in the background ask in an urgent voice.

"I'm trying to, but he keeps asking questions and interrupting me."

"Noah, pay attention. How did you get that picture?" Luke asked again.

"I need to say this first. I have to get it off my chest. I screwed up, Luke. I'm sorry I told you to give Katie up. It was a huge mistake. One of the biggest mistakes of my life and that's saying something."

“When? What mistake? What are you talking about, Noah?” Luke shifted the chair closer to the railing so he could speak louder. “Does this have something to do with the picture of Neil?”

“In a second. Let me get this out first.”

“Get what out?”

“Listen to me, Luke. After the miscarriage, we helped Katie get over her grief. We thought she needed some space from you to heal so we kept you away from her.”

Luke clenched his jaw. “What does this have to do with Neil?” He didn’t understand why Noah kept talking about a situation from ten years ago when he just sent him a picture of Neil kissing some blonde woman ten minutes ago.

“Stay with me a little longer. We wanted to let Katie heal, make her happy again, so we sent you away. We thought she would reach out to you when she was ready, but she wanted to forget everything and move on. So, that’s why I told you to—”

“To forget her? To let her go?” Luke’s face flushed with heat at Noah’s confession.

“I made a massive mistake. I screwed up. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Sorry? You’re sorry?” Luke rubbed his face hard. “I never wanted to let her go, Noah. I walked away because you told me that’s what she wanted.” Luke replayed the horrible scene in front of the vineyard. It was the last time he visited, the last time he contacted her.

“I thought it was for the best, but now she’s marrying despicable Neil.”

“And Neil’s a cheating bastard asshat,” Mia yelled into the phone.

“I know,” Luke said.

“You know he’s an asshat?” Noah asked.

“Yeah.” Luke paced to the door and back to his chair. “That’s why I’m in the hotel room and Neil isn’t.”

Noah groaned into the phone. “I knew he was sleeping with the Barbies.”

“Whoa.” Luke sat down hard and gripped the phone. “Wait. I don’t have proof Neil slept with anyone. I saw him kiss some women. That’s all.” Unable to sit, Luke walked to the far corner of the balcony and tried to catch the breeze on his face. “The night before the quarantine lockdown, Neil strong-armed me into going to a strip club with him, some other groomsmen, and a lot of scantily clad blonde women.”

“Those are the Barbies.”

“Neil never called them Barbies, but I saw him kiss several women, and he definitely went home last night with some of them. It’s why he gave me the key to his room.”

Mia’s voice sounded deep and serious. “You knew Neil cheated on Katie, and you didn’t tell her? What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“I didn’t have any evidence he cheated. Maybe I made a mistake. She wouldn’t believe me anyhow. She loves him. Neil’s convinced Katie he’s this wonderful man who’d never hurt her. Apparently, hurting her is my job.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Luke. We have a gross picture as proof. There’s no question. He’s a cheater.”

“It’s just a kiss, Mia.”

“Just a kiss?” Adam yelled into the phone now. “Give me a break. We all suspect he’s sleeping with them. There’s no doubt now.”

“But there is. We don’t know for a fact he’s sleeping around. We only suspect it, and Katie will hate us if we ruin her wedding based on unfounded suspicions. We can’t destroy her life on conjecture.”

Noah and Mia both spoke into the phone, “We can’t let her marry okra dick.”

“But guys,” Luke paused, running his hand through his hair in frustration, “it’s too late to stop the wedding.”



Noah took the phone and walked away from Adam and Mia. “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t interfered between the two of you, she’d be married to you already.”

“Maybe, but that’s not what happened. She’s marrying Neil tomorrow.”

“We should at least let Mia punch him in the face. She wants to do it, and it would feel so satisfying to see her take him down.”

Luke laughed, releasing the tension in his neck. “Of course, she does, but don’t let her near him. Neil told me he wanted to settle down with Katie, so we have to believe he means it.”

“I don’t believe for a second he’ll be faithful to her.”

“Well, you need to because we have no proof saying otherwise.” Exhausted, Luke ran his fingers through his hair once more. “I need to go to bed. Okay?”

“We need to deal with this problem.”

“I’m aware.” He sighed. “Night.”

Luke hung up the phone and stared out at the dark ocean. Fucking Neil. He never thought he’d let Katie go twice in his lifetime. He opened the doors to the hotel room, tiptoed over to the bed, and slid in beside her. She turned toward him. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. I waited for you to come back inside.”

“You waited?”

“I’m sorry I lost the baby,” she said in a weak voice.

He reached over and stroked her arm. “Oh Katie, you didn’t lose him. He died.”

She rolled onto her back. “It was my job to keep him alive.”

Luke put his hand on her arm. “Fetal death is not anyone’s fault.”

“But I said I wasn’t ready to be a mother, and he died.”

He pulled her toward him and cradled her in a big hug. “No one is ready for a baby in college. It doesn’t mean you didn’t want him.”

“I wanted him so much.” She fell further into his chest.

“I know. I know. I wanted him as well.”

“It felt like too much to handle with the stillborn delivery. I wish he survived.”

“Oh, Katie, honey.” He put his hands on her face and tilted her chin up to face him. “I wish he survived too, but it’s not your fault.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers in the lightest of kisses. Instead of pulling away as Luke expected, she reached her hands up into his hair and tugged him harder against her mouth. He drew back a couple of inches, but she followed him. Her kiss pushed his lips open. He turned over onto his elbows and hovered above her. He fixed her with a stare and his tongue sought hers, savoring the taste of her. Katie scratched at his back with her nails, and he pushed his body closer, feeling her warmth. She moaned, signaling him to continue. Luke moved his kisses down her neck and onto her collarbone. Her hands glided down his backside while he moved his hand to her soft waist. She groaned again with pleasure and arched her back. This time, the sound shook him out of his waking dream, and he froze. “Katie, wait.”

She ran her hand through his dark hair again. “I don’t want to wait.”

Luke sat back against the bed. “I want you, but I can’t do this if you plan to marry Neil tomorrow.”

Katie sat up next to him. “I haven’t changed my plans, but this feels right, like closure.”

“But I want more than tonight. I don’t want an end. I want a future with you.”

She pulled up her knees and rested her chin on them. “I planned a future with Neil.”

“After seeing me, you still want to marry him? Our time together hasn’t affected your decision?”

She didn’t answer him.

“I love you, Katie.”

“I love you too, and I always will, but I made a commitment to Neil. My wedding plans won’t change.”

Luke couldn’t believe he had to compete against horrible Neil for Katie’s love. He was stuck in an alternate universe. “Did you tell Neil about the pregnancy?”

She peered up at him. “No. He knows nothing about my past with you.”

Luke stood up and placed his hands on the bed. “There has to be a reason you never told him.” Luke waited for a response, but she didn’t answer him. “I don’t understand why you would keep something this big from him.”

Katie glanced up from the bed but didn’t say a word.

He waited for an uncomfortable silent minute. “I’m taking a cold shower.” Pushing off the bed, he charged into the bathroom and shut the door harder than he meant. I can’t believe she wants to marry that jerk. He turned on the water and stepped inside. Mia’s right. If only she knew the truth about Neil.

## Chapter 30 - Noah

“Shit. He hung up on me. What now?” Noah studied his downtrodden crew and decided the next logical course of action. “Let’s go home and get some sleep.” Noah pulled up the Uber app on his phone. “Mia, we can have Uber drop you off at our place. Tomorrow will be a long day, especially if Katie and Luke get released from the hotel pandemic.”

“Stop the dramatics. It isn’t a pandemic.” Mia grunted at him and yanked her locks up into a loose bun on the top of her head. “It’s a potential case of measles. Chill.”

Noah shrugged his shoulders. “I would call what’s going on over there serious drama.”

“I’m so damn tired and sad,” Adam said.

“Yeah, me too. Let’s go.” Mia hopped into the blue SUV pulling up to the curb. “Should we do something tonight about this photo? If my brother can’t man up, maybe I can woman up and show him how it’s done.”

Noah shook his head no and snuggled into Adam, who had already closed his eyes.

“Uhh, guys?” Mia nudged Noah in the ribs. “We really aren’t doing anything? At all?”

“Oh, I’ll do something,” Noah said with his eyes closed. “I need to figure out what and how, but my body demands sleep first.”

The Uber pulled up in front of Adam and Noah’s house and let Mia out. “We’ll call you in the morning,” Adam yelled through the open window. “If the wedding happens, they expect us to be there around noon. I’ll be here super early to get you. We’ll need all the support we can get.”

“Threats, threats. Okay, bring chocolate glazed donuts. Oh, and lots of donut holes. See ya.”

They waited for her to get inside and then gave the driver Katie’s address. “I wish we were staying here tonight.” Adam pouted into Noah’s neck. “I miss my bed.”

“We need to do this for Katie, remember.”

“I only wanted to complain for a second.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Noah put his head on Adam’s shoulder. “I’m so tired and disgusted by this mess.” His phone chirped with a text.

“Who the hell texts someone at three in the morning?” Adam smirked as Noah lifted his head. “That’s so rude.”

“My guess is Mia has a house question. We haven’t been great hosts. We didn’t tell her where we keep anything in the bungalow, not even the towels.”

“It’s Mia. She’ll dig for anything she needs.”

“True.” Noah pulled his phone out of his pocket and unlocked his screen. “Not Mia. It’s a video file from Neil. That’s strange. Shit, I hope he didn’t see us at the bar taking pictures. Being caught snooping would suck.”

“Whatever. I don’t care what he thinks. He’s a dick.” Adam jabbed him on the arm. “Open it.”

The car exploded with loud music, and the video shook with erratic camera movement. Noah turned his phone, trying to figure out which way was up.

“No, the other way.” Adam squealed when Neil’s face showed up on the screen.

Looking straight on, Neil spoke into the camera. “Nick, dude, you gotta check out this hotness.” He moved the camera toward a bed where two nude women kissed. As their tongues mingled, Neil zoomed in on the movement. “Feast your eyes upon my double-time pre-wedding action tonight.” He laughed and the women pulled him down onto the bed. Neil tilted the camera so it was pointed at them, then he smirked into the camera. “I’ll need to rely on this hot footage later to make it through the wedding night with my innocent bride. I can endure a marriage full of missionary sex, but we both know I won’t give up my naughty nurse time, not even a marriage could stop this gravy train.” He moved the camera down his bare chest and stopped at a bobbing blonde head. “As if, right man?” Neil gasped out a quick breath, and Noah hit pause.

“What the hell?” Adam wrinkled his nose at Noah. “Was he naked? Was that one of his nurses? Noah, what is this?”

“Shhhhh, there’s more.” Noah un-paused the video and turned up the volume on his phone.

“Oh yeah, give it to me right there. Oh yeah, like that but harder,” a woman moaned.

The Uber driver whipped his head around. “I said, ‘We are here.’”

“Shhhhh,” Adam and Noah responded together.

“I got another gig. I need you to get out of the car. Now, please.” The driver pulled his ball cap off and gave them the evil eye, frustration etched all over his face.

Noah hit pause again. “Yeah, okay. We can watch the rest inside.” They got out of the car and ran up the front steps like their socks were on fire. “Hurry Adam, open the door.”

Fumbling with the key, Adam threw open the front door. “Okay, go. Hit play.”

They stood in Katie’s giant entry hall and watched with horror. The disgusting sounds bounced off the marble floors in the empty space in full stereo.

“When do I get a second turn?” another woman cried in the background.

“What is this?” Noah tore his eyes away from the phone for only a second.

“Oh my. Is that Neil’s bare ass?” Adam pulled the phone closer to his face.

“Come here, baby. You can play nurse down here,” Neil turned and winked at the camera, “while I doctor you up top.” He propped the phone up on something and then three nude bodies appeared on the screen. The two women wore nurse caps from the 1950s, and Neil had his stethoscope wrapped around his neck.

“Holy fuck. He sent us a sex tape.” Noah hit pause. “I can’t watch anymore. This is a nightmare.”

“Hand it over. I wanna see all of it.” Adam hit play again, and the space filled with moans and cries of ecstasy. Neil worked his way down each woman’s body as they sucked and licked back.

Noah walked away. “Shit. This goes way beyond kisses. He has been doing the Barbies this entire time. I knew it. My instincts about him were spot-on.”

The video ended in silence. Neither Adam nor Noah said a word as they threw themselves on the white sectional sofa. They looked at one another then down at the phone lying between them. The quiet felt oppressive to Noah. “What are we going to do?” asked Adam.

The phone lit up with another text. “Now what?” Noah turned his face into the leather cushion.

Adam picked up the phone and dangled it in the air. “Your phone is contaminated now. I’m afraid to check.”

“Yeah, but it could be Katie.”

Adam glanced down. “Nope. It’s him.”

“Him? Neil? Again? No way?”

“Yeah.”

Noah grabbed the phone out of Adam’s hands. “Let me see.”

**Neil:** Ha. Ha. Like my practical joke?

Two minutes went by while Adam and Noah sat there staring at the phone.

**Neil:** My buddy Nick and I play pranks on each other all the time. Sorry, you got roped into our game. Meant to hit Nick, but I guess I only saw the N and hit send. That wasn’t me in the video. Nick always pretends to be me. Funny guy. Ha. Ha!

“There is no way in hell I’m responding to this load of bullshit.” Noah glared at the phone screen. Another text came in.

**Neil:** No harm, no foul. Nick is crazy with a capital C.

“He is so full of shit.”

“What are we going to do?” Noah asked.

“You gotta text Mia right now and tell her about it.”

“Yeah, maybe she’ll have a plan. Do you think she’s asleep already?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Who cares. This is an emergency.”

**Noah:** We have serious trouble. You awake?

No answer.

**Noah:** Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.

**Noah:** Answer me. 911. 911.

No answer again.

“Noah, just call her. She’s asleep and has her text-sound off.”

Noah dialed Mia’s number.

“This had better be good,” Mia breathed into her phone. “I just fell into REM sleep. I think it was a fantastic dream too.”

“Neil sent us a sex video.”

“What did you say?”

“I need you to see this video. Neil accidentally sent it to us five minutes ago. I guess it was meant for some guy named Nick. Watch it and call us right back.”

“What are you talking about, Noah?”

“Mia, wake up and watch the video. Then call me back. I sent it to you.”

Three minutes later the phone rang. “Holy fuck,” Mia yelled into Noah’s ear when he picked up. “What are we going



to do? This shithead is so much worse than I imagined. How did you get this? Did you hack into his phone?"

"No. I told you. He sent it to me. He meant to text this Nick guy, but he pulled up my name. After he sent it, he texted a wild explanation, telling me it was a practical joke. He insisted it wasn't him in the video. He claimed Nick pretended to be him. Like that makes any damn sense. He's desperate to cover his tracks. I didn't respond. I don't know what to do. Any ideas?"

"Noah, listen, we have to send this to Katie. She cannot marry this douchebag."

"Maybe we should send it to Luke instead? He'll know what to do."

"Fuck no," Mia hollered into the phone. "Luke can't even show her a picture of Neil kissing another woman. He won't know how to tell her about this fiasco. Plus, it isn't fair to put him in this situation after everything they've been through."

"But he's in the hotel with her. He could ease her into it," Noah argued. "Hold on. Let me put you on speakerphone so Adam can hear."

"There's no easing anyone into this nonsense," Mia continued. "Her fiancé is an asshole who screws other women. He has no plans to stop cheating any time soon. No way do we keep this to ourselves. I think we send it straight to her. No note, nothing. Just the video."

"I think Mia's right," Adam piped up. "Let's pull this Band-Aid off now."

"Are you sure?" Noah's thumb hovered above the screen.

"Yes," they both firmly answered.

"Okay. I'll send it now before we change our minds."

## Chapter 31 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn laid in bed listening to the water run in Luke's shower. That beautiful specimen of a man stood nude and wet one room over. All she had to do was open the door and slip in with him. Where did that crazy thought come from? She frowned and tried to visualize her soon to be husband. Images of Luke popped up instead. Ugh, not Luke, Neil. She needed to picture Neil. I'm marrying Neil. She attempted to put naked Luke thoughts out of her mind when her phone chimed with a text. The display showed Noah's name with a video file attached. Certain it was the dance number from the rehearsal dinner, she smiled and hit play. This would get her mind off Luke's body.

Neil's face showed up first on the screen. Kaitlyn warmed at the sight of his image, but when Luke stepped out of the bathroom in only his boxers, all thoughts of Neil disappeared. She hit pause on the video.

"Sorry, I forgot my clothes." Luke threw on a grey T-shirt and shorts from his open suitcase.

"Noah sent me the dance video from tonight. I watched it already, but Noah likes to further edit his numbers after he films. He says it makes them more professional after he adds the backing track." She patted the space beside her. "Come watch it with me. They did such a great job. I'm sorry I missed dancing with them."

Luke sat on the bed beside her, careful to leave a small space between their two bodies. Kaitlyn hit play and Neil's face came to life again, but what followed horrified her. She gasped and pulled the phone closer to her face, examining the movement on-screen. Luke tried to grab the phone out of her hands, but she wouldn't let him. "No."

"Katie, don't watch. Turn it off."

"No. I want to see." Kaitlyn couldn't believe her eyes, but she couldn't unglue them from the screen. The video feed must be fake. Luke walked away after a minute, but her eyes

stayed focused all the way to the end. When it was over, Kaitlyn saw another text from Noah.

**Noah:** I'm sorry. I had to send this to you. Neil accidentally sent it to me ten minutes ago. I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry and I love you.

"Katie." Luke kneeled in front of her. "I'm so—"

"So what? So happy to prove Neil's an asshole? So happy to witness my embarrassment? Does it make you happy that he made a complete fool out of me? God, is everyone aware of his affairs except stupid me?" Kaitlyn jumped out of the bed and began to pick things up around the room and throw them. A notebook hit the floor and some throw pillows fell near the bathroom. Luke stood, careful to keep a significant distance from the flying objects. His suitcase was the closest thing to her, so she picked up a handful of his clothes and threw them on the floor. A pair of dress shoes hit the door. She balled up some Levi's and prepared to launch them at the balcony doors.

"Katie," Luke said in a gentle voice.

She swung around and dropped the jeans. "Ohh, don't 'Katie' me." She stomped toward the balcony doors and opened them. "AHHHHH," she screamed out to the ocean from the metal railing. She turned around and bumped into Luke behind her. "I feel like such an idiot. He's a disgusting cheater."

"Listen, you're not an idiot."

"I am." She hid her face behind her hands for a moment to collect herself. "Everyone knew, and I had my head in the sand. I'm one of those Lifetime movie women, the last idiot to find out the truth. I didn't have a clue." She paced on the small balcony like a caged tiger. "Tell me the truth. Did you know he was unfaithful to me?" She stopped and glared at him, but he didn't answer her. His face flushed red, and his expression said it all. "Shit. You did." She walked away and gripped the railing until her knuckles turned white. "How long did you know? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“You wouldn’t have believed me.” He stood next to her, and his warm arm brushed against her shoulder. “I couldn’t fly into town, get quarantined with you in a hotel room with a deadly germ for the weekend, then tell you your fiancé, whom you love and plan to marry tomorrow, is a horrible human who cheats. How would it look? It’s been ten long years since we had a conversation.”

“So?”

“I couldn’t do that to you,” Luke said.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because, well—” Luke avoided her and studied the ocean.

“Well, what?” He must love being right about Neil.

He turned and looked into her eyes.

“Tell me, Luke.”

“Because the truth is—”

“Is what? Say it.”

“I’m still in love with you.”

“You’re what?” Kaitlyn gave her head a fierce shake in an effort to erase his words. “No, you can’t be. It’s been ten years. That isn’t the truth.”

“Katie, I love you. I never stopped loving you.”

“If so”—she glowered at him—“why didn’t you tell me about Neil’s infidelity? How could you let me marry someone so terrible?”

“If I told you about his infidelity, it’s because I want to win you back. I have an ulterior motive.”

“An ulterior motive? Give me a break.” Her hands shook with rage and uncertain emotions.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Of course, I don’t. It’s only a coincidence we ended up trapped in this hotel together.”

He reached out to touch her, but she took a small step back. “Katie, listen to me. No one compares to you. I tried to get over you and move on, but I couldn’t.”

“That’s a lie. You moved on without even a glance back.”

“No, I never did. I still love you.”

“You love me?” She threw her hands up in exasperation. This was bullshit.

“I do. Always. I never quit thinking about you and what we had together. I love you today as much as before.”

A lump formed in her throat. “You mean that?”

“Which part?” Luke took a slow step closer. Kaitlyn wanted to step back again, but he drew her to him like a magnet. She couldn’t fight her body’s need to soak up his warmth a moment more.

“That you love me and want me back? Or do you feel sorry for me because my world fell apart?”

“It’s the truth. I love you.” Luke reached out his hand and caressed her face.

“This isn’t a sympathy confession?” His large hand on her skin felt like absolution.

“What? No, of course not.” He stepped into her personal space. “And I don’t think your world fell apart. This video saved you from a huge mistake. Neil isn’t the right man for you.”

“You got that right. What a fraud.” She stared into his eyes, afraid to say the next words. “And you’re the right man for me?”

“Yes, I am.” Luke picked up a slip of her hair and caressed it between two fingers.

She watched him wet his lips and her breath caught in her throat. “You think we could still be good together?”

Luke didn't answer. He bent down and pulled her to his hard body. He placed his soft lips on hers for a brief second. "See, we fit."

All of Kaitlyn's fury eased out of her body as Luke slipped his strong arms around her. His woody scent intoxicated her. He smelled of minty soap and him. "Luke. Don't." She pulled away, but he tightened his hold and placed a gentle kiss on her nose. Her body relaxed. His strong arms made her feel unbalanced. Kaitlyn felt dizzy with them wrapped around her. She licked her lips, and he dived in for another kiss, this time longer, trailing sweet kisses to her ear. She sighed and her body collapsed against him.

"I love you." His breath was hot against her mouth.

She pulled at his hair and kissed him first this time, her mouth an open invitation. The kisses went on, slow, soft, and then aggressive as the hunger for more increased. Luke's scent enveloped her, and her body shivered with exhilaration. He picked her up and carried her inside the quiet room. Placing her gently down on the bed, he kissed the smooth suprasternal notch above her chest. As he kneeled before her, she watched him take in her body, his eyes stopped on every body part. When Luke got to her face, she burned with desire. Her pulse raced with need. He leaned down and kissed the inside of her thigh with such tender care it felt like the tickle of a butterfly wing. "I love every single thing about you." He slipped his fingers under the hem of her shirt. "You in my clothes is hot, but you out of them is sexier." Kaitlyn grinned at him and helped him pull the shirt over her head, exposing her bare breasts. Luke stared down at her with hungry eyes, and her nipples instantly hardened. "You're so beautiful."

"I've gotten older." She worried she wouldn't live up to his expectations.

"No. You're extraordinary. You're exactly as I remember you, smart and beautiful." He crawled up her body and encircled her breasts with his tender hands.

When he swirled his tongue on her nipples, she let out a delicate cry. "Luke, you feel incredible."

She moaned as he kissed each eyelid. He found her mouth again. “I want to take all your clothes off. Is that okay with you?”

She didn’t answer. His kisses ignited a yearning in her so strong she had trouble breathing. His words felt like relief. She reached her arm down to remove her panties while Luke sat back on his heels, giving her a wicked smile. Suddenly, Kaitlyn felt vulnerable as she revealed herself to him. She scooted back against the bed frame, and her eyes met his. He smiled and she grinned back.

“Damn, Katie. I missed you so much.” He leaned in and rested a hand on either side of her head so his face was inches away from hers. He grabbed her lips with his again. Luke’s kisses were harder, and his tongue more determined this time. She was breathless and her body quivered. He took her right nipple in his mouth, pinching it between his teeth. She arched her neck in a frenzy of arousal. He pulled back and gave the other one the same attention.

“Luke, I need you.” She ran her finger along the inside of the waistband of his shorts.

He looked up at her with a matching desire. “I need you too, but I want to take my time. I waited ten years to hold you in my arms again, and I plan to take at least that long before I’m done.”

She laughed. “That’s a lot of sex.”

“God, I hope so. My sweet Katie, you feel so incredible in my hands. I can’t believe I get to do this.” He moved his hands to her hips and licked a trail down her stomach as he inched closer to her apex. He took his time there, tasting her until she yelled out in ecstasy.

“Luke.” The tremors running through her body paralyzed her. The release after all these years away from him brought tears to her eyes.

“Are you okay?” He wiped a tear away.

“No sadness here. Don’t stop, please don’t ever stop.” She grinned up at him and chuckled. “You’ve still got skills.”

We aren't done though, right?"

Luke came up onto his knees and laughed with his entire body. "Not done by far."

Kaitlyn's body flushed with feverish heat. She liked the idea of more. "Why are you still clothed?" She wrapped the hem of his shirt around her fingers and used it to raise herself up to meet him. She was on her knees now. She moved her hands, caressing his muscled abs and chest. As she lifted the shirt over his head, she marveled at the well-defined lines of his body. "Damn, you look fine." She stroked her hand down his body and stopped at the zipper of his shorts. "Do you need help with this too?" His eyes burned with lust, and he stiffened beneath her hand. She lowered the zipper until they fell down in a pool on the bed. She worked her hand into his boxers, teasing him. Luke made a rumbling noise like a growl as he took hold of her hand and used it to pull down his boxers. She stroked his desire for her. "You feel as amazing as you look."

Luke's smile reached his eyes as he pushed her down onto the bed, kicking off his shorts and boxers until his naked body covered hers. "I can't believe I get to be with you again." He nuzzled her ear.

Kaitlyn answered with kisses on his neck. "Mmmmmm."

"Condoms are in the bathroom in my shaving bag."

"That seems far away." She wrapped a leg around him and flipped him over so she could straddle him.

"You're killing me here," Luke said.

"Yep, it's my plan. Sex you to death." She bent down and bit him on the chest with gentle teeth. "You still taste delicious."

"What do I taste like?"

"Nothing specific. Just you, 100% Luke." She rolled over onto her side and nudged him in the ribs. "Go, get them and go fast."

"Yes, ma'am."



Luke rolled out of bed and strode across the room. Kaitlyn couldn't keep her eyes off his fine hiney. "Your lunch workouts are worth the effort."

Luke turned back at her and grinned. "Happy to oblige you."

"Hurry back in here before I give up on you." She felt empty without him next to her.

He ran back into the room and jumped on the bed. In one hand, he held a string of twenty condoms. "Oh yeah, that's right."

Kaitlyn giggled like a naughty teenager and tugged him to her again. Soon, they were entwined, and he kissed every inch of her body. His erection pushed against her thigh, and she shuddered beneath him. "I need you inside of me. I want to feel all of you."

Luke didn't wait a moment more. After he slid the condom on, he pushed his way into her.

She moaned into his chest.

He pulled her legs up and tilted further into her. She arched her back as he pulled out and plunged back in, finding a rhythm. When she reached the peak, Luke pinched her nipple and sank deeper still. After the satiation subsided, they explored and worshipped each other all over again. Luke paid extra attention with his mouth, finding all her erogenous zones. After many more orgasms, she collapsed into his arms. "You're right, we do fit."

Luke turned to spoon her and held her body close to his. "We do. We fit perfectly."

They laid in silence for a few minutes before Luke got up and headed to the bathroom to throw away the condoms. Kaitlyn's phone chimed. She thought it would be Noah since she didn't text him back after receiving the video, but it was a text from Neil.

**Neil:** Hey baby, thinking of you. Sent a silly video to Noah and wondered if you heard about it. Nick pretended to be me. He likes to play stupid jokes. Ha.

Luke climbed back into bed. “Noah again?”

“Nope. It’s Neil.”

“Oh.” Luke frowned and tucked Kaitlyn close to him.

She snuggled into his body. “He said the video was a joke.”

“Huh?”

“Huh, is right.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She did not want to ruin their time together, so she pushed thoughts of Neil away. “No. I need some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“Okay.” Luke kissed the top of her head and curled up next to her. “Goodnight, my Katie.”

## Chapter 32 - Luke

Luke stirred but didn't open his eyes. Images of last night played hazy in his mind like a dream. He didn't want to let go of the memories yet. His body wanted more time to explore, more time to show her how much he missed her. Eyes still closed, he rolled onto his side and bumped into Katie's curvy body nestled close to him. Opening one eye, he found Katie staring at him.

"Good morning sleepy head." She smiled and ran her fingers through his disheveled hair.

He grinned back and pulled her to him. "Good morning indeed. Last night seemed like a dream."

"Not a nightmare, I hope?" She kissed his neck.

Luke smirked as he lifted her chin and dove for her lips. They felt warm, and she quickly opened up for him, tasting and licking. Luke felt his heartbeat increase, and he pushed the blanket down, exposing her breasts. Caressing her first with the tips of his fingers, he swirled his tongue around each nipple, pressing his body to hers.

"Luke, you feel perfect. So right."

He licked again. "The best."

She pulled the rest of the blanket off and straddled him.

He gripped her hips, grinning maniacally at her. "This isn't bad either."

She bent to kiss his chest, gliding her hands down to his firm six-pack. "This isn't so bad either," she said, mimicking him. Her mouth pressed light kisses on his stomach while her hand inched down his body.

Luke rolled her over to hover above her. "Not bad, huh?" He kissed her again, and she pulled him down, taking the full weight of his body. "We can do better than that."

"I love how we fit."

He answered with a growl and pushed into her. Loving and taking his time, Luke made sure Katie felt complete and full.

When they couldn't move another muscle, Luke tucked her into him.

"I don't want to get up," she said.

Luke pressed himself farther into Katie's warm embrace, and she responded by closing her arms tighter around him. "Who says we have to get up? We can stay in bed all day long."

"Luke, we can't hide in this hotel room forever."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and be quarantined for a couple of weeks? We could spend it wrapped together like this. Emile will keep leaving us pimento cheese sandwiches outside the door. It will be bliss. Bonus, we could try to make up for all our lost time." He bent down and kissed her neck and gently tugged her earlobe with his teeth.

"That sounds delicious except for the gross sandwich part." She laughed. "A month alone with you sounds dreamy. We need more time." She snuggled into his warm body and closed her eyes.

There was a knock at the door.

"I guess that's our wake-up call." Luke got up, threw on a pair of boxers, and walked to the door.

"I hope I did not wake you." Dr. Roe peered down at Luke's boxers.

"We were awake." He felt the heat rise in his cheeks and hoped he didn't look too sheepish.

At the sound of Dr. Roe's voice, Katie grabbed Luke's T-shirt and pulled it over her head. "Good morning, Dr. Roe," she said, joining Luke by the door.

"I hate to come by so early, but I figured you would want the news right away."

Luke shot Katie a quick glance. “You have new information?”

“The CDC has lifted the quarantine.” Dr. Roe beamed, showing her straight teeth. “You are free to leave the hotel.”

“It wasn’t the measles?” Luke couldn’t help but sound hopeful.

“No, thank goodness. It was scarlet fever. Can you believe it?”

“I can’t.”

“It is remarkable. It is not common in adults, but it happens.” Dr. Roe adjusted her clipboard. “We are relieved it was not a more infectious disease. The measles would have pushed the quarantine at least another ten days.”

Katie bit her lip and turned to Luke. He returned a boyish grin. Another ten days in this hotel room with her would be heaven on Earth. “So, what do we do now?”

Dr. Roe handed Katie the clipboard. “Sign here and you are free to rejoin your life.” Katie signed and Dr. Roe handed Luke the clipboard.

“So, this is it?” Luke signed and handed her back the paperwork.

Dr. Roe’s face turned quizzical. “I thought you both would be happier. Emile tells me the wedding can go on as planned today. That should cheer you up, Ms. Thompson.”

Luke tried not to frown at the idea of her wedding.

“We appreciate you coming by to tell us the news right away,” said Katie with a blank face. “Thank you, Dr. Roe.”

“I am glad to spread fortunate news this time. Now, let me get out of your way so you can move on with the day. I have a lot of rooms to visit this morning. Oh, and best wishes on your wedding day.”

Katie closed the door. “Back to reality, huh?”

Luke wanted to kiss her but he suddenly felt out of place. “I guess I better pack up my stuff.” He walked around the

trashed room, picking up all the items Katie had thrown around in her fit of rage. Is she still angry with Neil? Does she regret what happened last night? He picked up one of his dress-socks dangling from the arm of the chair and turned toward Katie. She stood like a statue, frozen against the door. “Are you okay?”

“It might be a rough day for me, Luke.”

Luke didn’t understand what she meant. “Rough” because she planned to marry bastard Neil or “rough” because she had to cancel the wedding? He wanted to ask her what she meant, but he felt frightened by the answer. He quickly gathered the rest of his items except his workout pants, a T-shirt, and some clean boxers and shoved them into his suitcase. He even fit his suit and shoes in the small bag. “I’m jumping into the shower. You want one too? I didn’t mean with me necessarily.” He backtracked, not wanting to assume anything. “Unless you want to join me. I mean, we could.” He stopped talking because it didn’t seem like she was listening.

Katie shook her head in slow motion as if waking from a dream. “Uhh, no. I think I’d rather shower at my place.”

Luke took his clothes into the bathroom and shut the door. God, I’m an idiot. Of course, she’s in a daze. She has to face Neil today and probably his parents too. He turned on the shower and stepped inside, letting the hot water beat hard against his back. I need to tell her I won’t abandon her during this hard part, and I’ll be with her every step of the way. This time will be different. We’ll get through this together. He turned his face into the spray and smiled. This was his second chance. He couldn’t wait to begin his life with Katie again.

## Chapter 33 - Kaitlyn

With Luke in the bathroom, Kaitlyn could clear her head before canceling her entire life. She picked up the adorable sundress from the night before and pulled it over her head. Glancing in the dresser mirror, she admired Luke's thoughtfulness. Settling down on the edge of the bed, she ran her hand over the sheets. Last night was the best night of her life. If only they could spend a few more days getting reacquainted, then she could face the awaiting Neil shitstorm.

The offensive video from last night seemed like a nightmare from years ago. How did she not know Neil screwed around? He put on a stellar performance as the perfect boyfriend. Will he try to convince me he's still a decent man? She needed to call Noah and get her head straight before dealing with Neil drama. She jumped up from the bed and walked out to the balcony, leaving the doors open to let in the ocean breeze. She dialed her brother.

"You survived the night," Noah blurted into the phone. "Did Luke make it too? I'm so relieved to hear from you. I've been worried."

"Yeah, I managed to trash the hotel room by throwing all of Luke's things out of his suitcase and ranting, but he helped me calm down."

"I'm so sorry, Katie girl. I hated sending you that sick video. No one deserves to find out her fiancé is a pencil dick who cheats, especially by graphic video."

"I deserved it." She slumped into the bistro chair and gazed out at the blue water. "I've been blind. I think this was the only way I could see the naked truth."

"Naked is right. I can't stop seeing Neil's bare ass up close and personal."

"Ugh," she heard Adam groan in the background. "I think I woke up with PTSD this morning."

Kaitlyn leaned her head back. "I hear you. He put on a disgusting show."

“And to think I considered him an honorary ‘single lady’ last night. Gross,” Noah said. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Katie. We were all blinded by his convincing charm.”

“I appreciate the encouraging words, but I made a mess out of my life. I need to figure out a new plan and quick.”

“You made a mess? Please don’t talk that way. You did nothing wrong. This is all his mess. Do not take any of the blame.”

Adam sat down next to Noah and leaned into the phone, putting it on speaker. “He’s a pathological liar, Katie. You dodged a bullet.”

“You don’t understand. Neil’s parents bought us a beach condo. You know, the one you guys slept in last night. I’ll need to vacate it immediately and crash on your couch until I figure out my next steps. I also need to cancel an extravagant wedding with a ton of guests, and I have nowhere to live. I created chaos and homelessness with one wrong decision.”

“No loss. Neil will be very happy here by himself. It doesn’t even look like you moved in at all. There’s not a shred of you in this place.” Kaitlyn heard him take a sip of a drink.

“You always have a home with us,” Adam added. “Don’t worry. We’ve got you. You aren’t homeless. You can stay as long as you want or need.”

“What about the money I owe Neil for what he spent? He paid for the entire wedding. The venue cost a fortune.”

“Oh, please.” Noah snorted into the phone. “It was a wedding based on false pretenses. You don’t owe him a single penny. You didn’t even want this huge shindig. Remember? You wanted to get married at Sunny Vines with close friends and family. Katie, listen to me, don’t worry about the money. He is a miserable bastard. Hell, he should let you keep the engagement ring for all of your troubles.”

Kaitlyn twirled the sizable diamond on her finger. She forgot about the ring. It was beautiful but way too large for her taste. “Don’t be silly. I can’t keep the ring. It’s a family heirloom. I don’t want it.”



“Well, you can’t marry him simply to justify the cost of the wedding either.”

“Oh, I’m totally marrying Neil today.” Kaitlyn smiled, imagining Noah’s shocked face.

“What the fuck? Don’t even joke about Neil,” Noah and Adam screeched into the phone.

“Calm down. Of course, I won’t marry Neil, you idiots. Hello? Sarcasm, guys. You both know me better than that. Although I haven’t proved the wisest in decision making lately. Geez, my life is in shambles.”

Noah let out a heavy sigh. “How many times have we told you that you can’t do sarcasm, honey? You gave us both a heart attack. Death by utter disappointment would be a terrible way to go. And Adam almost spilled hot coffee all over me. It’s too soon to joke about this.”

“My bad. I do feel like I owe him something though.”

“Owe who?”

“Owe Neil.”

“No way. You don’t owe him a damn thing. You owe me and Adam some eggs Benedict for the life-threatening shock you put us through.”

“Oh, and maybe some bagels with cream cheese?” Adam spat into the phone.

“How about you and Luke head over here and pick us up for breakfast? We can work through all the details and make a plan for the future.”

“And mimosas too,” Adam hollered. “Don’t forget to bring those.”

Kaitlyn couldn’t help but grin at the thought of Luke joining the three of them for breakfast. The three people she loved most would help her come up with a plan to get out of this situation as gracefully as possible. This time she would not run away from her problems. “Well, I better get Luke out of the shower so we can vacate this infectious hotel. We’ll be there in thirty.”

She hung up the phone and walked back into the bedroom. “Luke?” There was no answer, so she walked over to the bathroom door and knocked. “Luke, may I come in?” Now that she had a plan brewing, she wished she had joined him in the shower. “Luke?” She knocked again and turned the handle. The bathroom was empty. She searched the hotel room. Luke’s suitcase was gone. “What the hell?”

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A disheveled Luke stepped out of the elevator with his overnight bag hung over his shoulder. All around him, people dragged suitcases behind them and little children cried. The normally elegant lobby was a disaster. At the front desk sat six tired, droopy staff members and a poster board sized note on the counter saying: *No need to check out. The bill is covered. We wish you health and wellness.*

“Health and wellness and a broken heart, you mean,” Luke said out loud to no one in particular. He headed straight for the front doors, hoping to avoid any fellow wedding guests. Katie’s words, “Oh, I’m totally marrying Neil today,” looped repeatedly in his head.

When he opened the bathroom door, he was ready to seduce her again, but he heard her voice coming from the balcony. He didn’t intend to eavesdrop on her conversation, but he heard her say she would marry scumbag Neil. He stumbled backward. He couldn’t go through the heartbreak of losing her again and survive it. Slipping on his running shoes, he grabbed his suitcase and ended up here, in the chaotic hotel lobby.

As he reached the end of the front desk, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. A smiling Emile raced towards him. “Dr. Andrews, I want to extend my sincere apology over the weekend catastrophe.”

Luke held up his hand to stop him. “Emile, it’s okay. I understand the circumstances. We should all be relieved it’s

over, so you don't need to apologize.”

“Please consider coming back to visit us at Pacific Palms Resort. I assure you your next stay will be much more to your liking.”

“I'm sure. Thank you, Emile. I appreciate all of your help.”

“I see you're alone? Is Mademoiselle Thompson not with you?”

“No, she's not,” Luke said. Katie's words, “Oh, I'm totally marrying Neil today,” resounded in his pounding head again.

“Oh, are you waiting for her down here?”

Luke frowned. “No, she no longer wants me to wait for her.”

“No?”

He met Emile's eyes, seeing his confusion. “She didn't choose me, Emile. She plans to marry Neil today.”

“*Mais, non.*”

“Thank you again for all your help.” Luke changed the topic, not wanting to recount all the details of the morning. It hurt too much. “Oh wait, my apologies. What do I owe you for the things I ordered? The extra dinner, the dress? It almost slipped my mind.”

“It is on the house. I was happy to help move love along.” Emile stumbled on the word “love” and frowned. “Please take care of yourself, Doctor.” Emile patted Luke's shoulder and turned to speak to another patron.

Luke watched for a moment as Emile pacified an upset mother holding an infant baby before leaving to find another hotel, one far away from Kaitlyn and Neil's wedding events.

## Chapter 34 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn startled at the commotion in the hall. At first, she thought it was Luke, but then she heard Neil's distinctive voice.

"Hey man, let me in." Neil beat on the door like a crazy man. "Luke, it's me, Neil. I gotta talk to you before the wedding. I need my shit. Open up."

She flung open the door, hands on hips.

"Honey?" Neil stumbled on his words. "What are you doing here?"

Kaitlyn frowned and stepped back. "Come on in, *honey*. I think you might want this conversation private."

"Where's Luke?"

"Beats me. He took off without a word. I wondered the same damn thing."

"What are you doing here?" Neil kissed the top of her head. "Did you come to fetch my things for me?"

"You're such an asshole. Do you believe your own air sucking bullshit?"

"Uhh, I don't understand your question. I dropped by to pick up my luggage. I thought Luke would still be here."

"Yeah? What was it you wanted to discuss with Luke? Maybe show him the sex tape you made last night?"

"So, Noah showed that crappy video to you? Can you believe Nick made it the night before our wedding? Pretty crass. He has a weird sense of humor, that guy." Neil ran a finger down her arm. "I told him it wasn't funny."

Kaitlyn recoiled at his touch. "Of course, Noah showed me, and it wasn't Nick having his wanker sucked." She took a giant step backward so she wouldn't scratch his eyes out. "Give me a break, Neil. I'm not stupid. On second thought, maybe I am stupid for not realizing sooner what a horrible

human being you are. To think, I was going to marry you today.”

“And you still are, baby. Come on, Kaitlyn, let’s be serious. You and me, we love each other. Everything is all right. No harm, no foul.” Neil grabbed Kaitlyn’s hand and pulled her to him. “You’re my girl. There’s no one else but you. Plus, we invited close to five hundred people here for the wedding. We can’t cancel now and disappoint our guests.”

“So, the answer is yes. Yes, you do, in fact, believe your own bullshit.” She pushed him away and walked to the other side of the bed. “Last night, Luke mentioned your stuff is in the closet. Get it and get out. We’re done.”

“What? You saw Luke last night? How?” Neil inspected the space as if Luke could be hiding in the small room.

“He’s not here. He left this morning, and I now I want you to leave.” Kaitlyn sat on the bed, heavy with exhaustion.

“So, why are you here? Did you come this morning? Aren’t you ill? I don’t understand.” Neil scratched his head. “I thought the hotel was under quarantine until recently?”

“I came to seduce you on Friday night, the fool that I am, but you weren’t here. According to your video, you were already getting it somewhere else.”

Neil closed the gap between them, a confused expression on his face. “Wait. You’ve been here all weekend? You were locked in here with Luke? You weren’t at home sick?” Neil slumped on the bed. “Why did you lie to me? What was the point?”

“I didn’t think you would understand the situation, but I guess it was really me who didn’t get it.” She threw her arms up in frustration. “You’re right. There’s no point to any of this trouble.” Kaitlyn walked to the end of the bed. “And now you need to go. I’ve had enough of you and your dishonesty.”

Neil jumped up and got right in her face. “I’m dishonest? You lied to me all weekend. What were you trying to hide?”

“God, Neil, I tried to protect you. I didn’t want you to be upset. I got myself stuck in this hotel. I made a huge mistake.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Neil, I’m done explaining myself to you. I need you to go. Now. I’m tired. I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

“Don’t be upset about the video. It’s only a prank, baby. It was Nick, not me. He played a silly practical joke. Not funny at all.” Neil’s voice went tender, and he reached out to her.

Kaitlyn jumped out of the way. “No, you asshole, it wasn’t a joke. You can’t be serious? Let it go, Neil.” She strode across the room and put as much distance as she could between them. “And just so you know, I stayed up all night with Luke. I was with Luke, and it was fantastic.” She mumbled under her breath, “Not that it matters now.”

“I heard you. You already said you were with Luke.” Neil walked over to her and halted. “Wait. What do you mean by ‘with Luke’?” Neil grabbed her upper arm. “Tell me what you mean?”

“I mean, I was with Luke. With him, with him.” She gestured to the bed. “Luke and I dated. He’s my boyfriend from undergrad.” She pulled out of Neil’s grasp. “He’s my first love, the one I let walk away.”

“He’s what? I don’t understand. You know Luke from before this weekend? How?” Neil paced the room, stopping to stare at the rumpled bed covers. “Are you telling me you and Luke fucked?”

“Yes, Luke and I slept together, and damn, if it wasn’t the best sex I ever had.” Kaitlyn took in the empty room. “At least, I thought it was.” Then she murmured, “Not so sure he agrees with me, though.”

Neil sat down on the bed. “Okay, give me a minute.” He released a long sigh. “We can get past this complication. The wedding isn’t until tonight. We can deal with the specifics later. Go home and take a rest. Your eyes are puffy. I’ll work out the details with Mother. Everything will go on as planned. It’ll all be fine.”

She couldn’t believe what he was saying. The man must be insane. “No.”

“No? We’re doing this, Kaitlyn. We love each other, and we’re supposed to get married today. Everyone expects it. I expect it.”

“No. I don’t love you. I’m over it, Neil. I don’t even like you. You fooled me into thinking you were someone honorable, kind, and honest, someone like Luke. But you aren’t at all. You aren’t any of those things.” Kaitlyn scrunched her hands into tight fists and yelled. “Hell, Luke’s right. You’ve given me a gift with your gross video. I’m free to leave your stupid ass. Thank you for the visual incentive, asshole.”

There was a knock on the door. “*Mademoiselle* Thompson, it is me, Emile. Is everything all right, *ma chérie*?”

Kaitlyn threw open the door. “No. It really, really isn’t all right.” She turned around and checked the room. There wasn’t anything of hers to take home. “Let’s go, Emile.” She looped her arm through his and pulled him away from the room toward the elevator before Neil could say another word. She whispered to Emile as they walked down the hall, “Thank you. Perfect timing. You saved me from a pointless argument.”

“Pardon my intrusion, *Mademoiselle*. Was that your fiancé? The one you chose?”

Emile pressed the lobby button.

“No. Yes. I mean, yes, he is my fiancé. Ex-fiancé now. I guess I chose him, though I wouldn’t use that word now. I feel more like the relationship happened to me. I’m such an idiot.” Kaitlyn leaned against the wall of the elevator.

“So, you canceled the wedding? You won’t marry Dr. Connor today?”

“No. He’s pond scum, Emile. I’m definitely not committing my life to that jerk. Ever.”

“But when your doctor friend left this morning, he said the wedding was on.”

“You saw Luke this morning?” She grabbed Emile’s hand. “Did he leave the hotel?”

“*Mais, oui.* He headed out with his things. I assumed he left the hotel for good. Did he not?”

“Oh, he did. Left for good is the right way to put it.”

“He led me to believe you were getting married today.” The elevator doors opened, and they stepped out into the lobby turmoil. Emile threaded her arm through his. “Perhaps you should talk to Dr. Andrews. He too seemed—” Emile put his finger on his temple, thinking. “Shattered, no, wait, exhausted. He seemed exhausted.”

After the way he left without a word, Kaitlyn didn’t think Luke wanted to talk to her ever again. She turned to Emile with tears in her eyes and hugged him. “You’ve been so wonderful to me. Thank you for everything.”

“I am sorry for the situation and for your ruined marriage plans. Remember to follow your heart, *ma chérie*. You are a kind soul and deserve the best.”

“Thank you, Emile. I hope to see you again.” Kaitlyn hugged him again before she disappeared into the crowd.



## Chapter 35 - Noah

Noah answered the door in skinny black pants, a crisp white shirt, and a red beret. “Katie.” Relief flooded his body. He grabbed her and pulled her into a huge brother hug. They stayed embraced for a few quiet minutes. After he released her, he glanced over her shoulder. “Where’s the luscious Luke?”

“Exactly. Where is Luke? I’d like to hear the answer to that question as well, but I guess this is my punishment for ghosting him ten years ago.”

“What are you talking about?” Noah stuck his head out the front door and scanned the street. “He isn’t with you?”

“Nope. He disappeared from the hotel room while I was on the phone with you. No note, nothing.”

Noah pulled off his beret and shoved it back on with a frown. “That doesn’t sound like Luke.”

“Well, he’s not here, is he?” Katie stepped into the entryway and kicked off her shoes, sending them skidding across the white marble floors. “I will not miss this cold, unfeeling condo. How did I think this place could ever be my home?”

Adam came in at the sound of the noise. “Katie.” He picked her up and held her to him.

Katie’s face pinched. “Oof, Adam, I can’t breathe.”

“Sorry, sorry. I love you so much. I’m so sorry, Katie. This whole situation sucks marbles.”

“I agree.”

Adam took in the empty entryway. “Where’s Luke?”

“Noah, fill Adam in. I need a run.” She made her way to the master bedroom and closed the door.

“What happened?”

“Luke left the hotel without saying a word,” Noah whispered.

“Why would he leave?”

Noah put his hands on his hips. “I don’t know any more than you.”

“Let’s interrogate her when she comes out. She can’t leave us hanging.”

“Is that fair?” Noah asked. “She’s fragile right now. I don’t want to push her too hard.”

“All’s fair in love and war. Now get ready, here she comes.”

“Don’t start. I don’t want to talk about it,” Katie said as she walked toward them in her running gear.

“You need to eat something before you run. Let me make you some toast with jam,” Adam said.

Katie narrowed her eyes at them. “Fine, but I see right through your evil plan, so don’t talk to me. And I want scrambled eggs too.”

She followed them into the kitchen and sat on one of the hard island stools. Noah sat next to her while Adam got the bread and eggs out of the refrigerator. He turned on the stove, heating up the pan. “I told you not to talk,” she said, pointing her finger at Adam.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You spoke multitudes with your eyes.”

Noah swatted her finger. “Katie, dear, you will eventually tell me, so why not get it out of your system before your run?”

“Fine. I slept with Luke and he left without saying goodbye. He didn’t just leave, he snuck out. I got off the phone and the man was gone.”

Adam put the bread in the toaster and clicked his tongue. “Yikes, that’s harsh.”

“And it doesn’t sound like Luke at all,” Noah added. “Did you two have angry sex? Oh God, was the sex terrible?”

“No.” She choked on the word. “It was beautiful and magical. Perfect. It felt like no time passed between us. I thought we were in it together and he felt the same way.”

“He does.” Noah put his hand around her shoulder. “He told me he never stopped loving you.”

“He told me the same thing, but he left me without any explanation this morning.”

Adam put toast and eggs on a plate in front of Katie. “There must be a misunderstanding. Maybe he went for coffee? Maybe he thinks you left him because he came back with breakfast, and you weren’t there?”

“No. He took his suitcase. He left the hotel, okay? This isn’t some Jane Austen novel where everyone ends up happily ever after. For God’s sake, the only wedding in this story isn’t even happening. This is a huge fiasco.”

“Does Luke know?” Noah narrowed his eyes at her. “Did you tell him you called off the wedding?”

“Don’t give me the ‘dad face.’ There’s no reason Luke shouldn’t know.”

“Did you *tell* him, Katie?”

“I shouldn’t have to tell him. We made love all damn night.”

Adam took a bite of her toast. “Yep, just like a Jane Austen novel.”

“You two infuriate me. The message is clear. Luke doesn’t want me, so the sooner I forget I love him, the better.” She shoved the remaining piece of toast in her mouth and got up. “Now, I need to exercise. Gotta release all this stress. Thank you for breakfast, Adam.”

After Katie left, Noah and Adam grabbed their phones. “Which one of us should call Luke?”

“I have to call him,” Noah insisted. “It’s my punishment. I’m the one who interfered with their relationship last time. I’ve learned from my mistake. This time, I’ll force them to talk. We must keep these kids together.”

“But aren’t you interfering again?” Adam placed his phone down on the counter.

Noah grinned and nodded. “I can’t stop now. They love each other.” He leaned over and kissed Adam, then dialed Luke’s number.

## Chapter 36 - Luke

Luke checked into the DoubleTree hotel across town. Desperate for a nap, he threw his bags on the spare chair, kicked off his shoes, and collapsed on the bed. His phone rang in his pant pocket. He sat up and grimaced at the caller ID. It was Noah. He hoped for a second it would be Katie, but of course, it wasn't her. She has a wedding to prepare for today. He silenced the call.

The phone rang again. What could Noah possibly want to talk about now? Luke hit decline again and fell backward on the bed. The phone rang again, taunting him. He grabbed it to hit decline a third time. When the phone rang for the fourth time, Luke knew Noah wouldn't stop. He would call and text all day long until he reached him. "What do you want, Noah? I'm not in the best mood, and I don't feel like having a conversation with you, of all people, right now."

"Katie said the same thing, but that's how it goes. I'm hard to resist."

"So, I guess she told you we were together last night. I told her how I feel, but she's still marrying odious Neil. You calling to make me feel worse?"

"She told me some of the first part, but you got the second half all wrong."

"Listen, Noah, I'm too tired to chase Katie again. I can't win her back. She doesn't want me. The sooner I forget her, the better off I'll be. It's time for me to move on."

"Katie said the exact same thing."

"See, I told you. It's a lost cause."

"No, it's a total misunderstanding."

"Like in a Jane Austen novel," Adam yelled in the background.

"Noah, I overheard her talking on the phone. She told someone she still planned to marry Neil. I will not ruin her wedding if that's what you think. If she wants to be with him, I

won't get in the way, even though it's a huge mistake and she's too good for him."

"She was being sarcastic."

"What? I'm not being sarcastic. I'm being realistic for the first time this entire weekend."

"Not you. Katie was being sarcastic. That's what you heard."

"Sarcastic about what?"

"About marrying Neil. She was talking to me on the phone. I was on the other side of the conversation you missed. She tried smart mouthing me about marrying that dip wad."

"She was being sarcastic?" Luke rubbed his hand over the top of his head, making a mess out of his hair.

"Yeah, she really sucks at it."

"So, she's not marrying Neil?"

"No fucking way," Adam yelled again from somewhere behind Noah.

"Oh my god. Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh. I'm positive. That's why I called you. You get it now?"

"But Noah, I left."

"Yeah, I heard," Noah said.

"I snuck out of the hotel room and left her there alone." Shit, what did I do?

"Yes, you did. Not a smart move, Mr. Darcy."

"But I thought ..." Luke's mind went blank. There was no way to fix this relationship wreckage.

"Yes, we all know what you thought and the sooner you tell Katie, the better."

"How can I make this right? She must be furious with me. There's no way she will take my phone call."

“I’m not sure,” Noah said in a soothing voice, “but she’s out on a run right now and it will calm her down a little. She’ll be back in an hour or so. I suggest you write down this address and call an Uber immediately.”

“I’m on my way.” As Luke hung up, his phone dinged with a text. He thought it was Noah again with the address, but Neil’s name appeared on the screen.

**Neil:** Kaitlyn told me she slept with you. Tensions ran high, and you guys were trapped. She said it just happened. I’m certain you won’t ever touch her again. We go way back and you’re still my bro.

Luke squinted at the screen. Neil? He must be reading this wrong. When did Katie tell him about last night? Neil’s message confused him. Was he threatening Luke or excusing him? While he reread the text, another one came in.

**Neil:** Kaitlyn and I will move past this difficulty. Hope you will too. See you at the wedding, bro.

Luke ignored the texts and jumped into the brown Toyota waiting outside the hotel. He didn’t understand. He was not now, nor ever had been, Neil’s Bro. The text made little sense. Neil’s words baffled him. Noah said Katie canceled the wedding not twenty minutes ago. Was it back on now? Could Noah be stirring some shit up? Would he play me like that? Luke needed to talk to Katie and find out the truth directly from her. He glared out the front of the windshield and willed the Uber driver to go faster.

## Chapter 37 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn jogged longer than originally planned, but she felt better. The run cleared her mind even if her heart was still shattered. She couldn't wait to crawl into bed for the next few hours and forget about the ruinous weekend. When she turned the corner and saw the silver Tesla parked in front of the condo, her stomach dropped and her feet slowed. What the hell is he doing here?

Neil stepped out of the car, perfectly coiffed and dressed in his wedding tux. "Kaitlyn, there you are, babe. Excellent timing. I was about to go inside to find you."

Kaitlyn stopped on the sidewalk, dripping in sweat and stunned into silence.

"You haven't answered any of my calls or texts. I've been worried about you."

She contemplated Neil standing in the street dressed in his wedding tux and smiling. Did he have a psychotic break? "Neil? What's going on? Why are you here?"

"Mother picked up your wedding dress this morning. It's in the backseat. Don't worry, I didn't peek at it. Do you want me to put it in the house?"

Kaitlyn held up her hand to stop him from talking. "Neil, what are you doing with my wedding dress in your car?"

"I didn't want you to make the drive all the way to my parents' house before the ceremony." He peered down at his watch. "You won't have much time to fit in your hair and makeup appointments."

He's certifiable if he thinks I'm changing into that dress. "And?" She pointed at his tux.

He straightened his lapel and shrugged. "I had a last-minute adjustment to make at the tailors and they pressed it for me. I thought it would be easier if I wore it over to the country club instead of changing there."



His explanation sounded even crazier than his demeanor. “Neil, I thought you understood. We canceled the wedding back at the hotel. Don’t you remember?”

“Listen carefully, Kaitlyn. I reflected on our discussion this morning, and I admit my mistake.” She winced, prepared to stop him, but he plowed on. “You’re right. I participated in the video.”

She threw her hands up in the air and took a step back. “Participated? That’s a weird way to put it.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to admit the truth. I’m mortified you saw it. But since you admitted to sleeping with Luke, I think we can call it even.”

Kaitlyn blinked her eyes three times in an attempt to reconcile the scene in front of her. Her fists clenched with rage. “Call it even?”

“Yes. I violated the bonds of our relationship but you did too. So yes, we’re even. Since we tied for bad behavior, we can move forward together with a clean slate.” Neil took a dramatic exhale. “It’s a fresh start.”

“What? No.” Kaitlyn shook her head violently as if the gesture could convince Neil since her words were useless. “Hell, no.”

Neil took one step closer to her. “We both messed up. Why would you say no?”

“First of all, you cheated on me with your nursing staff throughout our entire relationship.”

Neil raised his hands in a “I am innocent” gesture. “That’s ridiculous. Who accused me of sleeping with my staff? I want to know.”

“Luke, Noah, Adam, and Mia can all attest to your infidelity.”

“Who the hell is Mia?”

“Never mind Mia. You’re not marriage material, Neil. I don’t want a future with you. There’s no fresh start for us.”

“I disagree.” Neil spun his head around as if a jury of his peers sat in the street to offer him support.

“Why not stay a bachelor and play with your Barbies?”

“Barbies? What are you talking about? I don’t play with dolls. Kaitlyn, I want to marry you.” He reached out his hands. “Let’s make this happen.”

She dodged his grasp. “No, Neil. Your parents want you to marry me.”

He grinned. “Yes, that’s true. They love you.”

“And I like them.”

“So, what’s the problem, baby?” He leaned in.

“The problem is I hate you.” She stepped back again, continuing their silent dance. “I can’t believe I ever loved you.” Did I, though?

“Kaitlyn, don’t say such a thing,” Neil said, continuing to invade her personal space. “It isn’t true. We love each other.”

“No, we don’t.” She walked backward onto the grass, afraid he might grab her and throw her in the car.

He followed her. “I can give you everything you ever wanted and a house full of babies.”

“Ha. That’s funny. You’re not the father I want for my children. I can’t imagine you as anyone’s role model.”

“That hurts.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah, we’re perfect together. Our family will be beautiful.”

Kaitlyn shook her head in disbelief. “Neil, you don’t even want to be a dad.” You obviously don’t want to be a husband.

“I do. I told you I would do anything for you. And you can stay home and take care of the children like you said you wanted. It will be perfect.”

“Not sure you understand what I want, Neil.” Kaitlyn pointed up at the modern glass monolithic structure behind

them. “And this is where you want our children to grow up, in this cold unfeeling cage? I can’t even leave my running shoes by the door without you freaking out. Imagine what the baby gear would do to your perfect decor.”

Neil scratched his head as if only now realizing the amount of clutter children would add to his minimalist design scheme. “We can buy another house. A bigger one with more land, like my parents, and tuck the kids in there. We can keep this condo for ourselves.”

“That, right there, is not normal dad behavior. You should want to be with your kids, not tuck them away somewhere.” She pointed her finger at him. “Neil, you need to listen. Even if you bought me ten houses, I don’t want to be married to you. I don’t love you. I love...” She paused for a long moment. “I love Luke.”

“Luke? You haven’t seen him since undergrad. How can you still love someone after ten years apart? It’s absurd.”

“I never stopped loving him.”

Neil stuck his hands in his pockets like a disgruntled child. “So, you’re throwing our relationship away? Have you made new plans? You don’t intend to marry Luke, the bleeding heart, instead? Give me a break.”

Her tears started to swell. “No, probably not.”

“And what do I tell Mother? She prepared for a wedding today. You can’t disappoint her like this and embarrass our family in public. She expects you to join the Connor family.”

“Geez. Your mother’s wedding expectations are the least of your problems. I’d be more worried about the sex video leaking out if I were you. That would truly be embarrassing for your family. Anyway, I plan to call your mother in a few minutes.”

“No, don’t. I should be the one to tell her this disappointing news.” He took his hands out of his pockets and straightened up. His facial expression changed as if he had come up with a villainous plan. “I’ll tell her you’re in love with someone else.”

Kaitlyn squeezed the sides of her head in exasperation. “Of course, you will.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Neil, I guess you got me there.”

He reached over and pulled Kaitlyn into a hug. His lips brushed against her neck in a light kiss, and he pressed his body further into hers. “We can still be friends, though, right?”

Kaitlyn pushed him off of her, and he fell back against his car. “No, Neil, we cannot be friends.”

“Okay, whatever.” He pushed away from the car and motioned toward the house. “I need your stuff out of my house by the end of the week.”

Kaitlyn fought the urge to punch him in his smug tanned face. “No worries. I’ll be out by the end of the day.”

“Great. Leave your keys on the kitchen counter and clean up after yourself.” Neil put on his Raybans, climbed into his car, and left.

Kaitlyn stood there on the sidewalk, feeling like she fought a war, and although she won back her dignity, she still lost Luke.

## Chapter 38 - Luke

Luke saw Neil and Katie embrace as the Uber turned the corner onto her street. “Don’t stop, keep driving.” His hands trembled in his lap.

“But we’re here. I thought you wanted to stop at this address?”

“No, drive past it. Don’t slow down.” He ducked low in the car. “Hurry. Keep going.” When her house was a blur behind him, Luke called Mia.

“Luke? Thank god you called.” Mia rushed on, not letting Luke get in a word. “I’ve been dying to talk to you. Did you see the video? I can’t believe that douche. Is Katie okay? Is she a mess? I don’t know what he was thinking when he sent that video. It’s cray-cray.”

“Mia.” Luke took a deep breath, white spots forming behind his eyes. “Mia, where are you? I need to talk.”

“What’s the matter? Your voice sounds far away. Did they release you from the hotel?”

“Yes, this morning.”

“What a relief.”

“Are you free now to talk?” Luke couldn’t hold it together much longer.

“Yeah, I can talk. Why don’t you come over? I’m still in town. Are you okay?”

“Please tell me where you are. I’m driving over now.”

“I’m at Noah and Adam’s place. It’s right around the corner from Katie’s condo. What’s wrong?”

“Be there in two seconds.” Luke instructed the driver to turn onto the next block.

“Which house?” The Uber driver asked just as Mia walked out of the front door.

“Stop here.” Luke mumbled thanks and shut the door. He ran into Mia’s open arms without a word.

“Luke, honey, what’s wrong? What happened? Where did you come from?”

“Let’s talk inside.” Luke smiled up at the blue beach bungalow with the bright pink door. “This is Noah and Adam’s place?”

Mia led him up the path to the door and hugged him again once they got inside. “I’m glad you’re here. The past few days have been insane. Now, tell me what’s happened?”

Luke examined the eclectic plush furnishings, ignoring Mia’s words. “This place feels exactly like them. It’s full of exuberance. I love it.” It was a relief to be with his sister again.

“Yeah, it’s great, isn’t it? I’ve been staying here while they’re at Katie and Neil’s. I think I got the better accommodations.”

“I agree. I can’t believe she lives in such a modern monstrosity.”

“I know, right? That house is all Neil. You should see the inside. It feels like a mausoleum.” She pulled him down on the couch with her. “Wait, when were you at Katie’s house?”

“I just came from there. I saw her and ...” He leaned back into the cushions and shut his eyes. His head throbbed.

“And?” Mia prodded him with her shoulder.

Luke shook his head no with his eyes still closed. “I don’t even want to say it.”

“Did you two fight already?” She ruffled his dark hair. “It can’t be that bad?”

“It’s that bad.” He told her the whole story.

“So, let me get this straight.” Mia stood up and began to march around the small coffee table. “You and Katie have fantastic sex and profess your love for each other, then you overhear her tell Noah about the wedding today. You sneak out

of the hotel, and Noah explains what you heard was only Katie attempting to make a sarcastic joke.” Mia stopped pacing and chuckled. “To be fair, she stinks at sarcasm. She’s no comedian, that’s for sure. Remember when she offered to pick up her parents’ favorite dog, Sam, at the groomers and told them he died?” She scratched her head. “I don’t understand why she thought it’d be funny?”

“Yeah, I remember. Her parents were devastated. That didn’t go well, and you’re right, Katie sucks at jokes. But this isn’t a joke, Mia. This is my life.”

Mia began her walk around the table again. “Hold on. Let me finish. Noah tells you to come over and talk to Katie in person, but when your Uber drives by, you see her and Neil in an embrace, so you don’t stop. And now you’re here.” Mia stopped and took a big breath. “Is that everything?”

Luke cringed. He couldn’t stop picturing her in Neil’s arms. “Pretty much. Isn’t that enough?”

“I don’t see what the big deal is. She was probably hugging Neil goodbye.”

“It wasn’t that kind of hug. It was an ‘I forgive you and let’s get married and make babies’ kind of hug.”

Mia shook her head in disbelief. “Gross. No way. I don’t believe it. Katie wouldn’t marry him after his horrid sex video. She wouldn’t. It must be a misunderstanding, like in a Jane Austen novel.”

“Enough with Jane Austen already. You’ve spent too much time with Adam. I know what I saw. Maybe Neil convinced her it wasn’t him in the video.”

“Yeah, no. Katie would never believe his nonsense. Plus, Noah wouldn’t invite you to come over, only to set you up for disappointment. There’s no way she would stay with a dishonest person. What you heard Katie say on the phone wasn’t true. The only remaining truth is you love Katie and she loves you. That fact has never changed.”

“Maybe not anymore. I left her in the hotel without a word. I didn’t even say goodbye.” Luke pulled at his hair.

“God, I probably pushed her right back into his arms.”

“No way in hell Katie would go back to that lying, cheating, slimy Neil.” She picked up her phone. “That’s it. I’m texting Noah.”



## Chapter 39- Noah

Noah tapped his nails on the kitchen counter, waiting for Katie to return. “Maybe we should go for a walk?”

“Honey, relax. We gotta give our girl some space. She needs to clear her head. We could bake something while we wait?”

“No, I’m not hungry. I doubt there’s anything in the kitchen resembling food anyway.”

Adam sat on the stool next to him, listening to the clock ticking in the kitchen when Katie slammed the front door so hard the glass shook in the frame.

Noah peered around the corner. “I guess the run didn’t help, huh? You were gone for so long, we thought you ran away,” he joked, trying to lift the mood.

“You know what?” Katie put her hands on her hips. “I think you guys should go home. I need to pack.”

Adam’s head appeared next to Noah’s. “We’ll help you pack. We wouldn’t leave you alone with such an enormous task.” He whispered into Noah’s ear, “We can’t leave yet. Luke’s coming over, right?”

“Yes. Hopefully, soon,” Noah whispered back. “I’ll kill him if he doesn’t come.”

“Okay, gossip girls.” She shook her finger at them. “No more secret plots. I need you to go home so I can be alone with my thoughts. I’ll call you later to help with the boxes.”

Noah walked tentatively into the foyer. “Maybe one more secret plot?”

“What are you talking about? I can’t handle any more plots right now.” She held up her hands in surrender. “This day needs to end.”

“It will as soon as Luke gets here,” Adam said, standing behind Noah in case she decided to throw her sneaker at him.

“Luke is on his way over? Why? What did you do?”

Noah walked over to the glass doors and stared at the empty street. “He should be here already.” Just then his phone pinged in his pocket.

“Maybe that’s him?” Adam cozied up to Noah and put his arm around his waist.

“No. It’s Mia.” Noah showed him the text.

**Mia:** Houston, we have a problem.

“What problem? What could possibly be wrong now? Is this some kind of doctor code?”

“I don’t think so. I’m afraid to ask, though.”

“Maybe the breaker tripped at the house again?” Adam grabbed Noah’s phone and started typing.

**Noah:** The breaker is on the right side of the house near the rosemary bushes.

**Mia:** WTF? Why would I need to screw with the breaker box?

**Noah:** Because the electricity is out?

**Mia:** Ha. No, this is a Luke and Katie problem. Take two. This is a cluster f\*ck.

Katie walked over and grabbed the phone out of Adam’s hands and held it behind her back. “You said Luke’s on his way over here. Please tell me what sordid plan you’ve concocted.” The phone pinged again, and she checked the text.

**Mia:** Luke saw Katie hug evil Neil in front of the house. He thinks the wedding’s back on. Help. He’s a bloody mess.

Katie threw the phone to the floor and covered her face. Noah dived for the phone and grabbed it before it hit. “That’s

the newest iPhone, Katie. I stood in line for hours to get it, and you threw it across the foyer.” Noah sat with the phone cradled in his arms. “That must be some text. Can I see it?” She didn’t answer, her face frozen like Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Noah read the text, wincing at the new drama unfolding. “For Christ’s sake. This is absurd. How many dramatic twists are in an Austen novel?”

Adam took the phone and glared at her. “When were you hugging Neil? Is there something you need to tell us?”

Katie dropped her hands from her face and marched toward the living room sofa with Noah and Adam following behind her. She spun around and almost ran right into them. “He must have driven by just as Neil hugged me.”

“Hello?” Adam waved his hand in front of her face. “What are you talking about? When were you and Neil hugging?”

Noah fell onto the couch. “I’m getting motion sickness with all this back and forth, Katie. I thought you went for a run? Are you back with Neil now?”

She sat next to Noah. “I went for a run, but when I got back, Neil was parked in front of the house in his wedding tux.”

“That’s weird,” Adam said and sat beside them.

“Crazy is more like it. He thought we were ‘even’ and we could start fresh. He still wants to get married today.” Katie marched to the kitchen counter bar. Again, Noah and Adam were right behind her.

“What a psycho,” Adam yelled and “psycho” echoed through the sparse rooms.

Noah put his hands on Katie’s shoulders, hoping to calm her and get the full story. “Why were you embracing that psycho?”

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t. His stupid ass hugged me. He thought we could still be friends with benefits or something. I pushed him off of me hard enough he fell against his stupid trendy car.”

Noah squeezed her shoulders. “Kudos to you, Katie. I’m so proud of you. He’s such a creep.” Noah’s phone pinged again.

**Mia:** Did you read my text? What the hell happened? Is Katie marrying Neil or not?

She watched Noah read the text on his phone. “Is it Mia again?”

Noah nodded. “She wants to know what happened and she sounds pissed.”

Adam smirked. “Can’t say I blame her. She is Team Luke.”

“Shush.” Noah waved him away. “I can’t talk and text at the same time.”

**Noah:** No way would she marry that imbecile. Neil stopped by and tried to get her to change her mind. She said hell to the no.

**Mia:** Thank goodness. This feels like a second-rate roller coaster.

**Noah:** Neil is such a dickwad. He threw himself at her. I guess Luke didn’t see her push him into his car. Wish I could have seen it for myself.

**Mia:** Me too. Are we gonna fix this relationship or what?

**Noah:** You know we are.

**Mia:** Whew.

**Noah:** No more texts. We're on our way.

Noah grabbed her hand. "Come on, we're going to our house. Luke and Mia are there."

Katie dug in her sneakers, making a loud squeaking sound on the smooth floor. "Wait. Why was Luke coming here in the first place? You never said."

"Oh, honey. Don't you get it yet?"

She pulled her hand away and crossed her arms. "I guess I don't."

"Luke heard you this morning on the phone tell me you were marrying Neil. Remember your attempt at sarcasm?"

"I thought she was banned from using sarcasm after the grooming incident?" Adam asked.

"She was. Anyway, Luke only heard that piece of the conversation," Noah continued. "Nothing else. That's why he left without saying anything. He thought the wedding was still on."

"He believes I would still marry Neil? Didn't the night we shared mean something?"

Noah took a deep breath and felt a tug on his heart. "He believes it because you said it, Katie dear. He heard you say those words."

"Noah explained everything to him," Adam added, "but I guess he saw you hug Neil when he drove over here."

"I wasn't even touching him. He grabbed me. Big difference."

"Yes, totally. We get it, but Luke doesn't, which is why he is at our house with Mia, confused and devastated."

Katie's hands went back up to her face. "Oh, God. So, I've messed up everything again? How can this be happening a second time?"

Noah took her hands away and kissed them. "This time, Katie girl, I plan to help. I want to make it right for you. We

won't make the same mistakes. I won't make the same stupid damn mistake I did ten years ago.”

Adam threw his arms around the two of them, squeezing them in a huge embrace. “Let's go home and get your man.”

## Chapter 40 - Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn ducked out of the group hug and trudged to the back of the house. The floor to ceiling windows opened to the ocean. The crashing waves, rough against the rocks, matched her thundering emotional state. Adam and Noah crept cautiously to Kaitlyn. She rested her head against the hard glass and pulled at her lip.

“Katie girl?” Noah wrapped his muscled arm around her waist and pulled her to him. “What are you afraid of?”

“What if this happened to keep us apart? Maybe it’s the universe or fate telling us we aren’t supposed to be together. It shouldn’t be this hard. Or did I make it difficult?”

Noah motioned behind them at the sparse condo and shiny, sterile kitchen. “Katie, this space isn’t you. This life seemed easy, and it was a lie.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me choosing this life again. I just wonder if Luke and I are meant to be together.”

Adam sank to the floor next to her. “Oh geez. You can’t mean that. Don’t you love him?”

Kaitlyn lowered her eyes at Adam. “Yes, I do love him. I’ve always loved him.”

Noah turned and walked to the kitchen. Grabbing a glass of water, he crossed back to Kaitlyn. “Drink this. Your mind is clouded. You must be dehydrated.”

Adam stood and ran his hand through Noah’s hair. “Such a sexy mother hen.”

“I don’t know, guys.” She took a sip of water. “Luke and I miscommunicate every time we try to be together as a couple. I don’t think relationships are supposed to get sidetracked again and again.”

“Ha.” Adam and Noah laughed at the same time.

Kaitlyn squinted at them, narrowing in on their faces. “What? You two never have problems. You’re the perfect couple.”

“Katie, oh, Katie girl. We argue and fight all the time. Unattainable perfection makes for a miserable relationship. We learned to accept our human flaws.”

“But that doesn’t mean we don’t love each other,” Adam agreed and pointed at Noah. “Plus, this man adores me.”

Noah beamed at him. “Yes, I do.” He gave Kaitlyn’s hand a squeeze. “But we created big problems when we first moved in together. We had to learn to deal with them and learn how to communicate with one another.”

Adam raised his arms up as if praying to the heavens. “Thank God for couples therapy.”

“You go to therapy? Smack me with a stick. I can’t believe this.”

“Yes,” Adam and Noah answered loudly in unison.

“I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, for one, it’s private, and two, I was embarrassed we needed outside help. Later, when I figured out it was no big deal, it slipped my mind. We only go once a month now.”

“For an emotional tune-up.” Adam grabbed Kaitlyn’s glass and finished the water in one gulp. “Our therapist is the best.”

“Is it normal to have so many misunderstandings, though?”

Noah and Adam smiled at one another. “Remember the time,” Noah started, “when Adam washed all of my wigs in the washing machine, and I thought he intended to sabotage me and take over my act at Hot Topic?”

Adam pinched Noah on the arm. “I helped you.”

Kaitlyn laughed. “Oh yeah, like when he helped you by washing your sequined gowns and all the beads fell off?” She used air quotes when she said “helped.”

Adam pouted at Noah with mock seriousness. “And you broke up with me.”



“I did, and then we went to couples therapy. Dr. Gary taught me that you show love by ruining my stuff in the wash.”

Adam kissed Noah and turned to Kaitlyn. “And this is why I’m banned from laundry duties.”

“So, Katie,” Noah began, putting his arm around her, “just because you and Luke need to learn how to communicate better, doesn’t mean you aren’t meant for each other.”

“Amen, honey pie.” Adam blew her a kiss.

“You two love each other,” Noah continued. “You always have. Go to him. Talk to him. You can make this right. Luke is your lobster.”

“My lobster?” Kaitlyn turned in Noah’s arms to face him. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but I watched this PBS documentary about aquatic life, and they talked about how lobsters find a forever mate.”

“Ohh, yeah. I remember watching that one,” Adam said. He walked into the living room and threw himself down on the sofa. “You two are definitely lobsters.” He looked over the edge of the couch at them, almost falling off the sectional. “What’s the hold-up? Let’s get Katie’s lobster and fix this lovers’ debacle.”

Kaitlyn walked over to the couch and took Adam’s face in her hands. “Are you sure I should do this?”

Noah joined her by the couch and nudged her in the ribs. “Wasn’t it a glorious night of great sex?”

Kaitlyn grinned at the two of them. “Yes, it was amazing. Thank you for reminding me.” She kissed them each on the cheek. “I love you both so much. Your advice is sound. I think I’m ready to talk to Luke now.”

Noah scooted in closer to her and sniffed. “Well, maybe not right this minute.”

“Yeah.” Adam wrinkling his nose. “You should take a quick shower before we drive you over.”

“I think I can handle this by myself, guys.”

“Oh, hell no you won’t,” Adam said wide-eyed.

“No way are we risking some silly sitcom mix-up again.” Noah waved his hand at her. “Nope. What if you fall into a manhole on the way over there, and we all think you ran away to Mexico, but in reality, you are like poor baby Jessica stuck in a hole?” She gave him an incredulous glare. “Don’t give me your bossy stare. With the direction this weekend took, it could totally happen.”

“Fine.” Kaitlyn didn’t want to press her luck this time around.

Noah pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. “We should text Mia first. She must wonder what happened to us.”

“Yes, text her,” Adam said. “We don’t want Luke taking off again.”

**Noah:** Hey. Katie needs a quick shower. After, we are heading your way.

**Mia:** A shower? Why? COME OVER NOW.

**Noah:** She smells terrible after her run. Like stinky socks. Trust me.

**Noah:** It won’t be long. Guessing 15 minutes.

**Mia:** Fine. See you soon.

“Okay, done.” Noah placed his phone on the glass coffee table next to a random studio art book.

“Maybe we should dress up for this reunion?” Adam bobbed his eyebrows up and down at them. “What about a Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth theme?”

“Seriously?” Kaitlyn said.

Adam clapped his hands. “Wait. I have an even better idea, a virus contamination theme? We can wear plague masks and rugged survival gear?”

“I honestly don’t have the energy for a costume. Sorry,” Noah said, sinking into the sofa and closing his eyes.

Adam sank down next to him. “That’s a first.”

“Are you two taking a nap?” Kaitlyn hovered above them.

Adam pinched his nose. “Noah’s right, you smell like stinky socks. Wake us up when you smell like flowers.” Adam snuggled in closer beside Noah and closed his eyes.

Kaitlyn tried to sniff herself. She didn’t smell too gross. They were so melodramatic.

Within six minutes, she was out of the shower and standing over a dozing Noah and Adam. “I’m ready,” she announced, waking them up

Adam opened his eyes, startled. “Wow.” He stretched, reaching his hands up over his head. “You glow. Your dress is amazeballs, and you don’t smell like stale socks. That was fast.”

Kaitlyn twirled her white sundress. “Did I go overboard?”

“No.” Noah grabbed her hands. “You look like yourself, beautiful inside and out.”

She threw herself into Noah’s arms. “Thank you for supporting me.” He held her for a few minutes, no one talking. She stepped back and pointed at the front door. “Let’s go get my man.”

“We can take my car.” Adam grabbed his keys. Kaitlyn and Noah glared at each other behind his back, both making crazy faces.

“Are you sure it will start?” Noah’s voice dripped with mockery.

“I want to get there sometime today, Adam.” She linked her arm through his. “Can’t we walk? It’ll be just as fast.”

“Remember, I can’t risk you falling on your face and breaking all of your teeth,” Adam teased. “Plus, I’ll have you know Petunia got a full checkup and is in perfect working condition.”

Noah locked up the house and they walked over to Adam’s vintage red Datsun Roadster, appropriately named Petunia. Kaitlyn scrutinized the tiny vehicle. “Fingers crossed.”

Adam opened the door and bowed at the waist. “My lady.”

She climbed into the passenger seat while Noah wedged his way into the back, crinkling his nose. “This adventure reeks of excitement.”

## Chapter 41 - Luke

Luke paced the floor. “Ugh, I need you to sit down. You’re making me seasick.” Mia moaned into the soft cushion of Noah and Adam’s navy tassel-trimmed sofa.

“You should’ve seen the jerk. Neil rubbed himself all over her. I think maybe your intel is wrong, or Noah got confused. That seemed like a romantic hug. Plus, I heard her tell Noah earlier she planned to marry him. You don’t think Noah would screw with me, do you?” He wanted to crawl out of his skin. The pain of seeing them back together overwhelmed his senses.

Mia focused on Luke’s face and saw frustration and hurt. “Darling brother, you said your Uber driver drove like a bat out of hell, flying right by them. How would you know what you saw if it happened in a blur before your eyes?”

“Trust me, he had his hands all over her. I should’ve stopped the car and killed him.”

“Gross. Poor Katie.”

“Poor Katie? Poor me. I spent all night with her. I told her my true feelings. I love her.” He plopped down next to Mia and groaned. “Maybe I should go home. I feel drained and this situation sucks lemons.” How did I miss the hold Neil has over her? The repulsive man tricked her for a full year.

“Give me a break. This is Noah, our oldest friend. He wouldn’t manipulate you, and he would never in a million years cross me. I would kill him in the worst way, involving toothpicks and fire ants. That man would be too frightened of my sneaky ways to play games with your head.”

“Ha. We’re all afraid of you and your maniacal mind. And yeah, I knew Noah ten years ago, and if you recall, he kicked me out of Katie’s life.”

“He protected his sister. Remember how it was back then. He isn’t an evil bastard. Katie fell apart, and he had to protect her in the only way he could. He was forced to push you away. It wasn’t personal.”

Luke ran his hand through his hair, ruffling it. “But Mia, he let her date that prick Neil in the first place.”

She rolled over and got in Luke’s face. “Let her? Excuse me? No one let her do anything. She’s her own person, not some fair maiden. Geez.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound sexist. I meant he dismissed Neil’s disgusting behavior.”

“I don’t believe he did. He seemed willing to expose him when we saw Neil with the Barbies at the club the other night, and that was before the sex video.” Mia picked up a throw pillow to hug. “Aaaand, I hate to bring this up, but do we need to consider how destroying your relationship with Neil will affect your foundation money?”

“Mia.”

“Yes. It’s crass, but I want to see your ideas get off the ground. You told me Neil’s parents funded a large portion of the new programs.”

“Yeah. That’s true, but I don’t give a shit.” Luke paced again. “I’ll find the funding somewhere else if the Connors back out. I’ll sell my body and soul to make this foundation a success. We can always hold boots out on the street like the firemen and see how much we get.”

“That’s crazy talk. Donors will be fighting over each other to give you money.” Mia lifted her head to reach for her phone on the coffee table. She read Noah’s text, frowned, and typed her reply. “Let’s make a pot of coffee. We both could use a shot of caffeine.”

Luke nodded his head and followed her into the brightly lit kitchen. On the counter sat a large silver French press. Mia dug in the freezer and found four different varieties of coffee. “You pick. Do you want dark French roast, vanilla, cinnamon, or some Cuban brand that says it’s medium to light roast?”

He made a deranged face. She laughed. “I remember how you like it, but I had to ask with so many choices available.”

“Dark. Always dark and black. I’m hungry too. Do they have any comfort food?” He jumped up and sat on the kitchen

counter, pushing tea bins and dish towels aside.

“Tons. I found blueberry muffins in the fridge this morning. This place is loaded with baked goodness.”

“Great. I love Adam’s baking. He definitely has talents beyond shaking his hiney.”

“Total truth.” She pulled out a plastic container filled to the brim with muffins and some triangle-shaped things on the sides.

“What are those?”

“Scones maybe?” She took a bite of one of them. “Oh my god, they are chocolate and cranberry. So damn lip-smacking good.”

“Pass one over.” Luke took a bite and his eyes rolled back into his head. “Adam should be baking professionally. They taste incredible.”

As Mia crammed another bite into her mouth, her phone chirped with a text.

“I thought you hated it when your phone notifies you of a message. Isn’t it why you keep the sound on silent?”

“Yep. I hate the notification sound. Makes me feel like Pavlov’s dog. I turned it on last night because I kept waiting to hear from you about your viral contamination saga.”

Luke jumped off the counter. “Thank goodness it was only scarlet fever. It could have been a terrible situation for everyone in the hotel if it were the measles.” Though another month alone with Katie would have been ecstasy. Mia nodded as she filled a yellow kettle with water. He pointed at the still empty coffee pot. “I need to lie on the sofa for a few minutes, at least until the coffee’s ready.”

“Brilliant idea. It won’t be steeped for another fifteen minutes. Go.” She pushed his body out of the kitchen. “Maybe a quick nap will give you some needed perspective.”

Luke settled onto the sofa, sighing audibly. He tried to sleep, but images of Katie’s warm body against his flashed behind his closed eyes. Erase that picture. She wants Neil. Let

her go. But how could she pick Neil? Katie's smart. She wouldn't allow someone to treat her unkindly. Would she? He needed to get out of town. A cup of coffee and a nap won't bring Katie back. Why did he wait ten years? Maybe he got what he deserved. None of this makes sense. He tossed again and stared at the ceiling.

Twenty minutes later, Mia tiptoed into the living room and found him still staring at the ceiling. "This is a terrible nap."

"I couldn't fall asleep. I'm too upset. Let's drink our coffee and head home."

"Nope. Let's drink our coffee and wait for Katie to arrive."

"She's on her way? Does she know I'm here?"

"Yes."

"Yes, she's on her way, or yes, she knows I'm here?"

"I assume both by now. I texted Noah. They plan to bring her over in a few minutes." She put the French press on the table and handed him the steaming cup. "Here, drink this."

"Thank you. Best sister ever."

"Watch yourself, it's still superhot." Luke sucked down the entire cup and instantly poured himself another. Mia was right behind him. "Refill me too, please." They drank for a minute before she nudged him. "Scoot over. I need some space."

He shimmied over and they sat down side by side, together, in silence for five minutes before they heard a key in the front door.

"Honey, I'm home," Noah shouted as soon as he opened the pink door.

Mia jumped up. "Oh, thank God. We finished a whole pot of coffee and the caffeine has kicked in, big time." She ran over and squeezed Katie's hand. "Hi, Katie. I've missed you. We must catch up, but I believe you have more pressing work right now." She dragged a silent Katie into the living room.



Luke rose, mouth gaping wide, gazing at Katie. Her hair was damp and the dress she had on reminded him of the one Emile brought up to the room. “Hi.”

She smiled at him. “Hi.”

Mia clapped her hands twice. “Okay, let’s start this intervention already.”

“Mia,” Noah said, waving hello at Luke. “I think we should let them talk on their own.”

“Oh, hell no. I’m not letting them screw this up one more damn time. These two act like idiots when they are left alone. They’re not likely to discuss anything important, and we’ll end up in some crazy ass romantic comedy again.”

“Amen, sister,” Adam cheered and danced his way over to Luke, throwing his arms around him. “Darling boy, you got even hotter. The years treated you well.”

Luke smiled at Adam. “It’s great to see you, Adam. I’ve missed you too.”

Katie shook her head at the men. “Everyone.” This time she yelled to be heard. “Listen up. Luke and I need to talk.”

“We agree,” Mia, Noah, and Adam said in unison.

“I need you three to clear out.”

“We want to help you, Katie,” Mia said.

“I appreciate that, and I can’t wait to catch up with you. Right now, though, I don’t need an audience. It’s been a crazy few days.”

Luke stepped beside Noah and put his hand on his arm. “We’ve got this.”

“Okay,” Noah said, making eye contact with Mia and Adam. “Breakfast?”

“Only if I can eat pancakes,” Mia squealed. “I need more carbs. This morning, I ate Adam’s sweets and now I crave pancakes.”

“Ohh, I’m so glad you found those,” Adam said. “I forgot to tell you they were in the fridge.”

“They were so damn delicious. I loved them, but I’ll need to join a gym to work off those calories.”

Adam smiled, clearly flattered.

“Okay, okay, you two, let’s go.” Noah ushered Adam and Mia out with his hand and turned to Katie. “You sure about this? You don’t need me to be your emotional support pet?”

Katie choked out a small laugh. “Thank you, dear brother of mine. I adore and love your support, but we can handle this on our own. I think.” She glanced over at Luke who nodded his head yes.

“Let’s go bitches,” Noah yelled. “Pancake House, here we come.”

“Maybe not there. I think I might need a mimosa or a Bloody Mary this morning.” Adam grabbed Mia’s hand. “Let’s do State and Fig instead.”

“Yessss,” Noah hissed. “Perfect idea.”

“Let’s take my car.” Adam twirled the keys on his finger.

“Is that safe?” Mia asked, then added, “Wait. Adam, did you get a new car or do you still drive Petunia?”

“As if Adam would ever replace Petunia.” Noah opened the front door, letting Adam and Mia walk in front of him before he turned around to Luke and Katie. “You two talk. Explain yourselves. Listen to one another.” He motioned his finger between the two of them. “There’s so much love here.”

Katie and Luke nodded. “Thanks, Noah.”

“You kids have got this.”

When everyone left, the room stood still and silent. Katie didn’t take her eyes off Luke. He took a moment to gaze at her. She looked beautiful in her white dress and her hair flowing loosely down her back. She wore strappy sandals and her pale pink toenails made him smile. He remembered them from the night before. He wanted those legs wrapped around

him again, an image he would probably only dream about from now on. Neither moved for a second.

“Should we sit?” Katie squeaked in a higher pitch than normal. Luke nodded, motioning for her to go first. She settled herself on the far side of the sofa.

Luke couldn't read her. Did that mean she wanted to be far away from him? He chose the blue and white club chair across from her. The coffee table, still littered with coffee cups and the French press, felt like an ocean between them. Luke wanted to reach out and grab her, pull her to his body. Instead, he sat back as far as he could in the chair.

Katie curled herself into a small ball on the sofa.

“So.” Luke started at the exact same moment she said, “Luke.”

Luke motioned with his hand for her to go ahead. “Please, after you.”

“I'm not really sure where to start.” She grabbed the bright-colored throw pillow and hugged it to her body as Mia had an hour ago. “You left me in the hotel room. Alone. I wish you told me last night you weren't interested, or this was a one-time thing. I'm a big girl. I would understand. But you left me alone without any explanation. That hurt like hell. And Neil showed up at the hotel. I thought it was you at the door. I'm such an idiot. I actually thought you came back for me.”

Luke jumped in. “I'm the idiot. I get it. You picked Neil. I don't need to hear all the gory details. If he's who you want, I can't do anything about it.” Luke shifted his weight in the chair. “However, I thought last night meant something. I thought we were—”

“We were.” Katie stood up fast, still holding onto the pillow, and quickly sat back down. “Last night was—”

“Amazing.”

“Amazing,” she agreed.

“The wedding starts in a couple of hours, so it couldn't have been that amazing.”

“No.”

“Please, I get it. You don’t need to rub it in. I loved seeing you. I wish you well. I don’t think you should marry Neil, but I accept it. I’m too late.”

“Luke, you lost me. I don’t understand what you keep going on about. I don’t intend to marry Neil, ever.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I told you no.”

“I thought you meant the sex. That you didn’t feel the connection too.”

Katie shook her head. Luke stood up and walked to the sofa, lowering himself down next to her.

“Luke, last night was unbelievable for me. It was everything. Being with you again felt right. It was wonderful.”

“Really?”

She smiled at him.

“But I heard you say on the phone you plan to marry Neil today. That’s why I took off without saying anything. I couldn’t stay there after the night we spent together and watch you marry that prick.”

“Didn’t Noah tell you I canceled the wedding? He said he called you, that you two talked.”

“He did, but I saw you and Neil together in front of your house. He was all over you, Katie. I saw it when I drove by less than an hour ago.”

“Yes, he was all over me, and it disgusted me.” She shuddered. “I guess you didn’t see me push him away?” He shook his head. “Luke, you must understand, I would never marry someone who treated me unkindly, even if you weren’t back in the picture.” She put her hands up to her face. “God, I hope you’re back.” She lowered her hands so she could meet his eyes. “I’m so embarrassed I fell for his lies. He fooled me. And now I’ve lost you a second time.”

Luke grabbed her hands. “You haven’t lost me. I’m here for you if you want me. I don’t want to go another day without you. Last night meant everything to me too. I don’t want to sound ridiculous, but I don’t want to live another day without you in my life. Ten years is punishment enough.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Oh shit, did I say the wrong thing again?”

“No. I’m so happy and relieved. I was afraid you didn’t want me, so you snuck out to avoid telling me.”

“I want you. I want you so much it hurts.” Luke pulled her body to his, feeling her heartbeat against his chest. “We belong together. Remember how well we fit.”

“Like a sexy, hot puzzle.” She ran her tongue over her lips, meeting his eyes.

Luke dipped down and grabbed her lips with his. They held each other, kissing, stroking, and rekindling all the emotions from the night before. Luke pulled away in order to see her expression. With his most serious voice, he said, “Kaitlyn, you’re my forever. This time we’ll make it work.”

She smiled but nodded her head no, tears trailing down her cheek.

“No?”

“No,” she confirmed.

“No, it won’t work?”

She smiled again. “No, not Kaitlyn. Katie. And yes, Luke, you’re my forever too.”

# Epilogue

Katie sat with a book in her lap and her eyes closed when Noah opened the door to the study. “Knock, knock. Let’s get this party started before someone needs a nap.”

“Too late. I already need one.” She grabbed the arm of the sofa to pull herself up, but her giant belly kept her pinned down. “It’s not happening. I’m stuck. I need some help, please.”

Noah reached for her hand and pulled her from the purple velvet chaise. “I didn’t mean you, honey. What happens if this party runs past Sunny’s naptime? Will she and the other toddlers burst into flames?”

At the sound of her name, Sunny toppled over her tower of blocks, imitating an explosion and giggled. “Boom. Boom. Boom.”

Katie examined Noah’s flaming red curly wig, blood-stained lips, and extra-long lashes. His blue taffeta mini wrap dress with pink bootie heels might be the thing that burst into flames, not the toddlers. “Who are you supposed to be? I can’t remember. Pregnancy brain.”

“Iconic red-haired Rihanna from her 2010 Loud tour, of course.”

“Of course. And what’s Adam dressed as today?”

As if on cue, Adam poked his head in the room. He waltzed in decked out in a sleek black asymmetrical bob and a pleather bondage dress with lace-up, thigh-high, heeled boots. “I’m 2007 Rihanna from her Good Girl Gone Bad tour.” He stepped in to give her the full view. “It’s perfect, right? I nailed it.”

“Two Rihannas?” Katie asked. “And are you sure about that dress, Adam? You do understand this is a birthday party for a two-year-old. We’re going to freak out some tiger mommies.”

Sunny squealed and ran up to Noah and Adam, grabbing both of their legs in a toddler hug. “My bit-day, Ri-anna.”

Noah picked up Sunny and snuggled her against him, her soft hair tickling his cheek. “See. Sunny loves Rihanna too.”

“Whatever.” Katie started toward the front door. “I think the other mommies might have a heart attack when they find out our party’s Rihanna-themed, not very toddler appropriate, but I’m too tired to care.”

“Rihanna is for all ages, honey,” Noah scoffed.

Adam blocked the door with his arm. “Umm, I think you forgot something, Ms. Barefoot and Pregnant.”

She checked her feet. “Do I have to wear shoes?” Shit, I didn’t repaint my toenails.

“Yeah, you do. You have a vineyard full of guests,” Noah scoffed.

“Fine, hand me my flip-flops.”

“Excuse me,” Adam shrieked, glaring at her feet. “You can’t wear flip-flops to a celebrity birthday party.”

“I can since you two are the only celebrities.” She pointed to her shoes on the floor. “And they’re sparkly. Plus, I’m so swollen I can’t cram my fat feet into anything else.”

Adam handed them to her like they were covered in dog poop.

Katie tried to lean forward and stopped. “Help. I can’t reach my feet. You’ll have to put them on.”

“Really?” Adam gaped at Noah, but he only shrugged.

She reached over to touch her toes and her fingers barely passed her belly. “See.”

“Okay, okay, Cinderella.” Adam got down on one knee. “Hand me your foot.” Katie put her foot in his hand, and he slipped on her sequined flip flops. “Well, at least they fit.”

Noah waved his finger up and down her black sack dress. “If only you had a magic wand to transform Katie’s muumuu into a more flattering sheath dress.”

She punched Noah's arm. "Shut up. This is the only thing that fits me and I'm rocking it. Black is supposed to be slimming."

Noah and Adam shared a glance before laughing at her. "I think only childbirth will be slimming at this point."

"Ha. Ha. Aren't the two of you funny," she said as they walked out into the sunshine.

"MoMo." Sunny reached out for Katie.

Noah pulled her back, swinging her up into the air and back into his arms. "MoMo can't carry you right now, so it's my important job." Sunny twirled one of Noah's red curls.

"MoMo? That's new. Why does she call you such a silly name?" Adam pulled on one of Sunny's locks and it bounced back up like a golden spring.

Katie sighed. "Well, Mom wanted Sunny to call her 'Grandmama,' but last week Sunny started to call her 'MaMa'."

"That's very Southern of her."

"Yep, it's hysterical every time she says it." Noah kissed Sunny on the cheek.

"Since two 'MaMa's' confused us, I became 'MoMo.'"

"What does she call Luke? DoDo?"

"If only." Katie laughed. "She calls him Daddy."

"Daddy," Sunny shouted, searching for him in the crowd of people walking into the newly renovated barn at the other end of the vineyard.

"Speaking of Luke, where did he wander off?" Katie scanned the crowd, but she only saw other mothers with rambunctious toddlers. She definitely suffered from a pregnancy brain when she made the guest list. She invited everyone from KidArt, ToddlerTunes, and YogiBaby. Luke thought it was a bit extreme, but she didn't want anyone to feel excluded. Plus, Sunny loved those classes and everyone in them. Katie figured the more the merrier, but that was before



the exhaustion set in. Luckily, she could sit back and enjoy the show. Adam and Noah took care of every birthday detail for her.

Noah shrugged. "I'm sure he's with Mia somewhere. Is she bringing Henry?"

"Yes. He's so cute."

"He's so old, you mean," Adam corrected. "She has to push him around for God's sake."

"Stop being cruel, Adam. Mia is all Henry has in this life." She shook her finger at him. "And he doesn't have much life left."

"MiMi," Sunny yelled and pointed at Mia and Luke standing by the lemon tree on the circular drive.

Adam busted out laughing. "MaMa, MoMo, and MiMi? You've got to be kidding?"

"I'm not, and I wouldn't make fun since Sunny hasn't come up with a permanent name for you yet." She turned to Noah. "Or you either, Uncle NoNo."

Noah covered Sunny's ears. "Katie girl, don't give my baby any ideas."

"Luke. Mia." She waved at them to come over so she wouldn't need to waddle far.

Luke waved back and walked toward them with Mia and Henry in tow.

"Enry," Sunny said when Mia reached them. Noah put her down so she could pet Henry in the stroller.

"Be careful, Sunny." Mia stroked Sunny's bright blonde hair. "Henry is very old."

Noah scratched Henry behind the ears. "Only Mia would adopt a dog requiring 24-hour care for the next two weeks of his life."

"Where were you hiding?" Luke pulled Katie to him, dipping her, and kissing her dramatically.

“Oh, please.” Adam closed his eyes in mock shock.

“Yeah, get a room.” Noah smiled.

Mia turned to Noah. “Didn’t they already do that?”

Katie ignored them all and snuggled in closer to Luke. His gentle caress made her want to call this party done and head inside alone with him. “They made me put on shoes.”

Luke put his arm around her. “The heathens. Well, the show is about to start, so you can sit down and kick them off again. I’ll hide them so you won’t be forced to put them back on.”

“Best husband ever.”

Luke grinned down at her as Noah and Adam walked to the back of the meadow behind the barn. “Shall we?” Luke held out his arm for Katie, and Sunny grabbed Mia’s hand.

Noah and Adam transformed the barn into a twinkling wonderland with bright yellow balloons and tables filled with sweets and flutes of champagne. One table held a three-foot cake in the shape of a giant number two with sparklers shooting out of the top. The style was just the right amount of over-the-top. Katie smiled at her parents as they took seats before the makeshift stage next to Luke’s parents.

Seeing her grandfather, Sunny scrambled onto Luke’s dad’s lap, hugging him around his neck. “Papa.”

Katie leaned into Luke’s shoulder. He smelled like home. “Did you know Sunny’s obsessed with Rihanna?”

Before he could answer, the music started and the two vintage Rihannas took center stage. Luke twisted around, eyeing all the mothers in their flowered printed sundresses. “Well, this might be a shock for some of our guests who don’t know us very well.”

The song on stage continued as well as the provocative dance routine. Katie could feel eyes on the back of her head. “Are these the right words? I can’t remember ‘Birthday Cake’ sounding like this.”

“Are you kidding? Like I would know. But Adam and Noah. Wow, they’ve still got it. Those two can really shake

their bums.” Just then, the chorus started and all the toddlers, including Sunny, rushed the stage and started singing and dancing along.

“We should be recording this.”

Luke pointed to his mom. “She’s on it.” He clasped Katie’s hands and pulled her up onto the stage with him. “Let’s join the fun.”

Surrounded by a gaggle of two-year-olds, they danced, fitting together like a perfect sexy, hot puzzle.

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## About The Author

### **Michelle Angelle**



Michelle Angelle is the pen name of two good friends. Our love of clever romances, great breakfast diners, and late-night wine tastings led to many sassy stories. One day, we started writing them down.

## Books By This Author

### [Dear Pink](#)

Will an unexpected bucket list change Hannah and Gabe's lives forever?

Hannah will never fall in love again. That's what she tells herself after she catches her ex in bed with another woman. But when her best friend sends her a cryptic email, Hannah is forced to face the real reason she's been hiding from love and life.

Gabe has sworn off relationships for good. His cheating fiancé made sure he'd never risk his heart again. But when he saves a woman on a runaway bike, she reminds him love is worth the risk.

Will Hannah and Gabe put aside the past and let love into their lives? A crazy bucket list might just be the trick that gets them both back on track.

Dear Pink is a modern love story certain to make you laugh.

### [Until Next Year](#)

Two best friends. Ten New Years. One unforgettable night.

Can a man and a woman just be friends? Gloria and Jacob put this question to the test, but will a lifelong friendship withstand their undeniable attraction?

Gloria's trained her whole life to dance at the American Ballet Company in New York. Now that she has a coveted spot, she won't let anything or anyone stand in her way. Too bad she's in love with her childhood best friend, Jacob, a famous rockstar every woman wants.

Jacob's been in love with Gloria since elementary school, but she treats him like her best buddy. Over the years, his feelings have only grown stronger. Will he ever get out of the friend zone? One thing is certain ... he can't wait Until Next Year to find out.