

A Fisher out of Water

a sweet romance



SAVANNAH SCOTT

A FISH OUT OF WATER

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS CLOSED-DOOR
ROMCOM

SAVANNAH SCOTT

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For Jon

*We've made it through 20 books
and so many more years.*

Thank you for supporting my dreams.



*For the ones who've been misunderstood.
And those whose defenses are high and thick.
May you find the people who take the time
to know you and to see you:
Those rare and precious souls
who carefully scale your walls
to find their place in your heart.*



You are worth it.



We're all only human, after all.



SUMMER

*From the moment I saw you,
I knew that I wanted to spend
the rest of my life avoiding you.*

– Unknown

“**M**ermaids are going to be hot right now. So hot. All the rage!”

What does that even mean?

I swirl my toes in the water. One of the perks to wearing these cotton khaki shorts is being able to stick my feet in the water at one of the resort pools when I’m not on the clock. Whenever I can, I make use of the back patio and lounging areas of Alicante Resort and Spa on my lunch break.

And, okay. Being able to soak my legs in the pools is definitely the only perk to wearing these shorts. They’re stiff and the polar opposite of stylish—unless I’m shooting for a look that resembles a mom of two-point-five kids in Vermont who just happened to land a side gig modeling for L.L. Bean.

This is exactly the kind of image my dad would have wanted me to pull off for a pose with the family on a yacht somewhere. Well, he wouldn’t be a fan of the shirt with the resort emblem on my chest. But the whole preppy, clean-cut, we-summer-in-Martha’s-Vineyard look? Yes. He’d make the most of these shorts. We’d each have a pair. He’d probably even try to get our family dog, Churchill, to wear some.

I watch the water swirl away from my shins, rippling and then stilling. It's midweek, the end of summer, but early enough in the day that not all the pools are swarming with guests yet. Give it an hour and all the recliners and cabanas will be filled with the affluent and famous who seek out a luxurious getaway in this exclusive destination—along with those who saved for years to come sample the good life before returning to their usual grind, or the occasional resort-based conference-goer who always stands out in a more touristy way.

“Mermaids are hot?” I repeat, unable to keep the questioning note out of my voice.

My agent, Elaine, got me a gig as a mermaid in this production being put on in a few months on the island. No, my job in Guest Services doesn't include having an agent. Elaine Sharpe's a talent agent—one of the most sought after in Hollywood. She's helped a number of up and coming stars find their way onto sitcoms or major motion pictures.

I'm an aspiring actress who refuses to be just one more waitress biding time until she gets her big break in Los Angeles. Not that those waitresses have it wrong. I'm in the same boat they are—hoping for the role of a lifetime or an audition with the right casting director that will push me into the next stage of my acting career. In the meantime, I'm taking whatever I can get so I can fluff my resume and scrape a living.

“Yeah. You know. Things trend. Vampires. That was a few years back. All the Edward Cullen stuff. Then space, you know *Lost in Space* and the *Mandalorian* craze. Then we went through the whole obsession with the 1800s after *Bridgerton* hit it big. Now it's mermaids ... and pirates. Ever since Ben Speilding and Steven Arken decided to do their next film—a story based on Poseidon and his daughters—the industry is going gaga. And it hasn't even been cast yet. Ah, to be the men who set the trends. But lucky for you, I've got an ear to the ground, so I can catch on before a trend really roars to life.”

“Mermaids and pirates.”

I really don't have to say anything. Elaine can hold her own conversation, but I've found if I'm completely quiet, she starts asking if I'm still there, so a little echoing of her words keeps things moving along.

“And this is big news for you, Summer, since you're playing a mermaid right when Hollywood producers are looking to kick off more shows and movies with mermaid themes. If we play this right, you could have opportunities to audition for something far more lucrative and high-profile.”

Pretty much any play in community theater would be more lucrative and high-profile than my gig on Marbella Island, but I don't mention that petty detail to Elaine. She's all about positive vibes, actualizing your potential, and manifesting your future. She is quick to chide me whenever I'm bringing in negative energy, as she calls it. I call it being realistic. Not once has thinking positive spared me the hard knocks of real life.

I try not to emulate Elaine's excitement. It's more contagious than Swine Flu, and just as lethal. Elaine tends to spoon feed me hope. I've learned to wait for something tangible before I celebrate right along with her.

“Sounds promising,” I finally concede, throwing her the bone I know she wants.

She believes in me—believes I'll be a name people recognize one day. *You'll be the next Sandra Bullock, the next Angelina Jolie, the next Zendaya.* Never mind that those three women are nothing like one another and play completely distinct types of characters in different genres of movies.

“I love this for you, Summer. This could be the thing—your big break. You could go down in history as the woman whose name is synonymous with *mermaid*.” She pauses a nanosecond. “Okay. Well. I need to go. Botox at noon. Not everyone has your youthful skin. I used to, but that was eight or nine years ago. Now I have a little help from my friends, if you know what I mean.”

I do. I grew up in the land of botox, fake boobs, and the booty-full butt lift. Tucks and snips, lifts and fillers.

Augmentation, reduction, enhancement. It was the way with my mom and her friends—anything to prevent (*huge gasp*) aging or (*huger gasp*) weight gain. Many girls not too much older than me had nose jobs, chin jobs, even boob jobs in high school. Sweet sixteen? Here’s your brand new Mercedes sports car and an appointment with Doctor Burke. We strove to improve our images and lived like we were all slightly above the rest of the common people. And somehow I still want to immerse myself in Hollywood, the land of plastic body parts and quickie divorces.

My parents would die a thousand deaths if they could see me now, wearing a white polo with an employee name tag pinned to the chest and these godawful shorts, living in the staff dormitory, and driving golf carts—and not because I’m about to hit a round on the green before lunching at the club.

“Well, toodles, Summer. Get ready to make a splash!” Elaine’s voice breaks through my mental spiral about my life BC (Before California).

She’s always dishing out puns that border on dad jokes.

“Thanks! Happy botox.”

Did I really just say that?

Elaine ignores my odd salutation, makes a repeated kissing sound, and hangs up.

The alarm on my phone chimes, telling me break time is over. I swirl my feet once more, lean back on my arms and close my eyes to let the island breeze blow across my face. Then I stand and walk through the tall double doors that lead into the main hotel building. Guest Services has a rounded desk just off the center of the lobby with a tiled partial wall behind the desk. Water flows down the wall into a marble trough, creating a soothing, tropical ambiance. We have our own computer and phone setup so we can arrange for the needs of resort guests.

“I’m back from my break,” I tell Shaw, the head of Guest Services.

“Oh! Summer! Great. I have a couple who wants a tour of the north shore. They’re interested in seeing the fishing spots and the old town. You know what to show them and what to steer clear of.”

“I do.”

“Great. I told them you’d be in from break shortly. They’re meeting you at the golf cart corral at eleven. The husband’s in oil—from Texas. Treat them well and you may get a nice tip out of this. Mr. and Mrs. Pickins.”

“Thanks, Shaw.”

Shaw smiles at me. He’s probably seven or eight years older than me, but he gives me the look. You know the look. It’s the one that says he’d be happy to do something less professional after work.

He’s my boss.

And he’s charming.

I don’t do charming.

I once heard this proverb that went something like, *Charm is deceitful*. No kidding. And I’ve had enough charm to last me a lifetime. Give me a simple man who doesn’t think too well of himself. Or, scratch that. Give me a career in Hollywood. Who needs men? I can live on friendship and wealth and fame—and a healthy dose of Audrey Hepburn movies, and dark chocolate, and coffee drinks that are more cream than anything.

I spot Mr. and Mrs. Pickins when I step out the front doors and down the steps leading toward the resort’s wide, lush entryway. It’s pretty hard to miss the very large man with graying hair standing next to the golf carts, wearing boots and a cowboy hat. But, bless his heart, he’s got a bright yellow, large-print floral shirt on as if he were in Hawaii, and he’s paired that with some pink board shorts. It’s quite the getup. I’ve been to Texas plenty of times on trips with Daddy. I know not all Texans are cowboys. But those who are, most definitely are. And Mr. Pickins looks like he possibly sleeps in his boots and hat. His wife is wearing a very tasteful sundress that looks

tailored to her. She looks about ten years younger than Mr. Pickins, but one never knows.

“Mr. and Mrs. Pickins?”

They nod as I approach.

“I’m Summer. I’ll be your guide for your tour of the north side. Please, hop in.”

Mrs. Pickins smiles a beautiful smile. Her hair is perfect, not one strand out of place. Her lipstick looks like it wouldn’t smear even if she rubbed her lips all over something. Great. Now I’m picturing Mrs. Pickins rubbing her lips all over things just to prove how foolproof her lip color is. I swallow my urge to giggle.

Mrs. Pickins’ voice fits her, a demure and lovely tone with the slightest lilt to it—probably from somewhere near Dallas.

“Well now, Summer. We sure thank you for takin’ the time to come out here and drive us around.”

I’m careful not to fall into a sympathetic southern accent from the mere sound of the words falling out of Mrs. Pickins’ mouth. I can change accents the way a chameleon changes colors, but southern is the most natural to me—for reasons.

“It’s her job, Ginger. Isn’t that right, dear?” Mr. Pickins looks at me, and I can tell his question is rhetorical. Besides, the Alicante Guest Services training taught us how to skirt potentially controversial situations with guests. I’m not about to side with one Pickins over the other. No pickin’ between the Pickins.

“Now, now, Slim.”

Slim. You’ve got to be kidding me. This man’s name is Slim. Slim Pickins.

I nearly chuckle, but I cough to cover it. Then I wave toward the cart. The couple takes the back seat and I hop in to drive.

I lead us along the small paved road that winds uphill and leads toward the main road that hugs the coastline. The other smaller street leading away from the resort ends at the

employee dorms, where I live for the time being. I avoid that road, knowing guests aren't supposed to see what's up there.

"Isn't this just the loveliest?" Mrs. Pickins asks out loud in a way that's more of a statement than a question. "How long have you been working here, dear?"

"About a month so far, ma'am. How long will you be staying with us?"

Always turn the questions back on the guests. That's another Alicante rule of thumb.

"We're only here for a week. Slim's got business to get back to. It was all I could do to drag him away for a week."

"Well, I hope you enjoy your stay." I point out toward the ocean. "That pier is our boat launch and rental area. Guests who want to learn to surf, snorkel or sail can arrange for lessons or rentals."

Mrs. Pickins says something to her husband about bringing their grandkids here sometime. He simply nods.

"Where are you from?" Mr. Pickins asks with a tone that sounds more like a cordial obligation than any type of genuine personal interest.

"Here and there," I fib. "We've moved around a lot."

We haven't. I grew up in an estate that's been in our family for generations. The nature of my father's line of work means he has to portray an image of stability. The thought makes me swerve the cart just the slightest.

Mr. Pickins gives me a chiding look in the rear view.

"Sorry," I say. "I thought I saw a starfish."

A starfish? Really?

Mr. Pickins ignores my ridiculous excuse for distracted driving.

"Army brat?" he asks bluntly.

"Slim! What has gotten into you?" Mrs. Pickins shakes her head at her husband.

“I think it’s all this sand and water,” he nearly groans. “I miss the humidity. And the ranch. And the office.”

“Well, I never,” his wife chuckles good naturedly. “If I’d-a known you were going to be a grump, I’d have invited Missy or Clarise instead. We could’ve gotten spa treatments and enjoyed the ocean breezes together. You better snap out of it.”

Mr. Pickins nods, seeming not at all interested in snapping out of anything.

I’m grateful the focus has shifted to Mr. Pickins. I don’t need people poking around in my personal life. I’m here in California. Moving on with my future—a future in film as Summer Monroe, if Elaine and I have anything to say about it. Elaine picked my name. She said it would make people speculate if I were somehow related to the late, great Marilyn. She insisted Hepburn would be too obvious. I reluctantly agreed, but now, I love Monroe. It suits me.

I drive the Pickins around the north shore, past the older wooden piers and rock jetties where fishermen cast their lines or dive for lobster at night when it’s in season. I tour them through the older neighborhoods that wind up the hills toward the north side of the island. There are some private home rentals open here and there, but mostly these homes are filled with locals—humble people who’ve embraced the island lifestyle. Some of them are a tad eccentric. Most of them grew up on Marbella or chose to live here so they could enjoy simple living and escape the demands of life in LA.

We wind around a bend where plein air painters are creating their interpretations of a cove and the view beyond on canvases propped on easels. I wrap up the tour by passing some smaller shops where locals get groceries, coffee, and clothing. The quaint stores aren’t like the shops near Alicante. Those are high-end, island-styled, and tourist-focused. These shops are more casual, with worn wood exteriors and simple interiors.

The people who live on this end of Marbella like to be left alone. They begrudgingly share the island with the resort guests. Yes. Some of them even work at Alicante or own one

of the restaurants or shops in Descanso. But they want the bulk of their lives to be lived on this secluded section of the island. It's a love-hate thing for them with tourists.

I wave to an elderly woman I met last week when I took a kayak out on my day off. I docked it on one of the north shore beaches and was sitting on the sand when she walked by collecting shells. She stopped to chat and we ended up talking for nearly an hour. She was interested, not nosy, and believe me, I know the difference.

“Hiya, Summer,” she shouts out.

Phyllis is wearing comfortable capri pants in a light khaki color, a white T-shirt, and her cover up looks like it's made of silk scarves. Her feet are bare and she's walking along with her sandals dangling off the tip of her fingers as if shoes are an afterthought.

“Hey, Phyllis!”

I don't slow the cart. For one thing, I don't know what Mr. Pickins might say to Phyllis. For another, this is her home. He seems like the type who might treat any unfamiliar place like an exhibit. Mrs. Pickins waves and Phyllis waves back. Mr. Pickins nods his head politely, but in a way that only people who are old money can do. It's fascinating. I'll practice that same facial expression later in the mirror. One thing about working my temporary job here—I get plenty of material.

When I drop the Pickins back to the main building, Mr. Pickins slides me a hundred dollar bill. That kind of money never used to make me flinch. My weekly allowance far exceeded one hundred dollars, and that didn't even include the uncapped credit card Daddy insisted I carry. He paid that off at the end of every month—or at least I think he did. Who knows what he actually did.

Today, I know the value of a dollar. I'll take this Benjamin, and I'll make it last.

I have one more task before I clock out for the evening—greeting four new employees when they arrive on the

afternoon ferry. I walk from the golf cart parking area to the main pier just as the boat is pulling in.

Shaw gave me each new employee's photo and basic info to review. The taller young man with blond hair and kind eyes is Cameron. The other two are summer temps. Madeline and Riley. The guy with wavy light brown hair looks like trouble. He's got the smile of a charmer—even in the picture in his employee file. *Ben*. I'm fully aware that it's wrong to prejudge a person by a photo. I guess I'll give him half a chance.

I make my way to the end of the dock. A crew member calls me over to where the four new hires are waiting for me.

“Hey guys, I'm Summer. I'll be your welcome hostess and island guide.” I look at Cameron and address him. “You must be Cameron.”

“How'd you know?”

I explain that Shaw gave me their files, and then I glance over at Ben. He's handsome in a reckless way, with disheveled hair that would tempt most women to run their fingers through it. Blond streaks from time spent in the sun make him all the more appealing. His graphic T-shirt stretches over his muscles in a way that says he works out and wants to show off the results of his efforts. His eyes catch mine. Grey? Hazel? Brown? I can't tell. Mischievous. I can tell that. Ben's jawline is cut, defined and manly. But he's got a boyishness to him that's supposed to put me at ease. It does anything but.

He gives me a look. It's classic Flynn Rider. No. It's like Jude Law and Robert Downey Jr. had a baby. Only, that baby took smoldering lessons from Adam Levine.

Man. Oh. Man.

If I were into players or flirts, this guy would be hitting every note for me. Unfortunately for him, he's completely not my type.

He adds a smile to his full arsenal, which I'm sure he intends to use to cause me to faint on the spot, or something equally ridiculous.

Then he speaks. He's got one of those voices you don't expect. There's a playful note to the tone, but it's a little gravely, like he just woke from a nap. Maybe he did. That boat ride can be pretty soothing.

This guy's the whole package. He should come wrapped in caution tape.

"Hi, Summer. I'm Ben. I've always loved summer. It's my favorite season."

Oh. No. He. Didn't.

Get me a charcuterie board. This man is bringing the cheese!

As if the line wasn't enough, he wags his eyebrows. I just can't. He could give lessons. He's that good. But for me, good is bad—very, very bad.

I think we're done. But Ben's apparently not. He wags his eyebrows again. It's not gross or skeezy. He's a master. I'll give him that. Smooth. Attractive. Lethal.

Then he says, "And now I have even more reason to love that season."

I look through his soul. It's that look that says, you better keep an eye open at night. I don't even dignify his comments with an answer. I cross my arms over my chest. And then, I decide to add one last comment, just so we're clear where we stand.

"Well, hi, Ben. You were pretty cute ... until you opened your mouth."

BEN

The moment I saw you, I knew I was in trouble.

And I never wanted to be saved.

– *Unknown*

“**I** think I’m in love.”

The words are out of my mouth before my brain has a chance to catch up.

I’ve never felt so off-kilter. Not to brag, but I’m the type of guy everyone loves. Girls love me. Guys love me. Moms and dads love me. Senior citizens love me. Children love me. Even stray dogs with trust issues love me.

But this woman, the one standing on the pier, wearing the badge that says *Summer*? Welp, she does not love me. Not at all.

Three of my closest friends in the world and I just landed on Marbella Island, off the coast of California, after driving for a week down historic Route 66. We spent last night in LA and took an afternoon ferry boat over so Cameron and I could start our new jobs in just over a week.

I’m stoked, as the surfer dudes say. Or, I was stoked, until Summer shot me down.

A blond woman wearing a white polo, tan pressed cotton shorts, and white boat shoes had walked down the dock to greet us when we stepped off the ferry. I’ll be cliché enough to say she took my breath away. Did my mind start singing a

song about wishing they all could be California girls? I won't admit it. Let's just say the Beach Boys knew what they were talking about. Blond, slightly taller than average, tan, with sun kissed freckles across the bridge of her nose, sharp eyes that sparkled with kindness ... Well, she was full of kindness until she officially met me.

“HEY GUYS, I'm Summer. I'll be your welcome hostess and island guide.”

She looked at my best friend first. That rarely happens. It's not like Cameron isn't attractive, for a guy. He's just aloof. And he's so taken with his new relationship, he's got *doubly-unavailable* written all over him.

But Summer smiled at Cameron. A wide, gorgeous, welcoming smile. And she said, “You must be Cameron.”

When Cam asked her how she knew, she said, “Employee file. They gave me each of your photos so I'd recognize you.”

Are you tracking with me? She had all four of our photos, but she talked to Cam. I picked up on that little detail right away. It wouldn't bug me, normally. And I figured she just hadn't really had her full chance to see me. So I set about fixing that minor detail.

I cut in before she could call me by name and officially introduce herself. And, yes, I gave her the look. It's a foolproof approach. You don't know me yet, so let me assure you, I'm not some sleazy scumbag who comes on to women left and right.

Am I a flirt?

Most definitely.

But I only flirt with ... well, everyone. Okay. I'll give you that. But I flirt for fun. And people generally eat it up. I'm not doing any harm. I'm spreading a little levity and making people feel good.

I put that look on my face—the one that has never failed me, as in *never*.

I gazed into her bright blue eyes, smiled, and said, “Hi, Summer. I’m Ben. I’ve always loved summer. It’s my favorite season.”

I wagged my eyebrows. Not like some creep. Just that light wag that always seems to make women respond to me.

If any of these moves were off, Cam’s face would have told me. But Cam stood by, seemingly confident I was going to win Summer over with my tried and true approach.

I added another compliment—a truthful one. I might be playful, but I’m sincere.

Still lightly wagging my eyebrows, I said, “And now I have even more reason to love that season.”

Summer looked at me.

And the most foreign, unexpected, inconceivable thing happened.

Summer crossed her arms over her chest, and said, “Well, hi, Ben. You were pretty cute ... until you opened your mouth.”

Then she gave me a smirk.

A smirk.

I’d be lying if I told you that smirk wasn’t beautiful—in a dangerous, very rejecting, but still unexpectedly sexy way.

I felt like someone had punched me in the gut and then clubbed me over the head.

And Cam—what did my best friend, the guy I’ve grown up standing alongside through thick and thin with—what did he do? Oh. He chuckled. It wasn’t even subtle. He laughed at my expense—in front of Summer. This is the thanks I get after basically setting him up with his sister’s best friend.

I’ll admit, it was good to see Cam laughing. He’s always so serious and intense. Falling for Riley seems to have softened him. But laughing at my expense? I could have done without that second layer of humiliation.

I was so baffled, at a total loss for words. And trust me, that happens so infrequently I can't remember the last time I was rendered completely speechless. I'm the guy with a punchline always at the ready. I'm known for my sense of humor and my easy-going personality.

I stood there, stunned silent while my best friend tried, and failed, to wipe the amused grin off his face.

"Whoa," Cam finally said to me under his breath. "Never saw that coming."

I just shook my head.

Me neither, dude. Me neither.

And then I blurted out five words without even thinking twice: *I think I'm in love.*

That sent Cam, Madeline and Riley into a private fit of giggles.

I need to make something totally clear here. I don't believe in love at first sight. I'm not even sure I believe in love. For other people, sure. But I've never fallen for anyone. If I do, which I guess someday I might, it won't be sudden and swift and debilitating like what I just experienced. I'll get to know the woman. We'll spend time together. Sure, I'll flirt. But I'll also share my heart with her. And I'll romance the heck out of her.

If there were going to be someone I would fall for, I'd let her know what she meant to me every minute of every day. But so far, while I've dated plenty, it's always just been a good time. Women fell for me occasionally, even when I tried to let them know I wasn't interested in anything more than friendship. But I've never met a woman who made me crazy, who dominated my thoughts, who made me reconsider all my life choices.

Whatever this is with Summer, it's obviously not love. But it's something, because I feel like a man with a splinter stuck under his thumbnail.

One of those splinters that you just can't get rid of.

A splinter named Summer.

I just met her and she got under my skin in a way no other woman ever has.

I don't have time to dwell on my awkward welcome to Marbella Island because we're being ushered along the pier that stretches toward the beach alongside a harbor filled with luxury sailboats and motorboats. The terracotta clay tile rooftops and white stucco buildings of the resort sit off in the distance about a block away, behind a bunch of multicolored storefronts that line a small street and walking path.

Evenly spaced palm trees line the back edge of the soft sand beach. South of the pier, the sand stretching along a beachfront is dotted with red beach umbrellas and loungers. Looking to the north, I see the boat launch and a small white wooden building on a dock with a turquoise, beachy sign that says, *Rentals-Lessons-Tours*. My new workplace.

"Welcome to the office, Ben," I mutter to myself.

Despite the residual confusion and whatever else is swirling through me about Summer's reaction to me, I smile. I'm going to be working on a dock next to a beach in paradise every day from here on out for the foreseeable future.

Cameron's walking up the pier, talking to Summer like they're old friends. I sidle up to them, ready to have another go at this. So, my too-cheesy line made a bad first impression. I can fix this.

"This is so beautiful," Cam is saying to Summer.

She smiles back as if she dishes out smiles like a cheery little grandma greeting Trick-or-Treaters on Halloween. "It really is. I just started working here in June. My agent got me the gig."

"Your agent?" Cam asks her.

Her agent? Huh.

"I'm an aspiring actress. There's a show that's going to be starting on the island in the next few months. I auditioned for the part of the mermaid." She pauses, looking at Cam with a

shy look on her face. “It’s not like I dream of playing mermaid roles in island theater productions, but we take what we can get in the hopes that each role gives me increased exposure so I can go for the next big thing. Someday, I’ll get my break. It just takes that one role to get noticed and then a career can skyrocket.”

“I’d love to see the show,” I say, striking while the iron’s hot.

Again. I’m not lying. I would love to see Summer in a show. For good measure, and to demonstrate my valid interest in the dramatic arts, I add, “I did a little theater in my high school days.”

Summer completely ignores me.

No. You don’t get it. It’s like I borrowed Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak.

Nothing. Zilch. Nada. She’s not even acknowledging my existence.

I lick my teeth to see if I’ve got something stuck in them. Nope.

Then I subtly look the other direction and check my breath against my hand. It’s good.

I’d sniff my pits, but I’m sure I’d get busted.

What is even going on?

“Peter Pan,” I continue like the glutton for punishment I apparently am. “John Napoleon Darling. That was my role. I had seventeen lines.”

Oh. No. No. No. Why? Seventeen lines? Seriously?

I did. I did have seventeen lines. But Summer’s obviously a serious actress. Why would she care about my measly seventeen lines in a high school play? If she could see our high school, that would only make her cringe even more than she is right now. I graduated with sixty-six kids in our senior class. She’d really give me the bombastic side-eye if she knew how small potatoes I was.

I think Summer glances over at me, but it's more of a look of pity or repulsion. Then she turns to Madeline and Riley and says, "Let's ditch your luggage. Then we can take these two to their apartment."

She looks at Cameron and says, "The landlord gave me your key."

I feel my lips move like a marionette who's been possessed in a very low-budget horror film. Only the horror is: *Why won't I stop talking?*

"You already have the key to my apartment?" I pause, but not long enough to spare my own dignity. "Feel free to use it anytime."

My eyebrows wag out of habit. Cam shoots me a look telling me I look like a used car salesman.

Madeline looks at me with raised eyebrows. "Did you get seasick on the boat ride over? Or catch some ocean-borne virus that messed with your head? What has gotten into you?"

Then Madeline looks at Summer, apparently trying to salvage my reputation and the horrible job I'm doing at making a good impression. "He's definitely a huge goofball at times, but he's never like this. I don't know what's gotten into him. Trust me. He's really a nice, mostly-normal guy. Women usually throw themselves at him."

Mostly normal? Whatever. This whole thing is the Rube Goldberg of impressions. One thing led to another, to another, and it's out of my control at this point.

"Mostly normal?" I ask. "I'm totally normal. I'm so normal, they put my photo under the word *normal* in the dictionary." Why? Why don't I just stop while I'm ahead, or behind? Definitely behind. No doubt about that.

"So normal," Cam mutters. "There's your proof."

Madeline shrugs and shakes her head. She tried.

Summer takes us to a golf cart parked in a line of other golf carts. On the side of each cart there's an emblem that looks like an island and the words *Alicante Resort and Spa*.

“These all belong to the resort,” she explains. “Employees get to use them for carting guests around or running resort-related errands. If you get to know the guys at rentals, they let you use them whenever you want—within reason. Guests can check them out too. They just have to see the front desk in the main building or the concierge. So, hop in!”

“Wait,” I ask. “You’re a resort employee?”

Do the white shirt and tan pants not give that away? But she did say she’s here to be in the play. I’m oddly dying to know more about Summer. Even if we didn’t hit it off right away. Maybe especially because we didn’t.

“Yes.” Summer’s exasperation is tangible. “I’m a resort employee. Part time.”

“But I thought you came here to be a mermaid ... in the play.”

“I came to take the role of a mermaid, but that job hasn’t started yet, even though we’re already scheduling rehearsals. And it pays in clams.”

“Seriously?” I ask. I’m joking, of course. I know no job pays in clams.

Summer’s glare could slice glass. She definitely thinks she’s had enough of me.

“No. But it may as well. So, I needed another gig. Working part-time with guest services allows me to rent a room in the employee dorms at a discount and I make a little money. I’m your typical starving artist.”

Hey, she’s talking to me. Not Cam. Not Riley. Not Madeline. I’ll take it.

“Resourceful.” I’m hoping the compliment sounds as sincere as I intend it to.

“I guess.” She doesn’t meet my eyes.

Still, that’s a whole eight sentences we’ve lobbed back and forth. If this were tennis, it would be a good match. Not that I’m matching myself with Summer. Not unless I want to get shanked in my sleep. I get it. She’s not into me. Not even a

little. What can I say? I don't like people not liking me. I'm not used to it. Besides, Summer's beautiful, and obviously smart and ambitious. And we're going to be working together. It would be good if we didn't start out as mortal enemies just because I made a comment about her name being like my favorite season.

We pile into a golf cart, and Summer takes off, driving down narrow roads that run between buildings, then wind back behind the resort and up a hill until we're at a three-story building that looks like a college dormitory. The exterior is simple, but clean.

She addresses Madeline and Riley. "Here we are. Employee dorms. I'll show you two to your room."

Summer goes through her spiel about the dorm setup while we walk up to Madeline and Riley's room. We pass a couple of young women wearing the same Alicante uniforms Summer has on. They titter and giggle a little, leaning into one another and whispering, and then they both wave at me, those familiar coy waves with their fingers wiggling. I wave back and flash them a friendly smile.

See. That is what I'm talking about. Women act like *that* around me. I only hope Summer noticed.

After the girls deposit their luggage, we all get back in the golf cart and Summer drives us to our new home. Our place is one of two upper apartments in a four-plex. The building is a deep mustard yellow with a terracotta roof that matches the ones on most of the buildings around town.

At the top of the steps, Summer hands the key to Cam. He opens the door and we all walk into a tidy living room with an adjoining kitchen. There's a balcony off the side of the living room with barely enough space for two chairs and a little table between them. Cam and I walk down the hall and check out our bedrooms.

"I call dibs on this room!" I shout. I'm serious. I want this room, but if Cam wants it, I'll give it to him in a heartbeat.

“You can have it,” Cam says from somewhere down the hall. “This room has a sweet view.”

We leave our suitcases in our respective rooms, and we all head back downstairs with Summer. She tours us around the front side of the island, telling us about different sections of the island, like the fishing village further north of the resort area. Then she explains that the back side of Marbella is owned by a wealthy family who leaves it open for public use, but they are strict about not developing that side of the island. There’s some conservancy land and then other spots for people to hike, camp, and kayak on what the locals call, *the backside*.

I high five myself for not making some juvenile joke about backsides. Maybe there’s hope for me yet.

Summer’s in full-blown tour guide mode now, talking about the wild emus, chimpanzees, kangaroos, and a variety of other animals roaming the island because some film included the animals and then left them on the island after production ended.

Cam’s interested. He asks Summer more about the wildlife.

I can’t help myself. I lean in toward Cam and quietly whisper, “It’s a wild backside.”

Cam chuckles softly. I’m pretty sure Summer didn’t hear me.

After driving us around to see various neighborhoods and shops, Summer parks the cart in a designated area at the resort and gives us a tour of the buildings, telling us about the amenities the resort offers as we go.

It’s nearly dinnertime by the time we’re finished touring. Since none of us have groceries yet, we decide to eat in one of the restaurants on the resort property.

Summer seems to have relaxed a bit while she toured us, so I risk asking, “Do you want to eat dinner with us? We’d love to thank you for your time and the tour. It’s the least we can do.”

“No thanks,” she says. “I’ve got dinner plans.”

Dinner plans. With a guy?

Why do I care?

I may not believe in insta-love, but I do believe in someone getting under your skin at first sight. And Summer definitely has gotten under my skin.

Dinner's casual, since we've run through our vacation spending money traveling across the country. Cam and I won't start work for a few days, so it will be several weeks before we collect paychecks. We have a little money set aside for expenses until then.

We're sitting at our table relaxing and finishing the last of two slices of cheesecake we ordered for dessert. Madeline excuses herself to use the restroom and Cam takes the opportunity to ask Riley to meet him on the beach. The two of them just started dating and they haven't sprung the news on Madeline, Cam's younger sister and Riley's best friend. They will, it's just a matter of timing.

"Can you slip out tonight?" Cam asks Riley.

I put on a falsetto and say, "I thought you'd never ask," before Riley has a chance to answer.

Cam sends me a look. "Bro, you are not in red hot form today."

"I know," I say, shaking my head. "I literally struck out."

"Is that the first time a woman has denied you?" Cam asks me.

He should know. We grew up together and we attended SDSU in San Diego together.

I nod. Nothing in my life has confused me more than my encounter with Summer today. And I took high school calculus.

Cam chuckles good-naturedly. "Welcome to the human race."

"I want my mojo back." I know I'm pouting.

Riley sends me a sympathetic glance, but then the two of them go back to plotting some secret nighttime beach rendezvous.

I stare out the restaurant window at the ocean, letting my mind drift like the waves hitting the shore in the distance. I've got time. We just got here. I'll win Summer over before I even collect my first paycheck.

SUMMER

The only thing constant in life is change.

– *Heraclitus*

I grab the box of Kleenex next to my bed and blow my nose. My roommate, Marissa, opens the door, nearly oblivious to my tears.

“What are you watching this time? *Titanic*?”

“*Love Story*, with Ali MacGraw and Ryan O’Neal.”

“How many times have you seen that one?”

“I don’t know. More than twenty, for sure.”

“It’s like a sickness with you.” She chuckles, amused.

Most people don’t understand my obsession with old movies. It’s okay.

“Well, keep your Kleenex out. I’ve got news.”

“Sad news?” I sit up, setting my laptop aside.

Our dorm room only has room for twin beds on opposing sides of the room, two dressers, and a side table for each of us. We don’t own a TV, so I watch my movies on my computer.

Marissa walks to the foot of my bed and takes a seat, tucking her legs up into a criss-crossed position. “Not sad news for me. But you might not be thrilled.”

“You met the new water sports employee and you’re getting married?” I joke.

“What? No! Why? Is he cute?”

“To look at, yes. But he’s a player. Steer clear.”

Marissa shakes her head. “How could you know that after just meeting him only, what has it been ... not even a week ago?”

“Trust me. My radar for guys you need to avoid is laser sharp.”

“Well, good news. I’ll be avoiding him.”

“Okay. Good.”

Marissa takes a dramatically long breath, pauses, and looks at me with a softness in her eyes.

Her words come out in one rapid stream. “I’ll be avoiding him because I’m leaving Marbella. My cousin is moving here from Mexico. She and her husband are doctors. They need a nanny, and they’ll have a back house on their property in Pasadena. They’re going to let me live there rent free and pay me a sweet salary!”

“You’re leaving?”

“Si. But I’ll only be in Pasadena. You can come visit. That is, if you remember the little people when you make it big.”

“*If* I make it big.”

“You will. I believe in you. You were born to be una estrella.” *A star.*

Marissa has been teaching me Spanish since she and I started living together a month ago.

She’s leaving.

I’m more upset by this news than I should be. I don’t bond with people very easily. Marissa and I hit it off like she was an old friend right from the start.

And now she’s leaving.

“When do you leave?”

“Five weeks. I gave my notice today. Maybe you’ll need to start looking for another roommate. Too bad the new girls are

rooming together. They seem nice. I met them at the pool today.”

“They do seem nice. But they’re friends with the player. And besides, they’re only seasonal temps. Staying a total of six weeks and then heading back to UCLA. That’s what their employee files said.”

“Does this player have a name?” Marissa’s eyes sparkle with interest.

“Ben.”

“Ben. Ah. I think I hear a note of something in your voice when you say his name.”

“It’s a gag reflex.”

Marissa laughs like I’m a standup comedian and she’s at my sold out show.

“You are too funny!” she finally says after she stops laughing so hard. “Men make life interesting, mija. You ought to try one out sometime. They’re good for the self-esteem. A few pesos never hurt anyone.”

“Try one out? You’re killing me here. And, you think I should kiss random guys?”

“After a few dates, or if the night is right and he’s extra sweet, maybe on the first date. Why not? We’re young.”

I don’t feel young. Sure, I can play a young, carefree role if the script calls for it. Or someone old and cranky, or middle-aged and whimsical ... whatever they want. But that’s acting, not real life. Most days, I feel like I’ve lived ten lives and I’m ready to cash in my chips.

“Speaking of dates, I’m going to get ready to go dancing. Wanna join me? I thought I’d hit Club Descanso and shake what my mama gave me. Who knows? Maybe some rich billionaire will be there, and he’ll take one look at me in my going-out clothes and realize his life was incomplete before he met me. Ay! I’ll keep his attention. He won’t know what hit him. Then I’ll have to tell my prima I can’t be her nanny because I’m going to be the wife of a billionaire!”

“You’re loca.” I say it with a smile on my face. Marissa’s the best kind of crazy—the kind that hasn’t let life get to her, so she still takes risks and believes in fairy tale endings.

“I’m loca enough for the both of us. Now put away that depressing black and white show and come out with me. I need a wingman.”

For the record, *Love Story* is depressing, but not all the movies I watch are. But I don’t go there with Marissa. She thinks the fact that I cry when I watch old movies makes them all depressing. I never cry unless I’m watching a show that drags up my emotions. Then I’m the worst. All the feelings I’ve stored away like holiday decor in attic boxes come spilling out when I’m immersed in a great movie.

Marissa’s staring at me, obviously waiting for my answer, if her crossed arms and raised brow are any indication.

“A wingman?” I ask.

“Wingwoman, whatever. I need you to be there to contrast my effervescent personality.”

I laugh hard at that. She’s poking fun on purpose.

“Maybe I want to stay in and knit.”

“Maybe you do. But what kind of friend would I be if I let you start your spinster life too early? Besides, I only have five more weeks here. I want to go dancing with you. I promise I won’t leave you when my billionaire finds me. I’ll make him include you tonight. Then he can sweep me away when my five week notice is up. And he can take me to Corsica and the French Riviera ... and Bali ... and we’ll shop Fifth Avenue in New York City! I’ll send you postcards, mija. And you can visit us on our yacht or at our beach house.”

Want to know what’s really crazy? I almost believe that Marissa could meet a billionaire and win his heart. She’s got enough personality to keep life interesting. I’m sure affluent men are used to women throwing themselves at them. I actually know they are—first hand. Those kinds of men aren’t used to someone as intriguing, genuine, and self-determined as

Marissa. She'd be a breath of fresh air in their otherwise predictable, often superficial, materialistic world.

"Okay. You talked me into it!"

"Oh! Yippee!"

"Yippee? Please. Do not say yippee. And stop bouncing up and down and flapping your hands like that. I'm bound to change my mind."

"You won't. And now, you will let me fix you up. I have just the dress and we're going to make you look even more beautiful than you do every day. It's really not fair for you to look the way you do. It doesn't give the rest of us much of a chance. It's a good thing I have solid self-esteem. Otherwise, I'd feel like half a woman around you."

See. Who needs men? Marissa is always saying things like that in the midst of her stream-of-consciousness rambling. She compliments me, and she really means it. Trust me. I know when someone is blowing smoke up my backside. Marissa isn't. Men always want something. Marissa just pours out compliments like she's throwing confetti. All I need are a few good girlfriends, my agent, Elaine, and a trajectory that keeps putting me closer to my dream roles.

While Marissa curls my hair into long beach waves, my mind inconveniently drifts to the last thing that guy, Ben, said to me. *Do you want to eat dinner with us? We'd love to thank you for your time and the tour. It's the least we can do.* Typical charmer. He seemed so sincere. That's the thing. Guys like him might even convince themselves they are sincere half the time. But it's all bait on a hook, meant to reel a woman in until he has what he wants. He'd be bored of me before fall hits the island. Not that fall hits here. Not like it does in the south. I'll miss that, for sure.

I had told Ben, *No thanks. I've got plans.* His face fell. Good. Men like Ben ought to experience what it's like not to always get what they want. And who cares what my plans were. When I told him I had plans, I knew it was a date with an old movie. Most nights it is.

Once Marissa and I are dressed with our hair and makeup done, we take the golf cart I left parked outside the dorms down to the resort and park it in the designated area. The evening air is balmy with a cool ocean breeze balancing out the residual warmth of the day. The sound of the ocean waves crashing on the shore accompanies us as we stroll along the street in front of the shops which are all closed for the night. We turn the corner at the end of the block and arrive at Club Descanso. The noise from the music thumps out into the street where a casually-dressed bouncer sits on a stool near the doorway. We flash him our IDs which he barely glances at before ushering us in.

“Did you see him checking you out?” Marissa asks over the din of the crowd once we’re inside.

Club Descanso is a smaller venue, mostly filled with younger locals and some tourists. The room capacity is probably one hundred and fifty people, and tonight it feels dangerously close to breaking the fire code. I’m pretty sure no one’s keeping a headcount at this point if the bouncer’s lax attitude is any indication.

“He wasn’t checking me out.”

“Oh, *mija*. You need your eyes checked. Next time you’re on the mainland, see an optometrist. That guy was super-cute and he looked at you like he was trying to guess your dress size—inch by inch.”

She wags her brows suggestively.

It’s this dress. It’s red—a color I don’t usually wear because it puts me too front and center—and it’s tight in what Marissa called *all the right places*. I may not be a fan of the tan uniform shorts at the resort, but I’d trade this dress for those if it meant avoiding the way this dress feels like it comes with its own personal spotlight. Yes. I see guys eyeing me. I’m trying to give each one of them the cold shoulder. Ice for you. Ice for you. Ice for you, too. I’m a regular ice distributor right now. Ice, ice baby.

“Lighten up, *mi amiga bonita*. You are stunning. And you are young, and you live on an island. It’s not anyone’s

funeral.” She pauses and giggles. “Except the hearts of those men you won’t smile at.” Marissa gives me a pointed look and then shouts. “Let’s dance!”

She grabs my hand and pulls me forward toward the mass of people on the dance floor in the middle of the room. I nearly stumble at first. It’s been a while since I’ve voluntarily worn heels. Not that I’m voluntarily wearing them now. I’m under coercion of the worst sort.

We make it to the dance floor just as the song changes. I face Marissa. Her hair falls in dark brown waves over her shoulders, her deep walnut eyes twinkle with happiness, and she smiles that bright, white smile at me as she twists and rotates her hips to the music while Beyoncé belts out *Single Ladies*. Marissa’s mouthing the words like it’s our anthem, and dancing as if she’s at home, alone, without an audience of hungry men around us.

I close my eyes at first, trying to muster my courage. *Maybe I ought to listen to Marissa’s words*. Not the ones she’s lip syncing right now while she’s dancing like Beyoncé herself, the ones she said to get me to go out with her in the first place.

While Marissa mouths “Oh, oh, oh, oh ...” and covers her mouth with one hand while making her eyes go wide, and then extends her hand toward me singing about me needing to put a ring on it, I sway lightly, just barely resisting the pull of her magnetism.

She’s right. I am young. I don’t need to hold back and keep myself guarded tonight. I can turn a man down if he approaches me. Right now, I’ve got a little over a month to enjoy the closest friend I’ve had since I moved to California.

I throw my hands over my head and sway my body to the music. Marissa goes crazy when she sees me lose my inner battle. She smiles such a full smile and sings even louder, if that’s even possible. She dances like she’s flirting with me, parading around me in a circle while swaying her hips to the beat. Then she tilts her head back and shakes her hair, totally immersed in the moment. Men aren’t just watching me now.

They've all seen her. I tune each one of them out, clinging to the possibility of losing myself like Marissa does, if only for a few hours.

Dancing with Marissa is fun. Even I can admit that. I feel the smile growing on my face, and I'm grateful. I needed this—maybe even more than I needed to watch *Love Story* for the twenty-somethingth time. I'm swiveling my hips and swaying my arms overhead when my eyes catch someone watching me from their spot near the doorway. He's got a smirky look on his face and his gaze is riveted on me.

Ben. The charming player.

BEN

*Our lives may not have fit together,
but ohhh did our souls know how to dance ...*

~ K. Towne Jr.

Summer. The woman who seemingly hates me.

My eyes drift toward her of their own accord. It's like she's got a column of light illuminating her, making her stand out among the throng of dancers.

I came to this club to get out of the apartment for a few hours. Club Descanso was recommended by a few of the workers I met at the watersports shack. I've been hanging out there for a few hours each day even though my job hasn't started yet.

Our first few days on Marbella haven't been as idyllic as I had hoped. My best friend, Cam, messed things up with his sister, Madeline, by deceiving her about his new romance with her best friend, Riley. So, he's been moping around the apartment, and the four of us haven't been hanging out like we had planned. It's this weird version of moping, too. Half the time Cam's got his head in the fluffy, distracting clouds of new love, and the other half of the time he's sullen over having hurt his sister by withholding the truth from her.

He entertains himself by regularly bringing up Summer. Nothing has amused my best friend more than watching a woman blatantly reject me. I get it. It has literally never

happened. And it was harsh—and humiliating. But if it makes Cam smile to taunt me about it, I'll take the hit for now.

And there she is, swaying her body like a professional dancer, wearing a red dress that seems like it was tailor made for her, moving her arms overhead in this sexy, carefree sway, and closing her eyes occasionally. Worst of all, she's smiling. It's the most dazzling, gorgeous smile I've ever seen. You might think I'm exaggerating, but every male eye in the room is on her, and most female eyes too. She's captivating. And she wants nothing to do with me—for no good reason.

I watch her laugh with her friend while the shorter brunette dances flirtatiously around her. Her friend's pretty too, but nothing compared to Summer with her long blond hair curled into waves, and that red lipstick that matches her dress and those strappy heeled sandals. If she's conspiring to torture me, she's achieved her mission.

Maybe we just got off on the wrong foot. It could be that she was having a bad day—or, days. I've seen her a few times around the resort since our first introduction, and she's been like an ice queen then too. Or maybe it's just her. She might treat all guys this way. Though, I know that's not true. She warmed up to Cam right away. The idea simultaneously chafes me and motivates me.

I take a breath and square my shoulders. Summer just needs to get to know me. She'll see I'm as harmless as a puppy. Not one that chews shoes and pees in the house ... and digs holes in the yard ... and doesn't come when it's called. Whatever. I'm harmless.

Her eyes flash in my direction and I can tell the instant she sees me. Her face morphs from unhindered joy to wariness. I keep watching, holding her gaze as if I were leading a bucking horse around a ring. Buck all you want, Summer. She pastes on a smile and turns her attention back to her friend, obviously intent on shutting me out.

I quickly consider my options, and then, before I can chicken out, I stride across the room toward the dance floor, uttering, "Excuse me," every few seconds to someone who

blocks my path. When my feet hit the dance floor, I don't say a thing to Summer. I'm standing right behind her. Her attention is back on her dark-haired friend. They're dancing to *Cake by the Ocean* by DNCE. I had planned to walk up and introduce myself to Summer's friend.

But plans change.

Summer is swaying to the beat. Ironically, the lyrics sound like a plea from a man to a woman who won't give him the time of day. I step closer to Summer when someone tries to squeeze behind me. We are mere inches from one another, both of us dancing to the beat, our bodies mimicking one another's movements without any forethought. I close my eyes for the briefest moment, feeling the words, the music, the dangerous nearness of Summer. We're not dancing together, but in another way we almost are. When my eyes open, Summer's friend is smiling an amused smile at me over Summer's shoulder.

Summer turns and gasps. Maybe she didn't sense me here after all. And now I feel like the world's biggest creep.

Strike two.

Instinctively, I back up, in a very I'm-not-a-creep way. Then I walk around Summer so I can introduce myself to her friend.

I lean in just the slightest so she can hear me over the noise of the crowd and music. "Hi. I'm Ben. What's your name?"

"Ben?" Summer's friend smiles a full smile at me, boosting my confidence.

I had almost started to wonder if I had lost my touch.

Summer's friend looks over at Summer with one of those conspiratorial glances that says this isn't the first time she's heard of me. Interesting.

"Yes. I'm Ben. I'm new to Marbella. Working in watersports starting next week. What's your name?"

"I'm Marissa, Ben. Nice to meet you. Welcome to Marbella."

“Thanks!” I have to shout louder because some thumpy EDM song with an intense bass beat I can feel through my chest comes on.

The dance floor fills with more people packing us closer together.

Marissa gets a mischievously playful look on her face, and then she turns to Summer. “Have you met my friend, Summer, Ben?”

“We did meet,” I say, glancing quickly at Summer with a brief smile and then turning my full attention back to Marissa. I’m not giving Summer a second chance to shut me down tonight. I’m just going to show her I’m not a bad guy by being nice to her friend.

“It was not the best introduction, I’m afraid. Summer got a pretty bad impression of me.”

“Now, how would that happen?” Marissa asks.

We’re more or less dancing while we talk. Summer’s not putting her all into it like she was before she knew I was here. I’m doing some sort of sway, bop, sway movement which probably doesn’t look nearly as cool as I hope it will. Normally, I’m a good dancer with a natural sense of rhythm and moves like Jagger. Well, not Jagger. Have you ever seen him move? I’ve got moves—moves not like Jagger. Usually. Summer seems to have the effect of stripping me of all my chill, swagger, and self-confidence with a mere glance, or the lack of one.

“I’m not really sure. I think I may have come on a little strong by making a comment about summer being my favorite season.”

“Ooooh. Eww.” Marissa makes a face and shakes her head, but then she smiles at me.

“Cheesy, huh?” I laugh at myself.

See, Summer. I can laugh at myself. I’m not arrogant. I’m a good guy—a guy who can laugh at himself.

“Soooo cheesy,” Marissa says. “Is that your usual approach with a beautiful woman?”

“Um. No?”

“Well, it either is or it isn’t.”

Just then, a guy bumps into me from behind, propelling me forward—into Summer. She steps backward, stumbles, and looks like she’s going to fall. Against my better judgment, and on an instinct, I reach out and cup her elbows to catch her.

She regains her footing and practically yanks her arms out of my hands.

“Sorry,” I say, at the same time as she says, “Thanks,” in the quietest, most imperceptible volume ever—like it pains her to thank me.

“Let’s grab a table,” Marissa says to Summer. “I need a drink.”

“Can I get you two something?”

“Awww. That’s so sweet.” Marissa smiles over at Summer, her eyebrows raised in a plea.

“I’m good,” Summer says.

Ice. Queen.

If it weren’t so hot from all the bodies crammed in here, I swear this woman could send frost across the tables like that character Elsa in *Frozen*.

“Well, you can get me a pineapple mojito,” Marissa says. Then she turns to Summer. “You need one. Let me get you a drink.”

Summer shakes her head. It occurs to me that I’m making her angry, or at the very least, uncomfortable. For some reason she really doesn’t like me.

I wish someone had disliked me at some point in my life before now. It would make this situation so much easier on both of us. And maybe people did dislike me—they must have. They just never showed it so blatantly. I lack the skill set

to know what to do in the face of someone so utterly turned off by my mere presence.

I walk to the bar and wait in line. After a few minutes, a bartender approaches me to take my order. I ask for two pineapple mojitos and a glass of ice water with a slice of lemon. When she comes back with the drinks, she winks at me.

“You’re new around here. On vacation? Visiting relatives?”

“Starting work. I’m Ben. I’ll be working at the resort—watersports.”

“I’m Giselle. Nice to meet you, Ben. So, watersports, huh? Are you a big surfer?”

She doesn’t even hide the way she sizes me up, looking at my arms, shoulders and chest as if they’d tell the story of my prowess in the water.

“I do surf, but I grew up in rural Ohio, so not a lot of surfing there. I started when I went to college in San Diego. But I’ve always boated my whole life. And I have my snorkeling cert, and a few other certifications for instructing.”

“That’s so cool. Maybe I’ll finally get up the courage to come take lessons.”

“Surf lessons?”

“Yeah. I always wanted to learn.”

“You totally should.”

“Well, maybe I will.” She flashes me a smile that’s full of promises.

“I’d better get these drinks to my friends. Don’t work too hard, Giselle. This is quite a crowd.”

Giselle smiles another coy smile—the type I’m all too familiar with—and adds a well-practiced wink. “Thanks for having my back, Ben.”

The way she says my name, looking me straight in the eyes, and then trailing a light path with her pointer finger

down the back of my hand, tells me everything.

This. *This* I know how to navigate.

“You have a good night, Giselle. And feel free to come for lessons sometime.”

“You too. You have a good night. I’m not offering lessons, obviously.” We both chuckle, and then Giselle gives me a final once over, lifting her eyebrows and softening her eyes. Nothing too flirty, just a fun exchange between two single adults.

That’s what I’m used to. Two people who banter lightly and walk away with smiles on their faces. I feel good. Giselle feels good. No harm, no foul.

Why isn’t Summer more like Giselle? Why is she so different from anyone I’ve ever met? And why can’t I shake thoughts of her even though we’ve barely met?

I look across the room at the bar table where Marissa and Summer are talking, their heads leaned close to one another.

Summer is smiling softly. Relaxed.

She’s relaxed again.

Well, here comes the storm cloud, ready to wipe that smile away like grime down a gutter in a downpour.

I approach the table, setting a drink in front of Marissa, and the water sort of in front of Summer, but not exactly in front of her. It’s in this no-man’s land where she has to guess if I’m giving the water to Marissa or her. That way she can’t say she doesn’t want the water. I’m avoiding her next rejection like a contestant in the *Hunger Games*. So far, so good.

I look directly at Marissa as I set the second Mojito in front of her, but slightly toward the center of the table.

“I think I’m going to head out for the night. If you find anyone who wants that mojito, you can give it to them.” I subtly glance in Summer’s direction, but not definitively. “And you two might want some water with all that dancing, so ... yeah. Well. I’ll see you around, Marissa.”

I turn to look at Summer. “Summer.”

Even without a smile, she’s stunning. Cold and unapproachable. But stunning.

“Awww. You’re leaving?” Marissa has a sweet pouty tone to her voice. She’s really fun, I can tell. I wish I weren’t so distracted by her blond friend in the red dress.

“Yeah. I’ve ... yeah. Anyway, it was good meeting you. Stop by the water sports shack and say hi sometime.”

“I just might.”

“Goodnight, ladies.”

Marissa says goodbye and then she takes a long sip of her drink.

“Thanks again for this, Ben. It’s just what the doctor ordered.”

Summer doesn’t even look at me. She doesn’t say goodnight.

I hear Marissa’s words as I walk away. “Why were you so harsh with him? I’ve seen you keep men at a distance, but that was ...”

I can’t hear any more over the crowd and the music, but when I turn back to take one more look at Summer and Marissa, Summer is watching me walk away.

I pull my phone out of my pocket once I’m out of the club and on the street. I have a text from Cam.

CAM: Madeline’s decided to forgive me. Riley and I are going for a swim in one of the front pools. All’s right in the world tonight.

IF ONLY ALL were right in the world. I shake my head. Summer’s one woman.

In a world of eight billion people, I had to land on the island with the one woman who seems to hate me. But, she is

just one. That's a pretty good track record.

Enough of this. I'm in most people's definition of paradise with no obligations. My rent is paid. My friends are finally hanging out. I practically run back to the apartment to change out of my clubbing clothes. I put on a pair of swim trunks and grab a towel from the bathroom. Then I make my way to the lounging area at the front of the resort.

I see Cam and Riley, the blue light of the pool illuminating their faces and bodies in the surrounding darkness. I'm about to make my presence known when Cam leans in, cupping the back of Riley's head. They kiss. It's odd, seeing my best friend kiss the girl we've always known as his younger sister's best friend. Riley's definitely all grown up. But still, the sight of them being romantic will take a little getting used to.

And the kiss goes on ...

and on ...

to the point that I start to feel beyond awkward.

What a night.

I'm like that last raisin in the corner of the box. Or the one Cheerio you can't seem to get onto the spoon. I'm as adrift as a lone, soggy Cheerio.

Okay. That's dramatic, even for me.

The way I see things, I've got two choices. One is to go back to our apartment—alone. The other, well ... on a whim, I toss my phone onto a lounge and take off running.

I shout my warning cry at the top of my lungs, "Cannonbaaaaallll!"

I aim for about five or six feet away from Cam and Riley.

The cool, immediate splash of the pool surrounds me. My head pops out of the water. The first thing I see is Cam, glaring at me.

I give him an apologetic look. He's used to my antics. His scowl turns into an understanding half-smile.

Riley starts laughing and then she turns and splashes me big time.

“Ben! Seriously?” She’s still laughing.

“I couldn’t help myself.”

“I know the feeling,” Cam says, leaning in and kissing Riley on the temple and dragging her toward himself until her back is nestled against his front.

“I’ll get out of your hair. I just needed to do that—I guess.”

Riley and Cam laugh again, while I tread water, comfortable in my familiar role—the clown, the one who lightens things up, the life of the party. I do all that naturally. And I love making people smile, especially the handful of people who mean the world to me.

“You don’t have to go,” Riley says. “Let’s call Madeline. We can all hang out.”

She looks over her shoulder at Cam. He nods. The smile on his face is one I don’t think I’ve seen before, and I’ve known him my whole life.

“I’ve missed hanging out, just the four of us,” Riley says.

“Me too,” I admit. “You two stay here. I’ll hop out and text Mads.”

SUMMER

*I must be a mermaid ... I have no fear of depths
and a great fear of shallow living.*

~Anais Nin

Marissa's arm is looped through mine while we walk home. She makes it so easy to love her. Nothing keeps her from speaking her mind, or showing those she loves how much they mean to her. And the night would be one hundred percent perfect if only she would drop the subject she seems to be obsessed with.

"You should have seen him dancing behind you. It was like a scene out of a movie."

"A horror flick?"

"Summer! No. It was so romantic. He even closed his eyes for one brief second, like he was lost in the moment. Que varonil. What a man. So sexy."

"Or creepy."

"What is with you and Ben? He was so sweet. He bought us drinks. And then he left. If he were really creepy wouldn't he have stuck around to try to get you drunk? Or insisted on drinking with us? Or not bought you a drink since you were rechazando."

"Rechazando?"

“Rejecting. Cold. Frio. Icing him out. He could have said to himself, *Self, let’s not give this icy woman a drink. Let’s just give her bubbly friend a drink.* But he got you a drink. And ...” Marissa laughs like whatever she’s thinking is incredibly funny. “He was so scared he left the drink in the middle of the table. Like you were going to bite him if he set it any closer to you!”

I chuckle too. That *was* funny.

We’re past the resort with the twinkle lights in the trees and tiki torches along the edge of the entrance. The beach slowly disappears from view as we climb the hill into the neighborhood that separates the resort from the employee dormitory.

Why did I wear heels?

I stop and unlink my arm from Marissa’s. “I have to take these off.”

“And walk barefoot on the street?”

“Anything’s better than these instruments of torture.”

Marissa giggles while I unhook the straps of my sandals and dangle them from my fingers. I put my free arm back through the crook of Marissa’s elbow and we continue our ascent toward the dorms.

“Ben’s a player. How do you not see what I see? Did you see his eyes and his body language when he was talking to you? Not to mention his words, trying to act all innocent and forgivable to gain your sympathy. It’s pathetic. Then he went over and flirted just as heavily with that bartender—Giselle, I think her name is. And, buying both of us drinks? That’s not sweet. That’s a man casting a wide net with his charm hoping to land any one of us, or all of us, for all I know.”

Even in the dusky darkness of night, I can see Marissa shake her head.

“And why did that man go home with an empty net then?” Her voice is full of challenge. “And he left of his own accord. He could have stayed. Women were checking him out. You weren’t the only one dragging all the attention to herself

tonight. Oh, no. Women noticed Ben. He's a tall glass of water."

I laugh. "I don't think you use that term for a man."

"Well, then. He was a full pitcher of water. A big, muscly, pitcher with a gorgeous head of thick, wavy hair and kind eyes."

"A pitcher of water with hair and eyes?" I laugh. "Did you get drunk on that one drink we had hours ago?"

"No, mija. What I'm saying is, Ben is beautiful. And sexy. And sweet. And the women at Club Descanso noticed. And he saw them noticing. And he didn't go home with anyone. He bought you and me a drink, and brought us water ..."

"A tall glass of water."

"Shush, you." She laughs despite herself. "Ay. You're loca not to see it."

Marissa. She's so naive. Yes, her family has had some hard times, especially before they moved to California when she was a little girl. But she's the type of resilient not to let those hardships define her. She lives life without guile or suspicion of others. And she's assuming the best about Ben. I don't care what she says. He's a player. I know a player when I see one.

"He really closed his eyes?"

Why? Why did I ask that? It's just ... I don't know what to make of that. It's weird, right? A guy danced behind me, where I couldn't see him, and then closed his eyes.

"Ahhh. You see! You want to know. And why do you want to know? Well, I'm going to tell you. It is because you are intrigued about the kind of man who would buy women drinks and leave them alone. You want to know why a gorgeous, kind man like that would leave a club by himself when obviously so many women would have gladly escorted him somewhere for a continuation of the evening. Yes?"

"No." I shake my head for emphasis. "No. Definitely not yes. I'm curious what kind of creepo dances behind a woman

without making his presence known and then shuts his eyes. What even is that?”

“He shut his eyes to drink in the moment. He was enjoying himself. And I think he was enjoying being near you. If you could have seen it, it was like that face you make when I sneak you some of that nocciola you love from Chops.”

“What face? I don’t make a face.”

We walk up to the front door of the dormitory. A light over the entryway illuminates Marissa’s expression.

“Ohhhh ... mmmm,” she says, only the sounds come out like a soft moan. Then she closes her eyes and licks her lips while tilting her head back a little. “Ohhh. This hazelnut praline is heaven!”

She peeks one eye open to see my reaction.

I’m crossing my arms over my chest, trying to hide my smile so I come across as if I’m properly irritated with her teasing. I can’t help myself, a laugh bursts out of me.

“Seriously? I don’t look like that.”

I open the door. Marissa walks through ahead of me and beelines toward the elevator. I follow her and push the button for the third floor.

“You definitely look like that. I would never want to be in public with you when you eat that dessert. It would cause a scene like the one in *Harry Met Sally*.”

She quotes a classic romcom I introduced her to last week. Note to self: stop showing Marissa old movies, especially ones with romantic plots.

“You’re killing me tonight, Marissa. And, don’t you think we ought to be talking about how psycho and inappropriate it is that Ben had *that* face when he was dancing behind me? I only just met him. He told you himself we had a rocky start. *Summer is my favorite season*. Honestly? What kind of cheesy, smarmy line is that?”

“He admitted it was bad.”

“Beeee-cause he’s a play-yah. Plaaayyy-ay-ay-yah. Admitting his faults indicates classic, telltale trait number three of the charmer: false humility. Marissa, please tell me you can spot a player when you see one. Otherwise, I’m going to have to quit my job here, back out of my leading role as a mermaid and follow you to Pasadena.”

“As if I’d hate that? We could be roommates!”

I give Marissa a sideways glance just as the door opens to the third floor. Female employees live up here. Men are on the second floor, and couples are on the first, along with a communal kitchen, a lounge and a few other multi-purpose rooms.

“I’m kidding. I wouldn’t want that, Summer. I want you to have this chance to make the most of this role. A lot of influential people come to this island. Maybe some famous director will see you, and that’s all she wrote. Plus, acting’s your dream. I won’t ever come between you and your dream.”

We reach our room and Marissa says, “Trust me. I know a player. And I’m pretty sure Ben’s not one.”

It’s obvious Ben has cast some sort of spell over Marissa. She’s all team Ben now.

It’s late and I want to take full advantage of my day off tomorrow. We step inside our room and I instantly start removing the dress I wore tonight.

“I appreciate you trying to set me straight,” I say.

“Meaning you still think he’s evil and you want me to stop bugging you about it?”

“Basically.”

“Okay. I will. But you do me a favor too.”

“That depends on the favor.”

Marissa shakes her head at me, then pulls the zipper on her dress down, obviously as eager as I am to get out of her clubbing clothes and into something more comfortable.

“I want you to keep an open mind. If you’re keeping score on Ben, make it fair. Notice the times he lives up to your suspicions, but also notice when he doesn’t. If I’m right, I think he’s going to surprise you.”

I consider what Marissa is saying.

Charm is deceitful.

“What is it about him that makes you so intent on getting me to give him a chance?”

“It’s not him. It’s you. I’ve never seen you pay this kind of attention to a man, let alone be so bothered by one. That means something. Where Ben is concerned, you are anything but neutral.”

Marissa smiles and winks at me, and then she takes her sleep shirt out of a drawer, pops it over her head and grabs her caddy full of personal care items. She steps out into the hall to head to the community bathrooms. I stare after her.



I WAKE EARLY, but not before the sun. The rays shining through the crack in my curtain encourage me to rouse myself. I stand quietly, careful not to disturb Marissa. She’s not working at Chops, the steakhouse here on the resort property, until eleven today, and I know how she loves her sleep.

My day off feels like a rare luxury since I only get one free day a week. Once practice begins for the production of *In So Deep*, I’ll start working part-time for the resort, and all my free hours will go to preparing for the play and then the actual shows. One of the spa employees, Aria, offers Pilates and Yoga in the main room on the first floor of the employee dorms. I spend an hour stretching and getting centered with about fifteen other people, each on one of the mats scattered throughout the room. After my shower, I bike over to C-Side Coffee.

I keep a ten speed bike in the employee shed. Most days I get around the island by walking, or I’ll park a golf cart at the

dorms overnight. But on my day off, I love to bike. The hill heading down to the beach from the dorm is too tempting.

It's not a busy street, usually just the occasional golf cart, Segway rider or cyclist passes through here, especially this time of day. Sometimes a few pedestrians decide to walk on the street. The roads are different here since no one drives cars on the island. Pedestrians can safely walk everywhere. But most people prefer to walk on the sand to C-Side since it's a beachfront shop.

I'm feeling energized from my morning yoga and the plans I have for my day off. I lift both my hands off the handlebars and extend them out to my sides. I tilt my head back and feel the wind lift my hair like a kite. Just for that moment, I am free of my past, detached from my goals, blissfully unaware of my surroundings.

In fact, I'm so unaware that I nearly run into the young man crossing the street at the bottom of the hill. I have to swerve to miss him, and luckily I don't lose control of the bike.

"Hey, watch out!" the guy shouts, not so much in an angry tone as a shocked one.

And that voice. He obviously sees it's me now, because he adds, "Hey, Summer, be careful." His voice is deep and rumbly, with a touch of gravel as if he just recently woke up and hasn't spoken to anyone yet. There's a deceptively playful tone mingled with the rich baritone. Dangerous. So, so dangerous. His voice is like a siren song, luring women near so they can crash to their death on the rocks—or wreck their bicycles, whatever.

I'm torn between saying, *You watch out, Ben. This is a street, not a sidewalk*, and apologizing. So I keep my mouth shut and pedal past him without a word.

I know. Not my brightest moment.

But when it comes to Ben, who apparently is now this strange new fixture in my life, I can't be too careful. What has him over here at this hour anyway? It's early. Only the avid

joggers, dog owners, and early risers are up and at the beach at this hour. Well, also some resort employees, of course, but only the ones on the clock, which Ben obviously isn't. He's not wearing an Alicante uniform. He's topped off his teal nylon beach shorts with a white tank top. I wasn't purposely checking him out, but as I passed, the image of him dressed in beachwear burned into my retinas, or something. Whatever part of the eye images burn into.

Ben in a tank top. He should have looked like some South Boston guy who's ready to rip you a new one if you speak ill of his mother. But, of course, Ben looks like he was born to wear a tank top. The lines of his arm muscles are like ridges in rock. All that definition. What does he do, drop and give twenty at regular intervals all day long?

And that smirky smile. I'd like to wipe that smile right off his face.

But it's my day off. So, hasta la vista, Ben, as Arnold Schwarzenegger said in the classic, *Terminator 2*. I've got a date with an iced white chocolate mocha with salted caramel cold foam.

I keep my eyes focused and my head level the rest of the short ride to C-Side. Bicycle racks line the edge of the sand where the shops start. I park my bike without locking it. That always seems so risky, but here on Marbella, the crime rate is basically nonexistent, so I can walk alone at night, and I can park my bike and return to find it right where I left it.

I walk in through the back patio that faces the sand, weaving between tables topped with umbrellas. The twinkle lights strung overhead aren't on at this early hour of the day, but come evening, they will turn this space into a magical beachside cafe. The sliding glass wall is wide open, making the whole space feel indoor-outdoor. I love the upscale tropical vibe inside C-Side. Wooden rafters span overhead, and a teakwood bar sits at the center of the room like an island amidst bistro tables for two or four.

The owner, Clarissa, greets me by name.

Is that a bad sign or a good one when your barista knows your name?

“Summer! Good morning. What brings you here so early. Oooh. Is it your day off?”

I amble up to the bar and take a seat at one of the stools. A few people sit at the tables indoors, and a couple more are on the patio, but it’s still mellow—an obvious lull before the morning rush.

“It is my day off. And I’m going to get my coffee, sit and watch the waves roll in, and then I thought I’d take a kayak out along the shore heading north for a while.”

“Sounds like the perfect day. Iced White Chocolate Mocha?”

“That’s the one. Please. And salted caramel cold foam.”

“You’ve got me offering that drink to other customers now. I tried it after you first ordered it. The combination is just perfection. I’ll have to see if our new barista can make a good cold foam. She’s coming in a little later today.”

Clarissa gets to work making my coffee while we chat. “The new barista? Is that Riley?”

“Yes. She’s starting already. Came to check the place out the other day. Made me a coffee drink I didn’t expect. I’m hoping she might stay on past her original planned six weeks.”

“Wow. She must be good.”

“She is. I think the two of you would hit it off.”

“What makes you say that?”

Maybe Clarissa assumes I’m a social butterfly because she and I seem to have a natural ease with one another. It’s odd. Considering the usual wariness with which I form close friendships, Marissa and Clarissa have both made easy and quick connections with me. Maybe I can only form deep relationships with people whose names end in “issa.” I’ll have to keep my eyes peeled for a Melissa ... Jalissa? ... Mona Lissa?

“Did you hear Marissa is leaving?” I ask Clarissa.

“I did. You know there are very few secrets on the island. It’s the epitome of small town living. Not only do we have such a miniscule population, we’re stuck in the same seventy square miles with one another. So, we talk. The wind blows in all the news. That’s what I always say. It’s a shame Marissa’s leaving. I really dig that girl. Such positive energy.”

“I’m going to have to look for a new roommate.”

Clarissa nods and hands me my drink. I sip it and smile.

“And the wind doesn’t only bring the news.” Clarissa’s eyes raise toward the patio entrance.

I feel a prickle across my skin. Even with my back to the entrance, I somehow know who just walked in. That same annoyingly resonant voice calls out. “Hey, Clarissa. What’s shakin’? I’m here for another one of your amazing lattes. You’ve got me hooked.”

I look at Clarissa and she’s nearly blushing. She’s definitely old enough to be Ben’s mom, or at least his older sister, but he’s got her melting like ice cream on a hot summer sidewalk.

Charmer. What.A.Charmer.

“Oh, and look at who we have here,” Ben says, taking the bar stool next to me. “It’s the bicycle bandit herself.”

Clarissa’s eyes go wide, obviously she wants to know the backstory. Which there is none. I do not have a backstory with Ben.

“I take it you two have met?” Her face is beseeching me to spill some juicy detail.

There’s nothing. Nothing juicy. No juice. It’s the opposite of juice. Dust. Or air. Yes. Air. Nothing at all. Just ... me taking my mocha and heading to the patio.

“Have a good day, Clarissa,” I shout over my shoulder.

I hear her soft chuckle as I step out onto the concrete and pick the table closest to the sand.

BEN

*Relationships are like farting,
if you push too hard things could get messy real fast.*

~ Kevin Hart

“**W**ow.” Clarissa only needs to say that one word.

We both saw the way I cleared the room. But, being who she seems to be, Clarissa has more to say. “I have to hear the story behind *that*.”

“A wise man once said something profound.” My eyes rove toward the opening leading to the patio, and then back at Clarissa.

“Oh? What’s the saying.”

“But first, coffee.”

Clarissa laughs. “I like you, Ben.”

“Who doesn’t?”

My reply comes so easily and then both our glances aim out the sliding glass walls toward the woman sitting at a table on the edge of the patio.

“Right. Well.” I shift on my barstool. “Make the latte a caramel one today.”

“Want to add salted caramel cold foam?”

“Is that even a question? That sounds amazing. Yes, please.”

“Such manners,” Clarissa smiles at me.

The expression on her face makes me oddly homesick. Not that my mom is anything like Clarissa. My mom’s a typical midwestern woman who raised me and spent her free time with friends, cutting coupons, doing laundry, and contributing to the community. Clarissa’s this free spirit, like a modern hippie, only not quite as flowery.

Still, she gives me mom-vibes. I guess that’s a good thing, since I’m officially twenty-four hundred miles from home and starting a new life on this island—an island where I keep bumping into the beautiful woman who despises me.

“So,” Clarissa asks. “What’s the story there?”

She tips her chin toward the patio.

“No story. I shot her a cheesy line when we landed. It wasn’t my best move. I fell asleep on the ferry, my brain was muddled, and then Summer greeted us. I looked up at her on the pier while I was still standing in the boat and I had one thought: Beautiful. The island, her, the way the sun caught in her hair. Her eyes were blue like the ocean. Anyway, I didn’t think. I shot out a cheesy line and it’s been one bumbling disaster after another since then. Usually, I’m smooth. Not to brag, but ... well, there’s not a way to say this without sounding full of myself.”

“I’ve met you. I get it. I can’t imagine you experience much rejection.”

“Never.”

“Never?”

“Not that I can remember. Is that crazy?”

“Look at you. It’s not crazy. You’re a nice looking young man with a friendly—even flirtatious—personality. You charmed me from day one. I’ve only known you a week, and I can’t see what’s not to like. You’re sincere and you have those midwest manners that we Californians seem to have shed

years ago. It's a combination most women would find irresistible."

I can't believe I'm having this conversation with a barista. Maybe they're like hairdressers—unpaid therapists. I think of all the times I poured my teen angst out to Laura, my hairdresser back home. She would listen and sometimes give me solid advice too. But mostly, she'd listen. Listening is an undervalued skill. It's rare to find a person who can just listen without feeling they have to fix you or share their opinion.

And, considering the hits my ego's been taking from Summer ever since that first day we met, hearing Clarissa say I'm irresistible shores me up a bit.

"I don't know if I'm irresistible, but I tend to make people smile. I've never met anyone who disliked me the way she does."

"Give her time."

"It's all I've got to give. I'm here for the long haul. I guess having one enemy on an island of four thousand people isn't so bad."

"It's three thousand five hundred and two, and I'd say that's a pretty good statistic."

I look out toward the patio. A few strands of Summer's hair lift in the breeze, blowing back over her shoulder.

"Why can't I just let it go? I don't even know her. I've never felt this compelled to set the record straight with anyone in my life."

"Summer's a puzzle—one I'm pretty sure you've determined you need to solve."

I nod to Clarissa, reach into the pocket of my shorts and stuff a few dollars into the tip jar. Resort employees have a tab at all the resort facilities. Even though Clarissa owns C-Side, she keeps an Alicante tab. Our purchases are deducted directly from our paycheck. It's a sweet setup.

I grab my latte off the counter and walk toward the patio, foolish man that I am.

I approach the table where Summer is sitting like a man walking on the African Savannah without a gun. I'm likely to get trampled by wildebeests or eaten by a lion, but I'm out here anyway.

She doesn't hear me at first. A couple on the other side of the patio nod at me and smile. I wave, not wanting to say anything that might unnecessarily rouse the lioness from her contented spot near the sand.

I consider my options: Sit at her table, which is a total intrusion, but might get us talking, or I could walk away and leave her in peace. But that's only prolonging the inevitable. We work at the same resort. We're obviously going to bump into one another, or run one another over with a bicycle. We should be able to get along. I compromise and pull a chair out at the table next to Summer. The legs make a scraping sound on the concrete of the patio and she turns.

“Seriously, Ben?”

Call me a masochist, but my name, from her mouth. Yeah. I like the sound of it, even if it sounds like she'd like to watch me writhe in an electric chair.

“What, Summer? Do you own this patio? A man can't get a caramel latte with salted caramel cold foam and sit here enjoying the view?”

She makes this scoffing noise that sounds like pffft and then hmmmph.

“Salted caramel cold foam? Are you that obsessed with me that you even copied my drink?”

“What if I am?”

I'm not. Well ... define obsessed. If it means you can't seem to get over the fact that a certain blond, sassy woman has rejected you without just cause, or at least with insufficient cause ... and, as a result you can't seem to stop thinking about her ... well ... yeah. Maybe I'm a tad obsessed. But not obsessed. Let's go with persistent. I'm a diplomat on a mission to make peace. Yeah. I like that.

“Obsessed with me?” Her eyes narrow. “You’re admitting it?”

“That’s putting it in a negative light. Let’s call it, persistent diplomacy.”

“What in the world?” Summer shakes her head and attempts to turn her back to me, but we’re both in parallel positions, aimed toward the beach so we can see the ocean.

We sit in silence, sipping our coffees like some synchronized coffee-drinking TikTok video. I entertain myself by trying to throw off the times I drink compared to when she drinks. I’m not really sure what to do. Once again, I came here to try to build a bridge and I’ve run into an impenetrable wall.

“Look,” she says. “We’re not going to be friends. I don’t like charmers or players. I don’t know you, and I don’t want to know you. Why can’t you just accept that?”

“Charmers and players?”

“Is that all you took from what I said?”

“I’m charming.” I say it as a point of fact. “And I’m an awesome friend. You’re missing out saying we won’t be friends.”

She huffs as if I’m absurd.

I do know I’m charming. Even my mom used to say, *Don’t pull that charming act on me, Ben*. I didn’t even know I had a charming act until she started calling me out. I try to use my charm for good. Cam teases me about flirting with anything that moves, but I assure him I’m just having fun. No harm, no foul. I don’t lead people on. I say kind things, wink, give them a look—one of the ones I’ve mastered after seeing how women respond. When I walk away from a brief exchange of banter or from giving a compliment, the person is left feeling happy, better than they did before we met.

That’s always been the story, until I met Summer.

“I’m charming,” I repeat. “But I’m not a charmer—if by charmer, you mean someone who takes advantage of people or tries to deceive people. That’s not me.”

Again she makes those little noises: hmph, pfft.

I should get up. I should walk away. I should shake the sand off my feet and go about my business. But I'm like a dog with a bone. I can't let go of the fact that she doesn't see me.

I'm not stupid. I don't continue talking. My dad used to tell me, *Digging a hole can stop at any point. The sooner you stop digging, the easier it is to get out.*

So, I sip my coffee, closing my eyes to enjoy the flavor. When I open my eyes, Summer's watching me—studying me like I'm some rare animal in a temporary exhibit at the zoo.

I cannot help the fact that my eyebrows lift upward just the briefest bit and drop just as quickly. It's instinct. The soft smile on my face should help, but knowing her, it won't.

Summer closes her eyes and shakes her head with her lips pinched in.

I don't even need to open my mouth to blow it with this woman.

After a nearly unbearable stretch of silence, I ask, "What are you doing today? Do you work?"

Her head snaps around so I'm left looking straight in her eyes. They are like blue-ice, set and determined.

There's more to her than this hard shell.

Maybe there is. But I might get killed trying to get through to her. Besides, she wants me to leave her alone. I really should respect the obvious line she's drawing.

Summer's voice is soft, almost resigned. "I don't work."

She answered me?

I don't even know what to do. I feign a casual and disinterested tone despite feeling like a herd of elephants is stomping through my chest. No one has ever made me feel this nervous. Not even my college baseball coach.

Summer's avoiding my eyes. I still ask, "A day off. That's nice. Any plans?"

I'm so casual. Oh so casual. I almost want to pat myself on the back.

"I have plans." She pauses, sips from her coffee, looks out over the ocean.

There's a morning fog that comes over the island when the air is cooler. Some days the cloud cover has been brief, evaporating like a mist once the sun comes out more fully. Other days, the bank of gray haze lingers well past ten in the morning, or it returns for a little while in the afternoon. It's starting to lift so we can see quite a way out now. No matter how clear it gets, we never see the mainland from here. It's an odd feeling, like being in our own world where everything else is so removed it almost doesn't exist anymore.

"I'm getting a kayak," Summer finally offers.

"Buying one? Or renting?"

She laughs lightly. It's not a full laugh, which I would pay big money to hear. Not that I have big money, but it would be worth it. I'm not even going to ask myself why. But this light laugh of hers feels like a momentary concession. It's a cease fire. And I'm not foolish enough to think it's the end of whatever weird war she's initiated between us. But it's something, and I'll take it.

"Renting. Just for the day."

"Where do you like to go?"

"Here and there. I paddle north."

"I haven't been up that way yet."

A part of me pictures her inviting me along, us kayaking in the ocean, pulling onto shore, eating a packed lunch, me finally coaxing a real laugh out of her, one where she forgets her troubles and lets her guard down, if only for a minute.

"You should go sometime. You ought to. If you're working in watersports, you need to know the island."

"Yeah. I probably will. I'm working at the shack today."

She nods. And then it's like a curtain falls and the show is over because she returns to drinking her coffee, staring out at the ocean, and ignoring me.

SUMMER

*She smiled at the ocean
because the waves told her story.*

~ R.M. Drake

“I thought you were going kayaking.” Marissa’s wearing her uniform for her shift at Chops—white shirt, black pants, black shoes.

She’s pulling her long hair into a twist and securing it with clips while she watches herself in the mirror on the back of our door. I just got home from biking up the hill to our dorm after a disturbing morning cup of coffee. The coffee wasn’t disturbing, but the man on the patio certainly was.

“I am going kayaking. I just had to come home first ... to get my bearings.”

Marissa pauses and turns to face me. “To get your bearings? What happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing.”

“Ooooh. Nothing is always something. Tell me.”

“It’s really nothing. I went to yoga. Then I cleaned up and got on my bike. Rode to C-Side for a cup of coffee.” I lower my voice and mumble, “Nearly um rode uh Ben mmm down and then had to listen to him try to uh befriend me on um the uh patio.”

“Wait. Wait. Wait. Hold all your horses. Did you mumble Ben’s name in the middle of all that? And did you say you nearly ran him down? What does that even mean? And he was at C-Side?”

Marissa places the last clip in her hair and turns to me with her hands on her hips, a knowing smile on her face, and her brows raised.

She won’t let up until I tell her everything, so I may as well get it over with.

“I was biking down the hill and Ben darted out in front of me. I had to swerve to miss him. He’s fine. I’m fine. It was just unnerving. And then, I was chatting with Clarissa, and in walks Ben, taking over the room with his charm. I ducked out onto the patio with my coffee, and he had the nerve to follow me. Then he starts telling me he makes a good friend and I’m missing out. Says he’s not a charmer. I talked to him a little. So ... yeah.”

Marissa looks like a model for a tooth whitening commercial. Both sets of teeth appear in the brightest smile I’ve probably ever seen, even on her.

“Ooooh. I love this. It’s fate. Destiny. Kismet. Karma. Providence. Serendipity ...”

“Okay, Madame Thesaurus. Enough of that. I came back here to clear my head, remember? It’s not fate or any of those woo-woo things. Ben and I live on the same small island with only a few options for good coffee. Clarissa makes the best coffee. Ben somehow discovered that. He’s apparently a morning person.”

“One strike on an otherwise perfect record.” Marissa winks.

Marissa does not do mornings. I wonder how that will pan out when she’s a nanny.

“Anyway, I tried to give him a pleasantly cold shoulder.”

“What even is that? You can’t give someone the cold shoulder and have them feel like you’re being pleasant—especially not you.”

I shrug. She's not wrong.

"Anyway, he followed me out onto the patio. Tried to strike up a conversation, so I threw him a bone and told him I'm going kayaking."

"And ... did he offer to come?"

"No! He's working—the kayak shack."

"Ooooh. That's good. You'll see him again."

"And again ... and again ... and again. This man is like my new shadow. A cheesy shadow who is too concerned with my impression of him. You know that's all this is, right? He can't stand that someone didn't fall for him at first sight. It doesn't gel with his worldview. He's obviously always been able to win over whomever he wants. I'm not that girl, so he's determined to make me see the good in him. I don't have time for this. I've got work, the play, and ... other things."

I don't talk about my past or my family. Not even with someone I trust as much as Marissa.

"I can't imagine wanting to brush him off. He's so yummy."

"Yummy? Seriously, Marissa?"

"He is. Those arms. Those eyes. The kindness in his smile. His sense of humor. His thoughtfulness."

"Are we discussing the same man?"

"I don't think so. Somehow you don't see the man I see. *Yet*. You don't see him yet. I bet you will. I only wish I could be living here when you do."

I flop back on my bed, grab my pillow, put it over my face and scream—not an angry scream, I just needed to get whatever's balled up inside me out of my system.

Then I sit back up, look at Marissa, who is laughing, but trying to hide her laughter.

"I really, really need this day off. I need to unwind, not answer questions like, '*Where do I go to sign up for massages?*', or give one more description of the history of the

island and how the land conservancy keeps the backside safe for the animal population. I just need to breathe. And not to talk about Ben.”

“Oh, mija. I’m sorry.” Marissa walks to my bed and sits down. “I won’t mention the hot watersports instructor again today.”

“Marissa.” I playfully warn her.

Way to not mention him, by reminding me he’s hot. I don’t need any reminder of what Ben looks like. If I close my eyes I see him in his tank top, his hair tousled and barely styled, but somehow he still managed to look like he was waiting for a photographer to show up and do a photoshoot themed: sexy man drinking coffee on the beach. He sat there smiling over at me on the patio. It was the smile of a predator trying to sedate his prey, but still. That’s one heck of a smile.

Marissa makes a zipping motion across her lips. “No mas. Ya no hablaré del instructor sexy.”

“I get that last part. And please. No more.”

“That’s what I said. No more.”

“You said sexy and instructor too.”

“Now you are talking about him.”

“I’m not.”

“Me either.”

She smiles a mischievous smile. It’s adorable on her and I’m not the least bit mad at her. If I believed what she obviously thinks about Ben, I’d be trying to plead his case too. Marissa’s too sweet. Hopefully she’ll find a man who appreciates how special she is and cherishes that precious heart one day.

Marissa stands and grabs her mascara wand and swipes a few coats on each eye, making her dark lashes even more defined. She leaves about twenty minutes later.

I lie back on my bed and close my eyes for a moment, just needing to relax—and, yes, okay. Also to gear myself up to

see Ben again. I'm going to rent a kayak. He's working the shack. With any luck, I'll run into Kai or Bodhi instead. Yes. Both of them have tried to ask me out over the past month, but they also took no for an answer, unlike someone else. Not that he asked me out. He didn't. Which is good—great, actually. He's probably biding his time, though. Guys like him always do.

I made it thoroughly clear to Kai and Bodhi that I'm just another employee at the resort, not a potential hookup or love interest, or whatever they thought they might see in me.

I'm considering my kayak outing ... My thoughts soften, blurring from me on the ocean, to Ben, to Kai, to Bodhi, to memories of the week I left home.

Somehow, closing my eyes for a moment turned into an unplanned nap. When I wake, it's past lunch. I didn't mean to fall asleep, but I do feel better. I stretch, run a brush through my hair, put on my flip flops, and take off for the watersports pier. When I reach the beach, I see Kai and Bodhi on the dock, chuckling. They're leaned toward one another conspiratorially. I walk past the shack and toward them.

“What's going on, you two?”

“Oh. Hey, Summer. You're looking good,” Bodhi says. “Nothing. We're just enjoying the sun and the water. Another day working in paradise.”

He looks like the cat who ate the canary and still had feathers sticking out his delinquent feline mouth.

Kai nods. “Yep. Another day in paradise.”

Then he busts up laughing and Bodhi joins him.

“You do look beautiful, by the way,” Kai adds.

Men. They are ...

1. Predictable.
2. Predictable
3. Predictable.

“Enough trying to distract me with the compliments,” I say, giving them both a look. “What’s really up?”

“Okay. Don’t tell,” Bodhi says in a hushed voice even though no one’s around.

Kai looks at Bodhi with a look that definitely says he doesn’t want Bodhi to share whatever he’s about to say. Bodhi’s probably a few years younger than Kai, who just retired from the pro-surfing circuit last year due to an injury. He’s healed and now teaches surf lessons and oversees water sports for the resort, but he’ll never compete again. Bodhi grew up in the Santa Barbara area and moved here a few years ago when a position opened up at the resort. He also surfed the circuit, but I don’t know as much about his career.

Bodhi stage whispers, “We hid the kayaks.”

“What? Why?”

“Bro,” Bodhi says. “The new guy needs an orientation.”

“The new guy? Ben?”

Both men’s faces blanch. They didn’t expect me to know Ben, I guess.

“Is he your friend?” Kai asks. “Dude. Say he’s not your friend.”

“He’s definitely not my friend. Roast, prank, initiate, haze. Do whatever you want to that man. Just get me a kayak.”

“Um. No can do,” Bodhi says. “We can’t let Ben know we were behind this. He’s already had two sets of customers come in asking for kayaks. It was classic.”

“Don’t you think Rowan will get mad?”

Rowan is the owner of Alicante. He lives on the island in a mansion further up the hill with a nearly three hundred and sixty degree view of the ocean. I’ve never seen it, but I’ve heard it has two separate pool areas and a helicopter pad. Rowan isn’t always at the resort, but he’s a stickler for excellence and customer service. He will not like the idea of guests wanting kayaks and being turned away.

“Bro, that dude, Ben, is brilliant,” Bodhi says.

Kai nods in agreement. “He told the customers all the kayaks were out and they should check back in a few hours. Then he gave them a coupon for when they return. I watched him as he wrote *twenty percent off* on a scrap piece of paper and signed his name. After the first couple left, he told me to take the twenty percent out of his check. Sheer genius.”

“Yeah,” Bodhi adds. “He’s gonna fit in here just fine. We just need to give him a little heat before he gets too comfortable.”

I should be impressed with Ben’s ability to think on his feet, but it only confirms my suspicions. Only a charmer would be able to cover his tracks that quickly. Ben the fox. Sly as I suspected.

“So, I can’t have a kayak?”

“Want a SUP instead?” Kai offers.

“Stand up paddle board?”

“One and the same.” Bodhi flashes me a smile.

“I guess I could paddle board.”

“Let’s get you hooked up, then.”

Kai, Bodhi and I walk toward the shack together. Ben’s eyes flash when he sees the three of us approaching.

“She wants a kayak,” Kai says before I can even say anything about a SUP.

“They aren’t available right now.” Ben’s face is a mask of calm.

“I really wanted to kayak,” I add. May as well play along a little.

Bodhi and Kai exchange a secret look. They approve.

“If I had one, I’d rent it to you. How about something else? We’ve got two-man sailboats, SUPs, Sea-Doos, snorkel and dive gear, surfboards, boogie boards. Or you can come back in a few hours and try again.”

I pretend to deliberate while Kai and Bodhi silently revel in their prank next to me.

“I’ll go for a SUP. It’s been a while, but I could use the upper body workout anyway.”

“You don’t need any improvement from what I can see,” Kai says off to my left.

Ben rolls his eyes. Oh. Now he’s the one to judge cheesy lines? Mister *Summer is my favorite season*.

“Thanks, Kai,” I say for Ben’s benefit.

I’m not sure why I goad Ben. I’m trying to get rid of this man, not egg him on.

“I’ll get that SUP for you,” Ben says, ignoring me, Kai and Bodhi.

Ben walks out the side door at the back of the shack. The SUPs are leaning on the outside of the building.

I can’t help myself, I have to ask, “Where’s the kayak rack? I mean, the kayaks are all out, but where’s the rack?”

Ben looks at me. Smiles. Then he leans in really close—too close. “I’ll tell you a little secret.”

He smells like coffee and the ocean and sun tan lotion, and it’s been a long time since any man has been this near to me—if you don’t count this same man dancing way too close to me last night. What is with him and the failure to give personal space?

I step away, but my back hits the wall of the shack. Ben steps forward a little. He’s not exactly crowding me, but he’s too close for my comfort. I feel all bothered and *aware* of him.

Ben looks straight in my eyes. His brown eyes are lighter in the sun. Not that I care what color eyes he has. People have eyes. Ben has eyes. They are another weapon in his arsenal, no doubt. Big brown eyes, locked onto mine as he lowers his voice so it’s husky and just between the two of us.

“I think Bodhi and Kai moved the kayaks as a sort of *let’s test the new guy* thing.”

“You think?” My voice is not breathy, for the record. I’m just catching my breath—from bumping my back.

“I do.” Ben’s eyes rove from mine, down to my jawline, up to my mouth, to my cheeks and back to my eyes. I feel the places they stop as if he’s touching me. Not okay. Nope. Nope. Nope. He’s got this innocent look on his face despite the fact that we both know he’s trying to unravel me.

“And you know what else I think?” He asks with this coy look on his face.

Ben places an arm on the wall of the shack, not directly over my head, but to the side so he can lean in closer. His breath fans across my cheek. He’s still giving the appearance of being respectable, while he’s simultaneously storming the gates like he’s Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*. Only Mel shouted, and Ben’s nearly whispering.

“Uh. What?”

Gah. Why did I stutter? It makes me sound like some schoolgirl who can’t keep it together when a hot guy breathes his words out near her ear.

Manipulation. That’s what this is. He’s trying to soften me—to get under my skin.

“I think you know they did.” The rumble of Ben’s voice echoes through me, I feel the tingling in my hair follicles and my nerve endings, and then the reverberation skitters across my skin with a soft vibrating hum.

I’m a human tuning fork. Great.

Ben pushes away from the wall and grabs a SUP, lifting it like it weighs nothing. “You know how to use one of these? I’m assuming you do.”

He’s all business, not like he was just up in *my* business less than thirty seconds ago.

I straighten my spine. I am the image of a woman unaffected. No way is a man like Ben getting the best of me.

“I know how to use one. It’s been a while, but I’ll get back on the horse and ride. The bike. The SUP. Whatever.”

Blahgggghhh. *Zip your lips, Summer.* I make a promise to myself never to mention the last five minutes of my life to Marissa. She'd have a field day. She'd get out pom-poms and do a cheer.

Ben flashes me that smirky smile of his. He winks at me. Of course he does.

“Welp. Since you know how to ride this, I’ll leave you to it. Have a great time on the ocean. Rental’s on the house since I couldn’t provide you with a kayak.”

“You’re going to give up your whole paycheck giving discounts.”

My eyes go momentarily wide. I shouldn’t know about that.

“Hmmm.” Ben hums.

Then he winks again, and turns away like the infuriating man he is. He hopes to leave me wanting more. I know how this game is played. I don’t want more. Nope, Ben. I want less. So much less.

I turn the board so I can carry it with the carry handle. Then I walk down the boat launch until I’m shin-deep in the water. I set the board down, kneel onto it and paddle a few strokes. When I’m out a little ways, I carefully come to a standing position, keeping my eye on the horizon ahead. I paddle a few strokes on the right and then on my left, feeling my skills return to me, even if they are a tad rusty. I glance over my shoulder and see Ben standing on the pier, arms crossed over his chest, watching me. My face shows nothing. I turn back toward the north and paddle, staying near enough to the shore to feel safe, while far enough out to avoid the crash of the waves.

Paddling the board takes a little longer than kayaking, but eventually I make my way to the beach where I pulled out to rest on the sand earlier this week. I choose what looks like a good spot and paddle to shore. My heart and mind have settled already. Being on the water does that for me.

Once I've got the board safely pulled onto the beach, I plop on the sand and dig my toes in, then I lean back and close my eyes, letting the sun and wind have their way with me.

BEN

My friends and I are crazy.

That's the only thing that keeps us sane.

~ Billy Joel

“I had the worst nightmare,” I tell Cam.

We're sitting in these undersized bistro chairs on our balcony, eating cereal together before he goes to work. We definitely need new chairs out here. This thing feels like it came from an elementary classroom. But the view makes up for the seating, that's for sure.

My days start a little later than Cam's unless someone schedules an early morning surf lesson. Then I have to be at work at dawn to catch the good waves. The rental shack opens at nine. Cam needs to be at Guest Services by eight, sometimes earlier if there's a special event that day. We're falling into a rhythm, even though I barely see him without Riley in his lap or at his side. They're in the bubble of new love, and it doesn't look like it's about to pop anytime soon.

It's been a whole month since I first ran into Summer at C-Side that morning she nearly ran me over with her bike. And then she showed up at the shack to rent a kayak that same day. Bodhi and Kai had stashed the entire rack of kayaks behind a service building on the main property that day. They made me go retrieve the kayak rack before we closed up for the evening. They never admitted to stashing it there. Just, “Ben, word is

the kayaks are behind the maintenance building at the back of the resort. Take the pickup and hitch the rack to the truck and bring them back.” I went without another word.

Bodhi and Kai went to all those lengths for me. It’s a welcome of sorts, and I appreciate it. Where I come from, pranks on your friends are par for the course. You don’t prank your enemies. So, I consider the events of my first week at the shack as an initiation into the inner circle of watersports employees. There are a few other part-timers who work with us, but since I’m full-time, I got the rite of passage.

The day after the disappearing kayaks, the guys left a goldfish in my coffee mug—an actual live goldfish in water, not coffee. I didn’t even look when I went to take a sip. When that thing tickled my lip, I slammed the mug back on the counter so fast, water splashed everywhere. Those two goofballs started laughing so hard.

They’ve been calling me Fish Lips ever since—especially in front of customers. They introduce me by saying things like, “Fish Lips would love to help you.” Resort guests try not to show their reaction to the nickname, but I’ve seen my share of wide eyes and curious stares. It’s not unusual for surfers to have strange nicknames, so I’m going with it.

The next day, my name tag had been swapped out. The one that says *Ben* is missing. In its place is one that simply says *F.L.* Only one guest has asked me what the initials stood for so far. Kai stood across the shack near the beach towels, with a look that told me I was facing a test. I straightened my expression and said, “Fish Lips, ma’am.” Kai had to duck into one of the changing rooms to conceal his laughter. I knew right then I had passed with flying colors.

The pranks didn’t fully let up until a few days later. I went to hit the light switch inside the storage shed the second week I was working and I got a handful of zinc oxide mixed with maybe vaseline. It was white and gloppy. I didn’t wait to analyze it. I privately grabbed the nearest rag and cleaned my hand off.

That same day, when I went to put my feet into my flippers so I could take a couple out snorkeling, there was jelly in the front, right where my toes hit the inside edge—strawberry, if you're wondering. That couple had a good laugh while I took my foot out of the flipper and rinsed it in the salt water hitting the shore.

Things have slowed down in the prank department since those first few weeks. Not once did I out Kai and Bodhi to anyone. That's part of the code of pranks. You never let the other man see you sweat, and you never tell anyone that you've been pranked.

Except Summer.

I did tell her. I don't know what came over me that day, but I felt so off kilter. I was grasping at straws, trying to level the playing field. It seemed like I affected her. She definitely responded to me leaning over and breathing my secret into her ear. It's not like I wanted to make her uncomfortable. I never want to do that to a woman. I don't even know what I want anymore when it comes to her.

All the pranking came with me incrementally being included more fully in Kai and Bodhi's friend group. I've been going to their place to hang out more often. They asked me over to their place for burgers again this week. Bodhi grilled and we hung out with a few other guys who live on the island and some other resort employees. Cam turned down my offer to come along so he could stay home and cook dinner for Riley at our place.

Did I watch for Summer to show up that evening at Bodhi's? She didn't. I can't seem to shake thoughts of her. I've met some other interesting women who work at the resort, some of them definitely flirted and made a point of striking up conversations with me. Cam, Riley, Madeline and I went to Club Descanso together two nights ago. Giselle, the bartender, was as friendly as she had been the first night. I'm sure she'd say yes if I asked her to hang out sometime.

A few women even approached me at Bodhi's barbecue to see if I'd want to get together on our days off. They weren't

even deterred when Kai shouted, “Hey, Fish Lips! Grab the chips, would ya?” Normally, I’d take a woman up on an invitation if she seemed like someone I wanted to get to know. Right now, I’m so ridiculously preoccupied with the one woman I should leave alone that I don’t feel it would be fair to go out with anyone else.

It’s starting to irritate me. Summer’s a squatter in my mental space. I didn’t give her permission to move in, and she won’t leave. I’ve seen her around pretty often since the day she nearly ran me down with her bike. But nothing’s changed. If anything, she’s more dead set on treating me like I’m a pariah. She’s got me so tied up in knots. She’s even in my nightmares.

“What was the nightmare?” Cam asks, setting down his oatmeal and picking up his cup of coffee.

“She was in it.”

“And by she, we mean Summer?”

“Who else? The woman is like an incurable rash.”

Cam laughs. He’s thoroughly amused at my plight.

“Hey. Did I laugh when you were starting to fall for Riley? No. I spurred you on. I got you to take action. We might be sitting here with you still silently pining away for her, and her not knowing how you feel if I hadn’t given you a pep talk. And this is my thanks. You laugh at my plight.”

Cam’s still chuckling when he answers me. “Sorry, man. You’re right. I shouldn’t take so much joy in your suffering. It’s just, I’ve never seen you like this. Even when you dated someone seriously for a hot minute, you never got caught up in anyone like this. You’ve been this happy-go-lucky tumbleweed, blowing from date to date, or one flirty situation to another. You left a wake of women wishing for more, even though you never made promises unless you intended to keep them. And now, you’re in knots over a woman who hates you. It’s just like karma or something.”

“Karma? You believe in karma?”

“Not exactly. And, for the record, I don’t like seeing you suffer.”

“You totally do.”

“Not in a mean way.”

“Which is a yes. You love this. You love me writhing in pain over a woman who is admittedly the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. And it’s not just her looks. You should have seen her riding that bike down the hill that morning, her arms outstretched, head tilted back, a carefree smile on her face. I could barely breathe at the sight of her. And that’s just ... wrong. I don’t even know her. But I can tell she’s sassy, smart, goal-oriented, a great dancer, and she seems to be a good friend ... and she hates my guts. I can’t help thinking there’s more to her.”

“There’s more to all of us, Ben. Even you.”

“What does that mean? Even me?”

“You come off so carefree and easy going. There’s a lot more to you. Think about Summer’s first impression. She saw a cute guy who tossed off a cheesy line. She didn’t even have a chance to experience your usual finesse. That’s all she thinks there is to you. And believe me, if that were all there was to you, I’d be out. You wouldn’t be my best friend. Which you are, so ... yeah. There’s more to everyone.”

“You think I’m cute?” I bat my eyelashes.

“Shut up, man. I’m trying to be serious here. At least tell me about this nightmare.”

“It was crazy. And it felt so real. You know? All I remember was walking into C-Side to get a latte. Everything seemed normal, like I was actually there asking Clarissa to make me my usual. When I walked out there was this commotion near the water. People were running and screaming about a monster. *Sea monster! Sea monster!* That’s what they were shouting. *She’s out for blood!* one woman screamed as she ran past me. It was like I was glued to the concrete while people ran pell-mell past me.

“Then this massive scaled dragon looking creature rises from the ocean like I’m in some Marvel movie, only, when I look up, the face on the dragon has her eyes—those crystal blue eyes, bright and mysterious. And then the dragon morphs ... at first it takes on her face ... then her hair starts falling in waves down the scaly back. She’s iridescent. And she’s focused on me. I can’t look away, or walk away. I’m transfixed.

“And this sea creature doesn’t care about the crowd that’s running frantically in all directions. She wants me. And not in the *I want you, baby*, sort of way. She rises and rises—Oh! I know! It was like when Maleficent turned into the dragon. You know that scene? Only this dragon was green and turquoise, not purple. And she bent over the beach, aiming right for me. She bent like she was poised for an attack. And the whole time, I’m not moving. I can’t move. I couldn’t move if I wanted to. I was stuck, standing there holding my coffee, watching her while she prepared to annihilate me.”

“And then what happened?”

Cam’s rapt attention is focused on me. It was a pretty intense dream. And I am a good storyteller if I do say so myself.

“Nothing. I woke up.”

“Aw, man. I really wanted to hear the end of that.”

“Which would have been my death. You know that, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe she was going to bend in and stick her forked tongue out and lick your face and then take you home to be her man pet.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Not likely. The day Summer licks my face ...”

Aw. Thanks a lot, Cam. Now I’m picturing *that*, and I don’t need to think about Summer and my face and ... licking ... not any of it. Besides, she’d be more likely to bite me.

“Anyway, what do you think it means?” I ask.

“As if I know. I wasn’t a psych major. You should ask the girls. They’ll have thoughts. Especially Riley. She’s good at figuring out emotions and relationships and stuff.”

“Um. No way. I’m not asking Madeline and Riley about my nightmare about Summer. This stays between us.”

“Okay, Fish Lips. Whatever you say. My human lips are sealed.”

“You don’t get to start calling me that.”

“Why not?”

“I think that’s relatively obvious.”

SUMMER

*Sometimes in the waves of change
we find our true direction.*

~ Unknown

“**L**ook what I found in our mailbox!” Marissa waves a thick manilla envelope over her head when she comes in the door to our room.

It’s eleven at night. I’m up watching *My Fair Lady*. Audrey Hepburn is divine. She makes me want to dye my hair brown, wear gigantically obnoxious hats and lace petticoats, and sing about the rain in Spain. And Rex Harrison is dreamy even though he plays a mindless, obtuse man in this show. It’s such a classic. And I haven’t even cried yet. In this movie, I usually tear up when Eliza Doolittle returns at the end.

The room is dark with the exception of my laptop, which I paused when I heard Marissa’s key in the door. And I know what’s in the envelope she’s brandishing.

I set my laptop to the side, click on my bedside lamp and hop out of bed.

“Gimme! I need to see this!”

“Of course you do! This is the gateway to your future on the big screen.”

“Or it’s the trap door to my season as a relatively obscure local theater actress.”

“It’s definitely a door to local theater, but so much more. And you know it. I feel it in my bones. And the bones don’t lie.”

“You feel it in your bones?”

“Yes. I have that good feeling that something’s about to change for you. I feel it. Mi abuela always told me to listen to the feelings you get in your gut. Dios planted the way of knowing there. We can tell when something good is coming. Just like we get those tingles of warning when something bad is about to happen.”

“Like when Ben is sneaking up behind me.”

“Ay! Summer. You are going to drive me loca. That man is not a bad thing. Do you know what I saw him do the other morning?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

I’m already tearing open the envelope, only pausing for a moment to look at the name on the return label. James Vincent Phillips. He’s not George Lucas or Steven Spielberg, but he’s a retired great in the directing world. He grew up on Marbella and moved to LA to attend film school at UCLA. Then he worked his way up in the film business from film crew to assistant director to director. A few of his films were up for Academy Awards and one got recognized at Cannes. I can’t believe I’m going to work with him. Apparently, he knows the playwright for *In So Deep*.

Hollywood is seventy-five percent who you know. You have to have skills, of course. But a few football stadiums could be filled with talented actors and actresses who never see their name in lights. Talent is only one ingredient in the cocktail that is fame.

“I was taking a morning walk on the beach, you know, at ten, which is technically still morning,” Marissa says as she pulls the ponytail holder out of her hair and shakes her head upside down while running her fingers through her long waves.

“Anyway, I saw Ben near the edge of the water with these little kids. There were five children, probably ages six or seven, and they all were wearing little wetsuits and had those foam surfboards. He was popping up on his board from his kneeling position to standing on the sand. Then he would walk to each one and help them imitate his same movements. Bodhi joined him by the time they were taking kids into the water. Whenever one of those kids stood up on their board in the waves, even for a second, Ben would hoot and holler as if the kid just won a gold medal in a contest for a world championship. It was so cute. I think my ovaries had a little party just watching him—with margaritas and a mariachi band.”

“Stahhhhp. Your ovaries having a party? Oh my gosh, Marissa!”

She just shrugs her shoulders. Then she walks over to her side of the room and starts taking her work outfit off.

“He was cute, that’s all I’m saying. Not evil. Cute.”

“Evil people can be cute. Sometimes the cutest people are the most evil. Keep that in mind.”

“I refuse to keep that in mind. That’s just broken. You can’t truly believe that.”

I can, and I do. If Marissa had lived my life, she’d know how true it is.

Charm is deceitful.

Marissa finishes getting ready for bed and heads to the showers. I pull the script out of its envelope like I’m handling a priceless artifact. By the time the play’s over, this thing will be tattered, marked, dog-eared, and no longer needed. The words on these pages will be embedded in my brain. The particular facial expressions, stage locations, and transitions between scenes will be movements I could do in my sleep. But tonight, as with any time I hold a new script in my hands, I’m encountering a foreign object, aside from the passage I memorized as a part of my audition. It feels magical every

time. A few months of hard work opening up a world of possibility.

I run my eyes down the cast. Jeremy Franzen. He's the guy who will play the pirate to my mermaid. I've been on the cast's GroupMe chat a little, enough to see he's eager to share his extensive experience and qualifications. He seems like a typical theater kid—one who grew up doing plays through high school, got an agent in his early teens and even did some commercials. He's not aiming for Hollywood. People like Jeremy want to be on Broadway, or the Los Angeles or Chicago theater scenes if they can't make it in New York.

Now the song from that musical is running through my head, except the words are mutated. *If Jeremy can't make it there ... he'll settle anywhere ... It might not be ... New York, New York ...* I giggle to myself. If most people could pull up a chair and watch my thoughts like a movie, they'd be mystified. Maybe it's all the films and shows I've consumed over the years. Maybe it's just me—not Summer Monroe, but the real me.

The next morning, I take a chance on repeating my perfect day off. Only, I'm hoping Ben's working or otherwise occupied as I fly down the hill on my bike toward C-Side. I even shut my eyes for the briefest moment, feeling the wind in my hair and the happiness of a new theatrical production in my mind. I stayed up reading the whole script until two thirty this morning, so I'm getting a little later start. I missed yoga, but it was worth it to get a feel for this play.

I'm reciting both Jeremy's lines and mine as I walk into C-Side. No sign of anyone I'd rather not see. So far, so good. Looks like this won't be the island version of *Groundhog Day*.

Jeremy's line: "She's out of my league."

My line: "You're in over your depth."

Jeremy's line: "You've got me adrift."

My line: "Your anchor should lift."

Jeremy's line: "I'm stranded ashore."

My line: "You're obsessed with the ore."

Together from opposite sides of the stage, we say: “I need someone to save me before I fall ... in so deep.”

I look up, having lost myself in my recitation, and see Clarissa smiling broadly at me from over the counter and past the broad, well-defined shoulders of the man I’m trying to avoid—the man who definitely just heard me reciting lines. His back is to me, so I can’t read his face.

Clarissa looks tickled. “Getting ready for the play?”

“Um. Yes.”

“Sounds like a good one. I heard Jeremy Franzen is your pirate.”

“He’s playing opposite me as the male lead.”

Funny, the man at the counter hasn’t turned around, acknowledged me, or made fun of what I was just doing.

“I haven’t seen him in anything, but his reputation precedes him.” Clarissa walks over to help another customer.

I mutter, “His ego precedes him.”

“That too,” Clarissa laughs and then asks the customer what she can get him.

“Oh, you heard that?” I ask.

“I heard it,” the annoying man at the coffee bar says, still not turning to face me.

I ignore him. Maybe he’ll go away. This was the perfect morning, and I’m not letting a minor detail like running into the hot new surf instructor turn my day sour.

“What can I get you, Summer?” Riley asks, appearing behind the bar almost like a ghost passing through a wall.

I guess she was somewhere else in the room. I have to really watch myself once I’m in a play. I get so immersed in memorizing lines, becoming the character, and spending the majority of my free time on stage, I tend to forget myself when I’m out in public. I’m only about fifty percent present most of the time during practice and rehearsal season unless I’m in the theater, then I’m hyper-aware of every detail around me.

“I’ll have ...”

I’m interrupted by a nosy baritone who has the audacity to say, “White chocolate latte, iced with salted caramel cold foam.”

Riley eyes Ben for me. Then she asks me, “Is that what you want?”

Not anymore. Not now that he knows my drink. How does he know? *Stalker. Charmer. Dangerous man.*

“Actually, I’d like a toffee latte today. And, hmmm ... maybe you can craft whatever cold foam you like for that.”

“I’m thinking vanilla or brown sugar. What sounds good?”

“Vanilla.”

Take that, Ben. I’m not as predictable as you think I am.

“Day off?” Clarissa asks after handing another customer a drink.

“It is. I’m going up to the north shore. I’m planning to visit a friend of mine who lives a few blocks from the beach.”

“An island local?” Clarissa smiles. It’s more of a statement than a question, but I nod anyway.

“And who’s the lucky guy?” Riley asks.

Ben swivels toward me for the first time since I walked in.

I’d love to play it off like Phyllis is a guy, but ... actually

...

“Phyl.”

“Phil?” Riley asks. “That’s not a name you hear in our generation that often.”

“He’s an old soul.”

Whaaaa??

“Maybe because his parents named him Phil,” Ben says, that smirky smile on his full lips.

“Maybe because he’s *mature*.” I quip back.

“Mature. Is that what the kids are calling it these days? Does he get an AARP discount?”

“You’ll have to tell me.” I retort. “You’re the one hanging with kids.”

I look at Riley and Clarissa, their heads are swiveling between me and Ben like spectators at Wimbledon.

“And when did you see me hanging with kids?” Ben wags his eyebrows.

“I’m assuming. Water seeks its own level and all that.”

Marissa told me, but I’m not sharing that little nugget of info. I picture her face, all goo-goo, gaga over Ben and a bunch of elementary kids on the beach. If he were really a good guy, and not a player, it would be adorable. Too adorable. Either way, this man should come with a warning label. If he’s the man I think he is, he’s a certain kind of dangerous. If he’s who Marissa thinks, the danger actually ratchets up—my heart would not be safe from a man like that.

“I hang with men, Summer. Because I’m a man. All man.” He glances down at his tight fitting T-shirt and back into my eyes. His brown irises burn like logs in a fire this morning. “Maybe you haven’t noticed. Which is fine. You don’t need to notice. I don’t think you’d know what to do with me if you did. Enjoy your date with Phil.”

Ben stands. Looks at Riley and Clarissa, flashes them the smile of a swimwear model, or a guy in a sports car commercial ... or a crocodile before it snaps a crustacean in half.

“Have a great day, Clarissa. Rye Rye.”

He brushes past me, intentionally skimming his arm over mine. He bends near, like he did behind the shack. He really, really needs to stop doing that. He’s not so close that he’s drawing attention from anyone but me. But he’s definitely too close.

Through a breath across my cheek, he says, “Summer. I had a dream about you the other night.”

Ben's voice is so low I wonder if I imagined him speaking.

Clarissa and Riley don't seem to have heard him. Their faces are neutral. I sway a little on my feet, which is ridiculous. Probably because I haven't eaten enough protein, or anything, this morning. Definitely not because of the potent smell of saltwater and sunscreen, combined with caramel and manhood lingering behind Ben as he walks away. Agh. He's infuriating.

No one that annoying should smell that delicious. I just need a latte. And a date with Phyl ... Phyl-lis ... Phyllis.

BEN

Who needs a pet

when you can have your own personal shadow?

~ Unknown

I have a full day off. I haven't taken many since I started working at the watersports shack. I like hanging out there, even when I'm not on the clock. It keeps me busy. Cam's working this morning, but he's taking tomorrow off so we can all say goodbye to Madeline. She's heading back to Los Angeles to start her final year at UCLA.

I haven't explored the island as much as I'd like yet. The resort, and especially the beach front, key landmarks and shops are beginning to feel familiar. But there are huge sections of Marbella I still want to check out.

Eventually, I'm assuming this whole place will feel like home. College never really did. This nomadic feeling hung with me all four years in San Diego, like my home was still my childhood bedroom in Bordeaux, Ohio. But that wasn't really home anymore either. I'm wondering how long I'll have to live on this island before I feel like I belong here—or if I'll always feel just the slightest bit out of place, like a fish out of water.

I walk from our apartment toward the bike rental. I'll have to find a bicycle for sale online. I love cycling, and Bodhi told me there are some great trails on the backside. The image of

Summer flying down the hill toward C-Side with that carefree smile on her face flashes in my mind.

I nearly growl. At first I wanted to get to know her, to prove to her I'm not who she thinks I am. Now, I'm just irritated. She pops into my head like a blond-haired, blue-eyed whack-a-mole, uninvited and persistent. I'd like to take that soft mallet and ... nothing. I wouldn't hit Summer with a soft mallet. I'm such a wuss. If she gave me the time of day, I'd probably throw all this frustration overboard in a heartbeat. But she isn't. So I'm left feeling aggravated and unsettled. And it's my day off, which means I should be relaxing.

I approach the little building on the street just outside the entrance to Alicante. A window at the front of the bright yellow shop is open like one of those Dairy Queen counters where you order a Blizzard and eat at tables outside. Only, this window is where you arrange to rent a surrey, bicycle, tandem, Segway, or motor scooter.

"Good morning," the pretty brown-haired young woman at the window says to me. "What can I get for you?"

One point in her favor: she's not blond. Another point: she's friendly. I bet she wouldn't turn into a dragon and emerge from the sea like my worst nightmare.

"Do you have something that will rid my mind of an obsession?" I mumble without thinking.

"What?" she giggles.

"Nothing," I shake my head. "I want a bicycle."

"Are you obsessed with bicycles?"

"If only."

She smiles a warm smile. "Ahhh. A girl?"

"A woman, yeah. Sorry. I shouldn't have blurted that out. I don't even know you. I'm Ben. I work at watersports. Just started here."

"I know who you are." She blushes a little. It's cute and makes her look even more attractive. "I'm Katrina. I grew up

here. Went away for college. Came back. Marbella's home. I can't imagine staying gone."

I smile at her. "It's home, huh? That's a great feeling."

"It is. Where are you from?"

"Ohio. A small farming town called Bordeaux. It's spelled like the French city, Bordeaux, but we give it a midwest touch and say, Bored Ox."

She giggles again, looking at me through her lashes. "That's cute."

Katrina studies me. "So a girl's got you spun out, huh?"

"Sort of. I'll get through it."

"I'm sure you will. And, if she's not worth your time, you need to get her out of your system. I'm pretty sure you won't have any trouble finding other people to hang out with around here."

I smile at what she's implying and the sweet way she said it. She's not flirting, but if I asked her out for coffee or lunch, she'd say yes. I just can't—because of the barnacle that won't stop clinging to my thoughts. The sea-dragon who has me stuck in one spot, unable to move.

And, *if she's not worth my time* ... I don't know. As much as I hate the fact, something deep inside me tells me Summer is worth my time. And that's why I'm stuck. It's like when my mom would get a necklace all tied in knots in her jewelry drawer. She'd hand it to me and I'd work on that thing until I had it straight. I couldn't give up. What is it Clarissa said? Summer's a puzzle I feel compelled to solve? Yeah. Unfortunately, that's true. I don't have to be happy about it. But I probably have to accept it. Until I solve the mystery that is Summer Monroe, I won't do myself or any other woman any favors by spending significant time with them.

"Are you going to the employee bonfire this week?" Katrina asks, tilting so one elbow's leaning on the counter and her hand cups her jaw—like I'm the most interesting person she's met in a while.

Right now, I could assure her I'm not that interesting, unless having redundant thoughts and feeling slightly aimless is her favorite flavor.

"I heard about the bonfire. Bodhi and Kai mentioned it to me yesterday. I hadn't decided yet. Are you?"

"I'll be there. It's chill. Some people see it as a chance for resort staff to start the next round of who's dating who. Can't blame them. We're here on an island, all young and relatively attractive, outgoing, fun. Why not start a little workplace romance? But a lot of us just sit around talking and laughing and enjoying the music and the fire. You can choose what you want to do."

"Definitely music and the bonfire for me at this point. I've got some complications to work through."

"Well then, I hope to see you there."

I almost say, *It's a date*. That would be my normal answer. Not to lead her on, but to make her smile. Instead I say, "Sounds good, Katrina."

"Let me get you your bike. Mountain, street or strand cruiser?"

"Let's go with mountain. I want to see the backside."

I won't say, *That's what he said*. Not in mixed company. I'd for sure say that to Cam and he'd roll his eyes, but he'd also laugh, like he always does at all my jokes and antics.

I miss him.

We live together, but he's in Riley-la-la-land these days. Cam and I used to be the inseparable duo, even when he dated his long-term girlfriend in college. She wasn't the one for him and I knew it. I was patiently waiting for Cam to know it. We still had plenty of time just the two of us while he was seeing Stephanie—going to the gym, surfing, getting a bite to eat together. Right now, Cam's either working or he's with Riley. And I don't blame him. I just miss him.

The map of Marbella Katrina gives me shows some roads and trails, but obviously not all of them. I ride away from the

bike rental and up the hill that leads to the employee dorms, half-hoping I'll accidentally bump into Summer and half-hoping she decided island life wasn't for her after all.

Who tries to get their big break by taking a mermaid role in a play on a small island? She should be in Hollywood, banging on doors there and finding men to sneer at and mock in the big city. Why me? Why her? Why here?

I pedal harder, loving the feel of the burn in my thighs and calves and the way my heart rate and breathing accelerate as I push my way up the hill. Summer is nowhere near the dorms, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I don't need to see her today. I need to steer clear of her until my head's sorted out and I'm able to feel like I'm not being blown around by her reactions, the way she side-eyes me, and the tone of her voice when she speaks to me.

I bike the roads leading from Descanso toward the less populated side of the island. The landscape becomes a bit more rugged. Tall eucalyptus trees sit in groves, a ravine with boulders appears when I take a turn, running alongside the now-dirt road I'm on. It's obviously a dry creek bed that disappears uphill into the mountain. I'll have to come back and hike that sometime. I wonder if there's water in the river during winter and spring seasons. I bike along through open brush and clusters of trees. The road turns paved again, and the occasional driveway leading to a developed property interrupts the otherwise wild landscape. Sometimes I can see the main house, often there's no view of where the residents actually live.

I come to a stretch with a few massive mansions on huge plots of land along each side of the road. I wonder what it costs to live in a place like that, and who lives there. What's their story? How did they end up with the kind of wealth that afforded them a place like this? And why did they choose Marbella when they could live anywhere?

I pause to check the map and then take a road to my right that winds down toward the north shores, Fisherman's Cove, and Harper's Landing. That's a part of the island with less of a touristy vibe. It's what islanders call "a hidden gem."

A few vacation cabins face the sand, and some older beachy cottages tucked into the neighborhoods have been renovated and turned into rental properties, scattered between the established homes of long-time island residents.

There's a bed and breakfast in Harper's Landing, Mila's Place, according to what Cam told me. Harper's Landing is far less glamorous than Descanso, with more of a quaint beach town feel. People who stay there don't want all the frills and high-end amenities our guests expect. They want to chill out and escape civilization. I imagine buying an old home here and fixing it up one day—something simple. Maybe I'll have a wife and kids, a good dog, an obnoxious cat, a hammock and a firepit in the back yard. I can give surf lessons and take people on boat tours, and then head home to my family at night. Cam and Riley could bring their kids over on the weekends for a barbecue. Then this island would feel like home—because home is where the people who love you most share life with you.

I come to a hill that heads down toward Harper's Landing and I take my hands off the handlebars, imitating the woman who should leave me good and well enough alone, but won't. I stick my hands straight up in the air instead of like an airplane the way she did. *See. I'm not copying you, Summer. You're not the boss of me.* Oh, man. I'm in so much trouble. I'm talking back to her in my head now. I need help. Serious, serious help.

I tour through a few residential streets—one story beach cottages sit on varying sized lots, driftwood sculptures in some of the yards, seashell wind chimes on a few porches. I turn onto a street with a row of shops and pedal down toward the end. A small street sign with an arrow pointing to the right says *Amphitheater*. I turn, curious to see what an open-air stage would be like on this island.

Why haven't I heard anything about this place? A thrill goes through me. Maybe life here won't be so cut and dry.

As I near the amphitheater, I hear voices. A man's voice in the distance, sounding like he's telling other people what to do. A densely wooded area sits at the end of the road, and a metal gantry arches over the trail with a simple plaque at the

center of the crossbeam that says, *All the men and women merely players*. Thanks to my tenth grade English teacher, Mrs. Greene, I know that's Shakespeare. She told us one day all that torturous early modern English would serve us. I bet she never thought that day would be the one when I explored my new island home and came upon a wooded glen that led to an open-air theater.

I wish she could see this.

I take my phone out of my pocket and snap a photo. I'll send it to Mom and she can pass it on to Mrs. Greene. That will make her day. I smile to myself.

I park the bike, sure no one will mess with it. That's one perk of island living. Then I walk the dirt path into the area past the grove of trees. The trail lets out at the side of an amphitheater with rows of curving bench seats extending up a hill, and a concrete stage with a stone front at the bottom. To the sides of the stage, walls of stone have been constructed with bushes planted around the outsides of the walls to form makeshift theater wings.

The voice I heard earlier belongs to a man who is obviously the director. The actors are sitting along the bottom row of bench seating aimed toward him with scripts in hand. He is pacing on the stage, talking loudly. This man does not need a megaphone. His voice is commanding. He's got one of those beards that instantly tells you he's a bit eccentric and creative. Or maybe I'm just projecting that.

He addresses the actors. "So, if you're following, Act Two is where the love story takes off. The mystery and deeper themes still run through this act, but the romance becomes the primary plot between you, Jeremy, and you, Summer."

My eyes scan the backs of the heads and I see her long blond hair. She's fixated on the director, only a slight nod of her head showing she's tracking with what he said.

Voyeurism isn't really my thing, but I can't seem to turn around and leave. It's not like they had a *No Trespassing* sign at the trailhead or anywhere around the amphitheater. This is public property. I'm allowed here.

A noise near the stone wall to the left of the stage drags everyone's attention off the director and onto whatever it is. It sounds like the ape house at the Columbus Zoo. Then there's a deep rolling grunt followed by a thumpy, booming noise. It's low, and definitely an animal—or animals. Those sounds can't be coming from the same animal.

An ostrich? No. I think that's an emu, struts across the stage like it's in a pageant. It continues behind the director and makes its way to the bush on the other side of the stage where it makes dramatic pecking motions at the leaves, eating like nobody's watching. As if the emu appearance wasn't disruptive enough, a small monkey screeches and follows the emu onto the stage, jumping up on the one stone wall, then jumping down, skittering across the stage and running back to the middle and then off into the bushes.

I didn't realize the wildlife made their way into this part of the island. I've heard a few stories of their appearances at the resort or even a time when a bunch of monkeys decided to try out the loungers scattered under umbrellas on the beach south of the boat launch.

The director claps his hands. The emu looks over, but then returns to feasting on the leaves of the bush that is supposed to serve as a cover for the side of the stage.

The director turns to a man at the end of the front row. In the same commanding tone he's been using with the cast, he says, "We're going to have to find a way to limit the appearance of rogue wild animals during the actual show."

The man on the bench seat says, "If you've got ideas as to how to make that happen, I'm sure half the stores in town would be grateful."

"I know. I know." The director shakes his head. "Let's call it a day. For tomorrow, I want you to memorize scene one and we'll do a run through of as much of the first act as we can. I've got a soundtrack we'll play in the background for a few scenes, especially the songs. I'll send you digital files of the songs so you know what I expect. That's it. Cast dismissed."

The actors stand, which startles the emu enough to send it strutting off the side of the stage and into a grove of trees. The monkey pops back out of the bushes and sits watching everyone a little longer, but then seems to bore of people-watching and skitters off in the same direction as the emu.

The cast mingles together. And, I should leave, but I'm watching everyone. Okay. I'm watching her. Don't ask me why. I'm a stranger to myself these days. I've grasped a hold of my confidence and sense of humor at times, but then it slips away as quickly as it comes.

I'm about to turn away, to make a clean getaway before I'm caught and end up looking like I'm some crazed stalker who traveled across a whole island to endure more torture at the hands of the sea dragon. Hands? Mitts? Paws? Tentacles?

Her eyes turn toward me as if guided by a magnet. Not my magnetism, because that has apparently fully left the building, the island, and possibly the planet. The look on her face would be priceless if I were in a better headspace. I, like a dufus, raise my hand and wave. I'm like the army private, new to combat, raising his head out of the foxhole and not only giving the enemy a foolhardy smile, but singing Yankee Doodle at the top of his lungs.

Sitting duck.

Dead duck.

That's me.

Summer says something to the female castmate who is trying to get her attention and then she turns and marches up the few sets of benches toward me. I'm glued in place. I consider turning and running. I could outrun her, but in this battle, retreat is not an option.

I think of all the women who have flirted with me over the years. All the smiles I've brought to numerous faces. Inwardly, I summon strength from all those memories.

"Are you stalking me?" Summer's question rings through the amphitheater.

Great acoustics, I'll give them that.

A few heads down near the stage turn.

“Stalking you? Monroe. You give yourself an awful lot of credit. What about our relationship makes you think I’d go out of my way to encounter you? Is it the way you’re always so happy to see me? Or the compliments you sling my way like Miss Corn Husk throws candy corn from her spot in the convertible in the Bordeaux Days parade?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Nothing. Just ... do you actually think I would go out of my way to stalk you so you could dish out more of your brand of affection?”

“Affection? And did you call me Monroe?”

“It’s your last name. And no, I didn’t stalk you to find that out. Bodhi mentioned it the other day. Affection. Obsession. Attraction. Call it what you will.”

I know I’m stretching it. I have to put Summer off balance, then I’ll flee. In a very manly way. A manly flee. Like Jason Bourne in *Bourne Identity*, or Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible*. I picture something blowing up behind me as I run, like the man I am, and narrowly escape danger. And, by danger, I mean Summer, who looks like she might enjoy blowing me up.

“I’d say it’s more like revulsion. Suspicion. Irritation. Determination.”

“Okay. So, considering all that, you have to know I didn’t come here to see you.”

“Who are you here to see then? One of the women on the cast? Have you found a new victim to charm?”

“Believe me, Monroe. I don’t have to bike across the island to find a victim.”

Not a victim. I’m not looking for a victim. Ugh. She makes me say things, do things, think things.

Insufferable woman.

And now my thoughts sound like I'm in a reenactment of *Pride and Prejudice*. Only she's no Elizabeth Bennett, and I'm no Darcy. Thanks again, Mrs. Greene, for that little nugget of literary awareness. Tenth grade English. Who knew?

"I was on a bike ride. I saw the sign saying *Amphitheater*, so I rode over here. The fact that you were being told about your romance with Jeremy when I stepped up is irrelevant."

Summer rolls her eyes.

We stand there, staring at one another in a showdown of the wills. I don't think either of us blinks for at least thirty seconds. Then someone calls Summer's name, breaking the standoff.

"Yeah?" she answers the person with a shout that echoes through the bleachers and across the stage.

"I want to go over something with you!" the guy I think must be Jeremy shouts.

"Be right there!" Summer answers.

Summer turns to me, but I don't wait to hear what she's about to say. I swivel on my heel and head out of the amphitheater.

From over my shoulder, I say, "See you around, Monroe."

I hear her shout, "Don't call me Monroe!" as I walk down the path toward my rental bike.

SUMMER

Stalk me all you want. I still won't like you.

~ Unknown

“Who was that?” Jeremy asks when I make my way down to the front of the amphitheater. “Boyfriend?”

“Um. No. Nope. Definitely not. Whatever the opposite of a boyfriend is, that's him. Not a boyfriend.”

“Shakespeare had a line about that. *The lady doth protest too much, methinks.*”

“Well, in Hamlet's case, maybe. In my case, I'm just being ultra sure. Like you would be with a nuclear leak, or a match falling on the ground near a gas line, or the bubonic plague.”

“Hmmm.” Jeremy smiles this knowing smile.

Only he doesn't know. He thinks he knows. Methinks hethinks. But hethinks wrong.

I'm done trying to convince Jeremy. He doesn't know me or the scourge on the island that is Ben Hayes. He probably wouldn't care if Ben were a player. Guys don't always dock points for that with other guys. And whhhhaaaatttt was Ben doing here? This is my safe place. My sacred place. *MY* place. Do I really buy his excuse: *I was merely exploring the island when I tripped across an amphitheater line?* Not really. He knows I'm in the play. Besides, if he just tripped across it,

once he saw what it was, why did he stay like a stage-five creeper and watch?

“So, you wanted to ask me something?”

“I thought we could run lines. Maybe one day this week. I have nothing on my schedule aside from this production and a few commercials and auditions I’ll be hitting the mainland for throughout the coming week. Word amongst the cast is that you have taken a part-time position with the resort.”

He says schedule like shhhezhule. And *amongst*? Speaking of words the cast has been murmuring about, rumor has it Jeremy spent a season in England studying short courses at RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and he did a stint as an extra at Stratford-on-Avon. Now he’s affecting a slightly British accent.

I can’t be too critical. After all, affecting accents has become a daily affair for me. But my speech pattern has been a point of survival, while Jeremy’s seems to be an extension of the reputed ego he brings into everything he does.

“I do work at the resort. Part time.”

“Well, let’s pick a time when you aren’t schlepping guests around in one of those carts. I’m staying on the north shore in a little cottage not far from here. We can practice at my place.”

“Or we can meet at a coffee shop.”

“I loathe practicing in coffee shops. I promise I’ll behave.”

I resist the temptation to roll my eyes. Act Two rolls through my thoughts. I’ll have to kiss this pompous man right on his pompous lips. Maybe we can feign the kiss. I’ll deal with it when the time comes.

“How’s your pirate-speak coming along?” I ask to shift the subject.

“Arrrgh, fine lass, tis well.”

Gross. He sounds like the one pirate every other shipmate wants to throw overboard.

“Great. Well. I’ll be going. I’m meeting a friend.”

“The guy?”

“I already told you, he’s not anything to me. I’m meeting a local. She lives near here.”

Jeremy nods as if he’s giving his stamp of approval over my afternoon plans.

Then one of the stage hands approaches Jeremy and starts fawning over him, saying how excited she is to be working with him. I take my opportunity to leave while he’s distracted with his adoring fan.

I kayaked here this morning, working out a deal with Kai so I could beach the boat and keep it on this side of the island for the bulk of the day. He insisted I come to the employee bonfire in exchange. Not as his date or anything, he just said he doesn’t see me out with other people “our age” enough and he wants to see me make some friends now that Marissa is leaving.

It was actually sweet. And Kai is probably seven to ten years above my age, but I know what he means. I tend to get along best with seniors and kids because there’s no pretense or guile. In both age ranges, what you see is what you get.

The walk away from the amphitheater clears my head of the encounter with Ben ... and Jeremy. Men! I’m carrying my script in the plastic bag I brought it in to keep it waterproofed on the kayak ride. I turn onto a smaller street about four blocks up from the ocean.

Phyllis’ home is one of the larger houses on a property that’s bigger than most on these back streets of the north shore. It’s no mansion, but it’s a four bedroom, three bath house with a full front porch and a nice yard. She and her sisters grew up in the home and now her younger sister, Connie, lives with her husband a few blocks over, and their youngest sister, Joan, lives here with Phyllis.

A young, brown-haired woman in her late twenties or early thirties is on the porch swing with a little boy who might be six or seven. He’s leaned back on her and she’s reading to him

from a book. I stroll up the short walkway and climb the steps, smiling at the two of them when they look up.

“Hi. Is Phyllis here?” My voice trails off at the end of the question.

The two of them were so cozy in their own little world until I stepped up here and made my presence known.

“You must be Summer! Yes. Phyllis is my aunt. She, Joan and Connie raised me—sort of like the three fairy godmothers in Sleeping Beauty. Actually, a lot like that. Do you remember the whole pink-blue-pink-blue fiasco? Well, that pretty much sums up my childhood. Sorry. I’m rambling. I’m Mila and this is my son, Noah.”

“Hi. Oh. Wait. Mila? As in Mila’s Place?”

“One and the same. I’m the proud, or crazy, owner of one of three Bed & Breakfasts on the north shore. It sounded so idyllic, opening a B and B. Restore a house; welcome people; create a haven. Or so I thought. Then you factor in the actual guests, and the actual plumbing that breaks, and the days when no one rents so you wonder if you’ll keep the business open.

“Ahhh. There I go again, rambling. Anyway, I love running Mila’s Place, and I’m also nuts enough to keep hoping it will be open forever—long enough for Noah to run it when he gets older.”

I don’t miss the look on Noah’s face. This might be news to him. And I wonder if he wants to run an inn or if he’ll have other aspirations. A family doesn’t have to be wealthy to try to dictate the futures of the next generation. Though, even at first blush, Mila seems far more reasonable and caring than certain families with their standards and expectations.

“Anyway, no one’s staying at the inn tonight, so Noah and I have a little break. Our next guests check in tomorrow.”

The front door creaks open and then Phyllis steps onto the porch. She reminds me of Meryl Streep with her strong, high cheekbones, expressive eyes, and classic features. She’s wearing another one of her outfits that looks like she models for Coldwater Creek—a long statement necklace, flowing

coverup, form-fitting tank and some sort of woven linen pants. She looks casual, earthy, and simultaneously elegant. I hope to be just like her forty years from now, a happily single woman, comfortable in her own skin, surrounded by beauty and the people she loves.

“I see you two have met.”

“Just now,” I say.

“And you met my grandson?”

“We said hi.”

“He’s the smartest, most clever boy this side of the Mississippi, aren’t you, Noah?”

“Whatever you say, Grammy P,” Noah says with a nod.

“See.” Phyllis beams. “Smart boy.”

“Stop puffing his head up with all those overinflated compliments,” Mila scolds Phyllis. “An arrogant man makes for the worst kind of company.”

“Isn’t that the truth!”

Both women flick their heads toward me. Maybe I said that with a little too much gusto.

“Are we talking about anyone in particular?” Phyllis crosses her arms over her chest and cocks her head to the side slightly.

I’m surprised when Jeremy’s face comes to mind instead of Ben’s, but if I’m being honest, Jeremy seems even worse than Ben. I would like to say I don’t judge people on their first impression. And I usually don’t. But Jeremy’s reputation precedes him and he lived up to it by being far less charming in his delivery than Ben.

Charm is deceitful.

True. But unadulterated arrogance just might be worse. As much as I hate to admit it, that’s a half-point to Ben. Don’t worry. Ben’s in no danger of earning more points with me. He’ll sit in his half-point status for eternity.

“My co-star in the play. He’s a piece of work.”

“Ahhh. Men in theater,” Priscilla says. “They do have a flair for the dramatic.”

“Isn’t that a given? It is theater after all,” Mila says, then she looks at me. “Auntie P was in theater. Did you know that?”

“I did not.”

“Even the movies.”

“What? You were in the movies?”

“Oh, nothing you’d know. Old films. And I had a stage name. I had some minor supporting roles. A few leads. Enough to earn a side income. And then a few films with James Vincent Phillips. Now he’s like me, living here, only the day he stops directing, I think he’ll breathe his last breath. I never made it to being a household name. I thank Providence for that. If I had, I’d be running from the paparazzi and hiding out like Alana.”

“Alana?”

Mila and Phyllis share a look.

Phyllis’ voice takes on a conspiratorial tone even though we’re the only people within earshot. “Alana Graves. She lives here on the island whenever she isn’t filming. You can’t tell a soul, though many people know. We just act like we don’t. Alana needs her rest. She grew up coming here over the summers with her parents. When she hit it big she bought her own place up between Descanso and here. Acres of land to herself. I wouldn’t live like that for all the star salaries in the world. Not up on those remote properties, and not with everyone wanting a piece of me, and very few knowing me for who I really am.”

“To be fair, you live on Marbella anyway,” Mila says with a warm smile. “Your life is pretty cushy, Auntie.”

“You have a fair point. But I still think my days of acting were perfect. I did local plays in the amphitheater. Had roles in

big productions. Got to be in film. Rubbed elbows with some big names, and was able to retire into blissful obscurity.”

I smile, even though my goals are much bigger than Phyllis’. I don’t know why, maybe it’s the part of me that always wants to go all the way with something, to prove to myself I can do a thing. Maybe it’s that I want something so separate and different from the life I came from. I just know I want to be in movies, and not as an unforgettable side character, though there’s nothing wrong with that. I want to be the star, and I’ll do the work it takes to get there—even if it means dealing with Jeremy’s ego and kissing his unappealing reptile lips. I don’t know if he really has reptile lips, but somehow, the thought of kissing a reptile is more comforting than what’s ahead for me in Act Two of this play.

SUMMER

*There are no goodbyes for us. Wherever you are,
you will always be in my heart.*

~ Gandhi Mahatma

“I ’m going to miss you, chica.”

“Stop now. I don’t like crying when I don’t have a screen in front of me or I’m not on stage.”

Marissa pulls her second suitcase over to the door. We shipped a few boxes of her things at the local island post office yesterday: a colorful table lamp, her vibrant, cozy bedding, some framed photos of her family, the twinkle lights she had strung over her bed.

Note to self: Buy twinkle lights.

If you’ve ever read fantasy books where the world is sucked dry of the magic and everything turns a melancholy charcoal gray where it had been vibrant and cheery, that’s what our room feels like stripped of Marissa’s belongings. In less than a half-hour she’ll be walking down the pier to board the ferry that will take her to the next chapter of her life.

I’m in my bed, pouting. I’m not even bothering to try to hide how messed up this feels to me.

“I’m happy for you,” I say, even though my face belies my words.

“You are so not happy for me. Don’t start lying to me, Summer. You’ve always been honest with me.”

I haven’t. I’ve never told a bold-faced lie, but I’ve withheld the most important things about myself: who I really am, where I’ve come from, and why I’m here. I want to tell myself that doesn’t matter. Marissa knows me anyway. And she loves me—takes me at face value. Friends like her are one in a million.

“I am happy for you. I’m just miserable for me.”

She walks toward my bed, and instead of sitting opposite me at the foot like she often does after she comes home from working her shift at Chops, she sits next to me, putting her arm around my shoulder and drawing my head to her chest as a mother would to console a child.

I can’t remember my mom ever doing this. Chancy did. She was my nanny for about eight years. She would coo into my head and say, “There there, Sweet Caroline. Hush your crying. Your life is good.” Always those words. Always Sweet Caroline, like the song. Sometimes at night she would sing that song while I drifted to sleep.

If Chancy had been around when everything came to light with Daddy, she wouldn’t have said my life was good. Or, maybe she would—maybe she would have dug deep and found some silver lining. She always saw the best, despite the fact that she lived nine thousand miles away from her home and devoted her life to raising me and my siblings, children she’d never see again when her job ended.

Sometimes, I feel like a caterpillar stuck in her cocoon. The idea of being a butterfly seems so unrealistic. Do some caterpillars never make it out of their self-imposed shell? I’d be that one.

“What’s going on in that unfairly beautiful head of yours?” Marissa murmurs into my hair.

Tears are dripping onto her shirt. She knows it. I know it. We’re not talking about the fact that I’m crying over a roommate I’ve known less than three months. Something

clicked into place between us. Time has nothing to do with the kind of kindred connection we've found in one another.

"I'm thinking I want to leave here and help you be a nanny. You'll never survive children before noon. You hate mornings." I pause and take a deep breath. Marissa strokes my hair in a soothing rhythm. "I had a nanny, you know."

I can't believe I said that out loud. It's the first real piece of my past I've shared with Marissa and it feels like the bottom just dropped out from under me.

"I don't doubt it. You must have given her the hardest time. You and your stubborn heart and creative spirit."

She didn't even flinch at my revelation.

"Yeah. I think I did. But she was so kind. She was from India. At first there was a slight language barrier, but she had learned some English too, in her school, and she picked it up quickly. I loved her. Your niece and nephew will love having you there."

"They will. I'm fun like that. Kids love me. Even in the early morning when I have to remind myself to love them back."

I chuckle and lift my head, wiping my eyes.

"This isn't goodbye," Marissa says, reaching over and swiping under my eye at a rogue tear.

She's always been like that, from day one. No boundaries in the best of ways. Says what she thinks, touches me freely, and never makes me feel awkward. It's just her. One in a million.

"You aren't getting rid of me, if that's what you planned. I'll come visit on some of my days off and I'll make you take me around the island for some fun. Or you can come over on your day off—get away from that horrid man whom we aren't naming right now. That hot, horrible man who knows how to dance and buys women drinks without strings attached."

I swat her arm and roll my eyes.

“I’ve got so many thoughts about him, but ...” She mimes zipping her lips. “Anyway, don’t cry like I’m dying. I’m going to be at your play, and at your debut on the big screen, and in your wedding. You’ll be so sick of me.”

“Never.” I smile softly.

She tore down all my defenses. And I’m not mad about it in the least.

“So, here’s what you are going to do.” Marissa straightens her spine and looks at me. She starts counting off her directives on her fingers one by one. “You’re going to pour yourself into that play and make a name for yourself. You’re going to kayak every day off. You’re going to find a new roommate as soon as you can. It won’t be good for you to be alone in a room. You might think you want that, but you need someone up in your business. And you are going to text or call me at least three times a week. And you’ll answer me whenever I text or call you. Comprendes?”

“Sí,” I answer her with a laugh. “You’re bossy. You know that?”

“I’m so bossy! It’s my superpower. When you get a roommate, tell me. Otherwise, I’ll worry like my mama, and that’s not a good look, especially not for me.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got the play. I’ll be so busy with that I won’t have time for much else.”

“And tell me when you go on your first date with your enemy.”

I laugh hard. Then I look at Marissa. She’s not laughing at all.

“You’ve got to be joking. I’m never dating that player, Marissa. You need to let that dream die. Get a shovel and bury those thoughts. I’m not looking to date *anyone*. But if I were, he’d be the very last on the list. And that list would scroll out like Santa’s record of who’s been naughty and nice. At the very, very, very bottom would be this name: Ben.” I look at her and then add, “Naughty. That’s the list he’s on: the Naughty List.”

She's laughing now, softly, while she shakes her head like I don't know my own mind.

"Let's get you to the pier."

Marissa stands. I follow her. At the doorway, she turns and wraps me in a hug. "I love you, hermana de mi corazón."

Sister of her heart.

"I love you too."

The words fall out of my mouth so easily. She has no idea how rare a gift they are. Or maybe she does.

We drive to the pier in silence, too many words to fit into the short time we have left, and yet none of them feel adequate.

I park the cart and take one of Marissa's bags while she grabs the other. We walk side by side down the pier toward the ferry, wheeling the luggage behind us.

The first person my eyes snag on is Ben. He's standing with Cameron, Riley, and Madeline on the end of the pier just before the ramp that leads onto the ferry.

Marissa shoots me a look. I'm too tender to engage with Ben right now. I don't have my wits. He'll flatten me with a mere look. I'll just hang back and avoid him. Hopefully, he'll take the hint. Marissa keeps walking, though. She stops so close to the four friends that we nearly look like one inseparable group. While she effusively greets them, I give a quiet nod and a smile in their direction.

Then, Marissa turns to me. She drops the handle of her bag and pulls me into a hug. I hug her back, blocking all thoughts of what Ben is thinking or doing out of my head. He won't rob me of this last minute with my friend.

When she releases me, Marissa steps back and holds my upper arms with her hands. She looks me square in the eyes, and in a soft voice, she says, "It's a small island, mija. Make as many friends as possible. And friends can come from the most unexpected places."

Then she winks, leans in and kisses my cheek.

She bends to grab her bag. I relinquish the handle of the bag I'm holding and watch as she heads down the ramp toward the ferry.

"I'll call you when I get to my prima's. Remember all my very, very wise words!"

I chuckle softly to myself, smiling and waving like a fool, afraid anything I say will bring a fresh wave of tears.

I back up, but I'm still standing a short distance from Ben, Cameron and Riley, a gathering crowd separating us, as they send Cameron's sister, Madeline, off on the same ferry Marissa just boarded. It probably looks to them like I left, since I'm behind a group of other passengers who came down the pier while Marissa and I were saying goodbye.

I focus on Marissa's back as she makes her way up the stairs to the top deck. Once she's up there, she waves down at me. I swallow the lump in my throat. I'll cry later, over one of the movies I found with Phyllis in it. She gave me her stage name before I left her home: Georgette Winters. I wish I could confess mine to her in exchange. Maybe one day. She played down her fame and notoriety. She definitely has been forgotten, but she wasn't as small of an actress as she tried to make it seem she was.

My eyes drift out over the ocean, across toward the mainland of California. One day I'll board this ferry and take this trip to the mainland for the last time, leaving Marbella Island in my memories. One day.

My eyes are still averted, and I'm at least twenty feet away from Ben and his friends. A few other resort employees stand between me and them, waiting to board the ferry, probably planning to spend some time on the mainland on their days off. I try not to eavesdrop, still I can't help but overhear the conversation between Ben and his friends.

I clearly hear Riley tell Madeline, "Don't go." Then she jokes, "Text me every day. FaceTime. Call. Butt dial. You name it."

“I’m butt dialing you daily, Mads,” Ben says loudly from behind Riley and Madeline. “With my ...”

I would roll my eyes, but I don’t want to draw attention to myself. I’d leave the pier, but I need to see the boat pull away, to watch it until it’s out of sight. At least I’m partially hidden behind the passengers waiting to board.

“Put a lid on it, Ben,” Cam says. “I swear you forget my sister’s a girl half the time.”

“I guess I do,” Ben easily admits.

He says that, but I can see he’s smiling like he’d repeat the same antics any time he had the chance.

“It’s okay, Benny,” Madeline says. She looks around, but obviously doesn’t see me, because she says, “I get you. Just tone it down around Summer, would you?” She lowered her voice when she said my name, but I heard her.

I hear Ben’s answer, even though I’m trying to blend in with the nearest pylon. I crane my neck just the slightest to catch a glimpse of him looking so befuddled when he says, “I don’t know what it is about that woman. She brings out the worst in me.”

I bring out the worst in him? No one has ever brought out a worse side in me more than that man. From day one he’s had me on edge. I get along with Bodhi and Kai. Cameron and I hit it off right away. I get along with Riley, Madeline, Clarissa, and obviously, Marissa. I have friends on staff. Guests at the resort love me. They give compliments about me to Shaw all the time saying I’m so thoughtful and patient, telling him how I go out of my way for them. And I love doing it, even though being a tour guide isn’t my dream job. I’ve even made friends with some of the locals—people who tend to steer clear of resort employees as a rule. But Ben? He has been like the oil to my water since he first set foot off the ferry onto this very dock.

Am I a strong personality? I am. But I’ve got southern manners so deeply ingrained into my makeup you’d think I was born saying, yes ma’am. And considering what I’ve just

lived through, I ought to come surrounded by traffic cones and barricades with a blinking orange light over my head. I'm not in my best headspace. But I will be. Given time and a little more movement toward my dream, I'll be much more like the woman I really am ... or the one I'm becoming.

Cocoon, you are dark and uncertain, but hopefully I'll grow some wings in here.

I'm dragged out of my introspection by the collective laughter of Ben's friend group in response to him saying I bring out the worst in him. Ben joins in, seeming to laugh at his own expense.

A ferry crew member calls out, "All aboard for the mainland."

Madeline gives each of her friends a hug and then she boards the boat along with the throng of waiting passengers. I turn and walk up the pier before Ben has a chance to see how close I was while he talked about me.



THE NEXT FEW days feel hollow. I'm focused on memorizing lines, showing up to practice, enduring sharing the limelight with Jeremy, and my part-time work at the resort. At night, my room feels like a chronic reminder of Marissa's absence. She usually came in late at night from her job at Chops.

Since she left, I've picked a favorite movie each night and then tried to drift off early, imagining she'll be sneaking in while I'm asleep. When I wake in the middle of the night, the empty half of the room stares back at me.

I miss Marissa. I don't tell her how much. She needs to settle in with her family and freely move on with her life. We talk and text. She sends me pics. I send her photos I sneak of Jeremy when he's not looking, like the one with his hand flourishing overhead as he overacts his role as a pirate. The man takes up too much space. He's not a large person, though he is tall in an Ichabod Crane sort of way. There's no room for others to exist in his world. I don't know how they didn't cure

him of that in England. Some things are beyond repair. His ego is one of them.

I haven't seen Ben since that day on the pier, and the fact that I notice his absence bothers me more than it should.

I'm in the lounge for yoga with Aria this morning. I need this hour to unwind, connect with my body, and relax. It's my first day off in over a week. The lines from the script fill every spare thought in my head, even now as I lay out a mat and sit cross-legged waiting for Aria to start class.

A familiar voice grabs my attention.

"Can I put my mat next to yours?"

Riley.

"Hey!" I smile up at her. "Sure. I didn't know you did yoga."

"I don't, but I'm trying to start."

"You'll love Aria. She's great at leading a class full of all ability levels."

Riley rolls out the mat she grabbed from the back wall. I recognize it as one Aria brings for people who don't own their own yoga paraphernalia.

"How are you doing since Madeline left?"

"Okay. I miss her so much, but I have Cam to distract me. And Clarissa keeps me busy at C-Side. The bigger question is, how have you been since Marissa left?"

"I'm good." I pause. "Sometimes lonely."

Riley nods, and it feels like the first real human connection I've had in days, even though I've been surrounded by people.

"Okay," I admit. "I've been really lonely. Especially at night. She used to come home from Chops late. I like watching movies, so I'd usually be up with my laptop open. She'd come in and we'd talk. Sometimes we'd talk for hours. Other times it was just, *Hey, how was your night?* and then she'd get ready for bed. But my room felt full."

“And now it feels empty?”

“You met Marissa.”

“She’s awesome.”

“She is.” I smile thinking of Marissa. Then I pull out my phone. “Want to take a selfie to send her?”

“Yeah! Let’s show her how awesome we are doing yoga when we could be eating junk food and sleeping in—not in that order, of course.”

I laugh. Riley leans in and we smile at the camera. I select the photo and send it to Marissa in a text that says. *Look who showed up to yoga this morning.*

Riley settles onto her mat. “And yeah. I could see how she’d leave a void in her absence. Are you looking for another roommate?”

I don’t have time to answer Riley because Aria calls our attention to class. “Welcome, everyone. Let’s get centered and be in the now together. This moment is yours. Claim it. We’re going to start with some deep breathing. Whatever worries and thoughts you brought with you to class, I want you to blow those out on the exhale. Inhale peace, exhale everything that is not peace.”

“Ben,” I mutter without thinking.

Riley snickers beside me. She whispers, “What is it with you two?”

“Honestly? I don’t know.”

She smiles like *she* knows—the same inaccurate, but knowing smile Marissa used to give me about Ben. They might think there’s something there to unearth. Some cosmic connection that will force us into a romance to end all romances. It would be so typical of their dreamy views of the world to imagine the impossible as if it were commonplace and certain. I don’t know Riley well, but from the conversations we’ve had since she moved here, I can tell her head shares the same pink cloud as Marissa’s.

The group of students breathes and stretches and connects our feet to the ground and moves through poses that do their job distracting me from everything outside this room. At the end of the hour, we lie on our mats, backs flat, arms extended overhead, breathing.

“It starts with breath. It ends with breath,” Aria says. “Be well.”

She turns off the mystical background music which is intended to relax us. People shuffle around, rolling mats, chatting to one another. I’m still lying on my back, soaking up the last drops of serenity before I have to get up and get on with my day. It’s a day off, but I’ve got plans.

Riley rolls over onto her side, props her head on her hand and rests on her elbow. “Are you looking for a roomie?”

“I think I am. Marissa told me I had to get one.” I sigh. “I think she’s right. I’m not the best company for my own self these days.”

Riley doesn’t ask me what I mean by that, and I appreciate her sensitivity.

“I need a roommate. Maybe ...”

“We should room?” I finish her sentence for her.

She smiles over at me. I’m still flat on my back, but I’ve turned my face to look at Riley.

“You might want to talk with your friend,” I add.

“Which one?”

I roll my eyes. “Ben.”

“Why would I talk to Ben about who I room with?”

“He’s not a fan of mine, as you know.”

“I thought *you* weren’t a fan of *his*.”

“I’m not. Sorry. I know he’s your friend. We just ... I don’t know. We’re like similarly charged ends of magnets.”

Riley sits up and crosses her legs. “I’ll tell you what.” She gives a little nod of her head like this is settled. “I’ll make you

a promise. If we move in together, we don't have to talk about Ben at all. If you ever want to talk about him, you just say so, otherwise, he's off limits."

I like that.

"You'd do that?"

"Sure. I liked you the first day we met you on the pier. You've been really helpful to me and Mads while we got settled. I need a roommate. You need a roommate. It's like destiny."

"Destiny, huh?"

"Ignore me half the time." Riley shrugs. "I say things like that. And, I mean them. I know I can be a bit idealistic."

"I'll balance that out with a healthy dose of realism."

"See! We were meant to be. So you'll think about us rooming together?"

I find myself saying, "I don't really have to think about it."

Riley squeals and does this excited, bouncy movement that really shouldn't be possible in the position she's sitting. "Me either. Let's do it!"

People look over at us from around the room. I ignore them while they go back to whatever they were doing before Riley's enthusiasm caught their attention.

I guess I'm destined to live with bubbly roommates. But this time, I'm moving into Ben's inner circle. What am I thinking?

BEN

Thanks again for saving me.

Someday, I'll save you too.

~ Zelda Fitzgerald

“**B**ro! Where did you put the pot holders?” Cam shouts from the kitchen.

The sound of clattering metal hitting the kitchen floor follows his frantic question.

I stand from the couch, walk into the kitchen, open the drawer where we keep the pot holders, and hand them to Cam. Then I place my hands on his shoulders.

“Relax, dude. She’s seen you during puberty and she still wants to date you. Even if you burn dinner, she’s gonna love you. We’ll just get pizza.”

I rub Cam’s shoulders firmly a few times with pressure that ranges somewhere between a massage and a snap-out-of-it squeeze. Of the two of us, he’s usually the one who’s chill and unaffected. It’s almost humorous to watch him spin out over Riley. She’s Riley, his sister’s best friend—the same one we teased growing up. And, yes. She’s a woman now. But she’s still Riley.

I bend down and pick up the pot lid that had clattered to the floor.

Cam puts the heels of both hands to his forehead. “Why am I so nervous?”

“You love her. Love does weird stuff to people.”

“Yeah. It does.”

“So, what are we cooking?”

“I’ve got ribs in the crock pot. I peeled and boiled potatoes to make garlic mashers from scratch.” Cam points to the potatoes in a pot in the sink. “And I’ve got green beans with bacon and almonds.”

“What can I do?”

“Mash the potatoes?”

“On it.”

I grab a fork, raise the pot out of the sink and begin mashing. Cam gets to work on the beans. By the time I’m mixing the last dollop of sour cream into the potatoes, there’s a knock at the door. Cam looks at me, lets out a long breath, and walks from the kitchen to the entryway.

I sometimes think it would be awesome to have a girlfriend. I imagine loving someone so much that I’d want to commit to her, so much that she dominated my thoughts and made me want to be a better man. Watching Cam flounder around in his nervousness should dissuade me. For some weird reason, it does the opposite.

“Hey.” I hear the relief in Cam’s voice when he opens the door and sees Riley standing there.

“Hey.” Her voice is bright and full of emotion. She stands on tiptoe and places a kiss on Cam’s mouth and he pulls her in for a hug.

“You okay?” Riley asks tenderly.

“I’m good. Just stressed myself out trying to make everything perfect for you.”

“Awww. That’s the sweetest. You know me. I’m not picky. You could serve up a bowl of Lay’s and some dip and I’d be good to go. But thanks for going the extra mile.”

“For you, I’ll go two.” He says it quietly like he doesn’t want me to hear, but we’re in a small apartment. It’s pretty privacy-proof.

“Hey, Ben!” Riley says.

Cam shuts the door behind her.

“Hey Rye Rye. How’s our favorite barista?”

“Is that all I am to you now? Do you only love me for my lattes?”

“I love you a latte!”

Cam moans at my dad joke. Then he issues a friendly warning. “No using the L word with my girlfriend.”

“I’ve said the L word to your girlfriend for years while you had your head stuck under your armpit and couldn’t tell how awesome she is.”

Everyone in the room knows I love Riley like a sister. I’m just giving Cam heat.

It works. Cam sidles up to Riley, wrapping his arm around her waist and kissing her on the top of her head. I look away. There’s only so much of these two gushing all over one another that I can take in a twenty-four hour period.

I picture the day I have someone to wrap my arm around. The four of us could hang out and do couple things. I’m not quite sure what couple things are, but we could improvise.

Man. If Cam could hear my thoughts, he’d give me such grief.

Riley joins Cam and me in the kitchen. We dish up the food and carry our plates to the dining table. The two of them make goo-goo eyes at one another over their ribs and forkfuls of potatoes, while I try hard not to feel like the baby brother Mom made them take on their date.

After dinner I take off for a walk, which ends up leading me to the beach. I lose track of time strolling along the shoreline until well after the sun sets, and then I shoot Bodhi a text. He’s up, playing a video game, and he tells me to come

on over. Our friendship's still new, but I'm pretty sure he's going to be one of my closest friends on the island, given time. The way my luck's going, he'll get in a serious relationship too.

I don't get home from Kai and Bodhi's until nearly midnight. Riley is long gone and Cam's crashed out in his bedroom. We both have the day off tomorrow, but I plan to go surfing early and Cam made it clear he wants to sleep in.

The next morning, I'm up before Cam. My excitement woke me before my alarm, even though I was up way too late. I'm planning to catch a shore break a few coves up from Descanso at a spot called Dead Man's. Yeah. Not the most encouraging and welcoming name for a surf spot. When the tide is right, the waves are supposed to come in as consistently as if they'd been machined—perfect curls to ride long and left.

I pack a backpack with a change of clothes and my beach towel, throw in a few granola bars and a bottle of water. Then I grab my board and prop it on the side of the apartment building while I pull out the bike I bought two days ago from a local.

It's an old ten-speed Schwinn, but the tires and seat have been replaced and the frame is in good condition. Riley wanted to name my bike as soon as I brought it home to Cam's and my apartment. I'm surprised she didn't name our plates and silverware last night at dinner. The girl's got a thing for naming everything. She's calling it The Brown Bomb. I'm completely against the name, which solidified it for her. For some reason, that name sounds conspicuously like something toilet-related, and I'm not a fan. I want something cool like KITT, the car in the classic TV show, *Knight Rider*, or Batmobile ... Benmobile? Okay. It's a work in progress.

The sun is barely cresting over the horizon when I mount the bike that is officially not named The Brown Bomb, grab my board, and start pedaling toward Dead Man's. It's a great day for surfing, but no one's out. Usually, that's a sign to a surfer that something's wrong—especially in a popular spot. Either someone saw a shark, or things are not as they appear.

I sit on the beach, close to shore, staring at the waves, asking myself if I should go in, or if I should cash in my chips and head back home to try and find something else to do with my day off. I could go watch the play practice. I snuck up there two days ago and watched for a bit, hiding myself in the bushes at the back of the amphitheater. I don't know what made me go there, or what made me stay once I arrived. The play is cool, but that guy playing the pirate is a mess. Supposedly, he's some hot acting commodity. If he's a pirate, I'm Long John Silver, come back from the dead.

He's the type of guy that would want to be called a thespian.

A perfect left rolls in, and I feel emboldened. Those waves are ripe for the riding, and I'd be a fool not to put my board in and grab my fair share of surf. This right here is what days off were made for.

I pick up my board, leaving my backpack on the sand a safe distance from the shorepound. Glancing back at the Benmobile ... Brown Bullet? Nope. Still sends my mind to the outhouse. Brown Beast? Whatever. My bike. I look at my bike. It's safe at the edge of the sand, leaned against a large boulder.

I walk toward the water, smiling the minute the saltwater crests over my toes and retreats. I make my way into the ocean and mount my board. Then I paddle past the smaller breaking waves, and out to the spot where the swell rises and falls. And I wait, sitting on my board alone. A set rolls in, and I take it, popping up just in time to position myself in the tube. Nothing but greenroom! It's a ride surfers dream of, and it's mine. I tumble off my board and remount. And so the morning goes, wave after wave, not another soul in sight. When I've had my fill, I ride the last wave in, rolling off my board into a flurry of whitewater, grappling for my board and planting my feet on the sandy bottom of the cove in a spot that's about four or five feet deep.

The next turn of events happens so quickly. I feel a sharp stabbing pain under my left foot. Instinctively, I grip my board. Blood in the water is never a good thing, so I scramble

back onto my board and ride it like I'm belly boarding a boogie board into shore. When I hit the sand, I do a sort-of army crawl, pulling myself and my board past the shorepound onto the soggy edge of the beach at the water's edge while keeping my foot off the sand.

I turn my leg to see how badly my foot was cut. I'm not going to describe it here. You get the picture. I definitely sliced the arch. The shooting pain radiates up my leg. I look over at my backpack as if staring at it might cause it to grow legs and walk the nearly fifty yards to where I'm sitting. I wince and take a stuttering breath. I can't just sit here bleeding. I reach over and drag my surfboard further up onto the sand so it's safe from being washed back out into the ocean. Then, I roll over onto my knees. Tipping my foot in the air so it's away from the sand, I use my arms and my good leg to crawl down the beach.

I'm almost to my bag when I hear a voice.

"Are you okay? Sir?"

Sir? I know that voice. And, trust me. For the rest of my days, I'll be wishing I had my phone open with the voice memo app on so I could have a recording to replay on an infinite loop of that woman calling me, *sir*.

Summer obviously can't see who I am. She'd probably have walked, or ... driven ... yes, driven on by. There's the golf cart, parked near The Brown Beast. The Brown Bear? Blaze? Butter? Booty? My brain rolls through B words while I drag myself toward my backpack.

"Sir?"

Ahhh. There it is again. She is going to die and then ... kill me ... when she sees who it is she's been calling sir. I laugh to myself—and then I wince again from the increasing pain in my foot.

She calls out again, "Sir?"

I make it to my backpack, flip over so I'm sitting instead of crawling, and that's when she sees it's me.

“Ben?” Summer’s voice is half shock, half irritation—as if I tricked her into calling me sir.

And there’s that hint of southern drawl I’ve thought I heard on a few occasions. Maybe I’m imagining it. I’ve always loved a little southern lilt. I try to imagine Summer as a southern belle and I almost laugh again, but the cut in my foot decides now’s a good moment to send another zap of pain up my leg, so I end up letting out a constrained moan.

“It’s me.”

“I can tell that now. Are you okay?”

Summer’s right in front of me now, towering over me on the sand, her hands propped on her hips, but her face is a mask of care—for me. Huh.

I grab for my backpack and drag out my shirt, wrapping it under my foot to cover the gash. I tie a knot on top and sit back, unable to keep my face from revealing the level of pain I’m in.

“I’m not, actually.”

I can’t look Summer in the eyes. Of all the people to come across me when I’m in excruciating pain, she would have to be the one.

“What happened?” Summer squats down so she’s eye level with me.

Her face is etched with concern. It makes her look even more beautiful than usual.

“I came in on the last wave and stepped on a rock or something sharp that felt like a butcher knife.”

“You must have cut yourself pretty badly to have been crawling to your bag.”

“It’s ... yeah. I did.”

I’m trying to school my features. I don’t know why, but I don’t want Summer to see me like this, even though she’s being this softer version of herself I’ve never seen before. Maybe that’s why. Sassy Summer? I know how to handle that.

We banter. She wins, but I give it my best college shot. Irrationally angry Summer? Yeah. I can navigate that one too. But this Summer—the compassionate woman squatting in front of me and acting like helping me is her personal mission in life? I don't know what to do with this.

“We've got to get you taken care of.”

I almost say, *We do? We? Since when is there a we?*

Instead, I manage to look over into Summer's bright blue eyes. Her brows are knitted together in worried sympathy. And she's reaching out. Without seeming at all grossed out or under the influence of a foreign substance, she actually touches me. With a soothing, soft touch, her fingers and palm graze down my arm. I watch as they leave a trail of goosebumps. Our eyes meet again, and if she were anyone else, I'd think we were having a moment. Then I feel another stabbing pain and I wince and moan slightly despite myself.

“Oh, Ben. You really are hurt.”

Who is this woman? If I didn't know better, I'd think someone had hypnotized her and she's now functioning like a Stepford wife version of her previous self. Maybe she'll make me a sandwich and wash my laundry after this. Just kidding. I wouldn't want a Stepford wife, and if I'm being totally honest, turning Summer into a Stepford wife would strip her of some of the qualities I find most entertaining and interesting. Not that I'm telling her that. I already dug myself a hole so deep with her I can't imagine ever seeing the light of day.

And yet, here we are.

“Let's get you up. Do you think you can stand? I can take you over to the golf cart if you can lean on me to get there.”

I could probably hop. It would take some effort, but I could do it. Am I going to fight her when she offers for me to lean on her? You know I'm not.

Summer extends her hand to me. I clasp it. She gives a tug and I use my other arm to push myself up off the beach.

Once I'm standing, she says, “You're taller than I remember. I'm not going to make that great of a crutch.”

I'm speechless, pretty sure I've entered an alternate reality, and I'm afraid anything I say will break Summer out of her trance and remind her who she's dealing with. So I wrap my arm around her shoulder—and she doesn't even punch me.

“We'll just leave your board and your bag here. I'll come back for them.”

“Okay.”

I sound like a dork. But I don't trust myself with more than one-word answers right now.

We hobble up to the golf cart, my arm slung around Summer's shoulder as if we walk around like this every day. Well, I hobble. She walks well enough for the both of us. Once we're at the cart, Summer stands next to the opening for the passenger side while I grab a hold of the roof and pivot on my good leg, plopping very ungracefully into the seat. Summer bends, lifts my leg with the hurt foot by the calf and gently sets my foot into the cart.

“I ... uh ... I could have done that.”

“Yeah. Right. Okay. Well, that's good. I'll just go get your backpack and board.”

Before I can say another word, Summer turns and jogs out onto the sand. Her hair blows behind her in the wind and I try not to think about how beautiful she is and how messed up it is that she has this sweet heart hidden underneath all that prickly attitude she usually throws my way.

Summer slows when she reaches my board. She struggles to hoist it and get it balanced under one arm. If you don't know how to carry a surfboard, it can be like wrestling an octopus. She manages to get it tucked under her arm and then she walks back to the cart. She has to set it down twice to readjust it, and I itch to go grab it from her, but I can't. After she lays my board across the back seat, she retrieves my backpack. She's about to climb into the driver's seat.

I point to the brown bicycle a few feet away. “That's my bike, too. The Benmobile.”

Oh, no. No. No, I didn't. I said it out loud.

Summer looks over at me. She's trying hard. She glances at my ankle as if the T-shirt wrapped around it is the white flag of armistice. But then she lets out a burst of air she was holding in and follows that with a full belly laugh.

"The what? I'm sorry, Ben. I know you're hurting. But, please. Tell me you didn't name your bike. And you named it ..." She laughs so hard she can't get her sentence out. "You named it ..." More laughter. She wipes at a tear. "The ..." She gasps. "The Benmobile?" Summer looks at me, obviously trying to gain composure. "Wait! Wait! ... Wait. Wait. Wait. Is that like ..." Another bout of laughter. "Like, the Batmobile?"

I stare at her. My foot still really hurts, but I'm smiling. Seeing Summer lose her composure and laugh like this? It's like seeing a rare meteor shower, or the aurora borealis, or Bigfoot. It's a once in a lifetime thing, and I am the guy who gets to witness her joy. Yes. It's at my expense, but I couldn't care less.

"Yes. Like the Batmobile."

Summer studies me. "Because ..." She changes her voice. "You're Batman." She sounds so much like the Michael Keaton version when she says it, all gravelly and deep.

I laugh. She smiles. I don't look away. She holds my gaze for a moment and then she says, "Let's get you taken care of. I'll put your bike on the rack."

Summer hops out of the golf cart and loads my bike on the rear supports. When she takes the driver's seat again, she pulls a U-Turn and starts driving us back toward Descanso.

"Where were you headed?" I ask. "I was out there alone. If you hadn't seen me, I might still be out there trying to figure out how I was going to get home on a bike with an injured foot."

"I was going to visit Phyl ..." Her voice trails off.

"Phil? That guy you visited a few weeks ago?"

Summer shakes her head, but not in response to me. It's like she's having this inner debate. I lean back and close my eyes. My foot is alternating between a burning sting and a

throb now. Our banter distracted me for a bit, but the pain is back with a vengeance.

“Phyl is a woman. Phyllis. She’s a friend that lives on the north shore.”

“Ah. Phyl. Well, that’s a ...” I almost say, *relief*—to Summer. Like she needs to know I cared if she was seeing someone. And why do I care? It’s not like she’s ever going to date me. She won’t even be my friend. This morning is a fluke, like the Leap Year of days. A blue moon. A Hale Bopp comet that comes once every two thousand three hundred and ninety-nine years. We’re in the moment, but it will fly by, never to be witnessed again in my lifetime.

We’re silent the rest of the ride into Descanso, but it’s not an unfriendly or awkward silence. When we get to Alicante, Summer weaves her way through buildings until she reaches the one-story, stucco building just beyond the spa. It’s an infirmary of sorts, where guests can get minor medical issues tended to if needed while they are staying at the resort.

Summer hops out of the cart. “Stay here.”

She walks into the building and a few moments later, she’s walking out with a young guy I’ve seen around. He’s pushing a wheelchair.

“Seriously? I can hobble.”

“Use the chair, Batman.”

“You don’t get to call me that,” I tell her. Then, in a whisper, I add, “My identity is a secret.” I wink at her for good measure, because I can, and also because I want to see what this version of Summer does when I wink at her.

You won’t believe it. I barely do.

She smiles.

Then, like her face got the memo on a thirty-second delay, she frowns. Only, it’s not one of those mean frowns. It’s one that tells me she’s obviously as disoriented by this morning as I am.

“Okay. Into the chair,” she orders.

“Whatever you say, Monroe.”

She gives me a low growl of warning. If she thinks that noise will deter me from using that nickname, she doesn't know me very well. I'd do just about anything to hear her make that sound again.

The medical staff at Alicante clean and dress my cut. I needed two stitches. I'll be able to put weight on it in a few days, but until then, I'm going to have to wear a boot when I'm walking to keep me from popping the stitches open. That means no working watersports until I can put my foot in a shoe, and no teaching surf lessons or taking anyone snorkeling until the stitches are out—which will be anywhere from a week to two weeks.

Summer drives me from the medical center to my apartment. She carefully unloads my bike and surfboard and then she reaches in and slings my backpack over her shoulders. She stands next to my side of the cart, an expectant look on her face.

“Okay, Ben. Let's get you upstairs.”

“I can get up there on my own. You've done plenty. Thank you, by the way. A lot. I think I said that already, but if I didn't, thanks.”

“You did. Three times on the drive to Descanso, and another five or six in the medical center. Now, stop arguing and let me help you upstairs.”

I know how Cinderella felt. Not because my foot hurts like it's squeezing into the wrong-sized shoe. She knew she was on borrowed time. The whole dance, she's falling for the prince, and he's oblivious. But she's not. She knows it's only a matter of time until her coach turns into a pumpkin. And I know it's only a matter of minutes until Summer turns back into Summer 1.0, and I'm treated like I committed a crime against humanity. That explains why I relent and loop my arm over Summer's shoulder. She walks slowly enough to be careful, leading me to the staircase that heads up to our apartment. And then she helps me take the steps one by one.

When we get to the top step, she knocks before I can get my keys out of the front pouch of my backpack.

Cam answers. He looks at me, then at Summer, then at my arm, which is still draped around her shoulder. The look of confusion that crosses his face is priceless.

“Hey, Cameron,” Summer says. “Ben got hurt. I’m just dropping him home.”

Cam nods. Yeah. I get it. The look on his face says everything I’ve been thinking ever since I heard Summer’s voice drifting across the beach to me, calling me sir.

Cam opens his mouth to say something. Shuts it. Opens it again.

“I think we’ve got it from here,” I tell Summer.

“Okay. Yeah. Good. Well, I’ll be going then.” She slips out from under my arm and heads down the steps.

It’s pumpkin time.

And if I had any doubt, the next words out of her mouth confirm it.

She turns and looks up at me, staring straight into my eyes. “Don’t go thinking we’re friends or anything just because I helped you. I’d do this for anyone.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I wink, and I swear I see a reluctant smile creep onto Summer’s face as she turns and heads down the stairs.

SUMMER

*If possible, leave room for your enemy
to become your friend.*

~ Robert A Heinlein

I hear Cameron's voice as I scurry down the stairs away from Ben as fast as my feet will carry me. "Dude. What was that?"

I'm at the bottom step when I hear Ben say, "When the good Lord pops a gift in your lap, you unwrap it and say thank you. You don't question these things, Cameron, my man."

I roll my eyes, but I'm smiling. As soon as I catch myself, I wipe my smile away. I am *not* smiling at Ben's antics, or the way he looked in his wetsuit with his hair fresh from the ocean, falling in wet locks around his face. I'm not grinning at his over-the-top comment when he thought I was well out of earshot.

He was hurt. I have a thing for hurting people. Well, I'm human. I care. But I know it's more of a pull for me than many. I can't just walk by. Some people can. Chancy used to always say, *Your heart is too soft and big for this world, Caroline*, at times when I'd beg her to bring an injured bird home so we could nurse it back to health, or I'd want to pack extra food when we went to the park to share with kids I thought looked hungry. My sister, Suzette, and my brother,

August, used to tease me. But Chancy made me feel rare, special.

She'd be ashamed of how I've treated Ben. But maybe if she saw what I lived through after she left, she'd understand. I've got no room for players and charmers. It's a zero-tolerance zone that spreads about twenty feet out from me in all directions. And Ben keeps crossing over the lines I've carefully drawn. It's inconvenient, to say the least.

But today's Ben, vulnerable, obviously hurt and stranded? A Medieval castle wouldn't have housed enough armor to help me withstand the urge to help him. And I said, *sir*. It's my upbringing. Sometimes, the old stuff comes bobbing up to the surface, especially under stress or high emotion. Thankfully we were at a distance, so I can only hope he barely heard me. Or maybe his pain drowned out the fact that ... I. Called. Him. Sir! Gah.

Once I'm back in the golf cart, I pull my phone out so I can call Phyllis. *Phyl*. I chuckle. Well, I took a torch to that farce. Ben tore down all my walls today. I'm not exactly mad. It's not like he tried.

But where do we go from here? Things were cut and dry before. Ben was not in my good graces. He knew it. Now there's been this kindness on my part, and a lack of flirtiness or pretense on his part. Something shifted this morning and I can't get it back in place. I was serious when I told Ben we can't be friends. At least, I think I'm serious. I feel confused and exposed.

Practice starts in two hours. I had planned on more time with Phyllis before I had to face Jeremy the Great. A few members of the cast had started calling him that behind his back. Then, yesterday, he overheard it and said, "I love it! Jeremy. The Great. Yes. It's fantastic." So now we all get to call him that to his face. I know I'm asking to be surrounded by egos once I'm in film. I think it won't grate on me so much when it's people who have earned the right to feel inflated. Maybe I'm wrong.

Maybe I'm wrong about a lot of things.

Phyllis answers on the third ring.

“Summer? Are you alright?”

“I am. Sorry. I was on my way to your place when I saw a guy on the beach at Dead Man’s. He had cut his foot, so I helped him to my golf cart and brought him back to the medics at the resort. Then I dropped him off at his place in Descanso. I’m free now if you still have time.”

“Of course I have time. My whole morning plan consists of baking scones for us, selecting a suitable tea to go with the scones, brewing coffee in case you don’t want tea, and sitting around waiting to have a chat with you. It’s a hum-drum life, but I wouldn’t trade it.” She pauses. “What a blessing you were passing by when that man needed your help.”

“Yeah. A blessing.”

Phyllis must pick up on my tone. “Is there a story there? More you aren’t telling me?”

“There is. And I will. I’m nearly a half hour away. We’ll only have an hour or so together.”

“Better than nothing.”

It will be. For some reason, I know Phyllis is just the person I need to see today. She doesn’t know Ben, and she probably never will. I wouldn’t know her if we hadn’t bumped into one another on the beach when I kayaked all the way to the north shore.

I hang up with Phyllis and drive the curving road leading back to the north shore village. When I pass Dead Man’s, the memories of Ben on the sand rush me like a video on double speed. He looked so helpless, and the pain he was in was obvious. He also looked like a model for Surfer Magazine, especially when he rolled onto his back and propped himself on his elbows. It’s no wonder he charms women with those looks and the way he sounds, and the skill he has at wielding his words to make a person feel wanted and toyed with in the best of ways. That’s why he’s dangerous. I need to remember that much.

Leave out a day old cookie, I'm good. Bake me a fresh brownie—I'm done for. Ben is the freshest brownie, baked to perfection. And I need to stay out of the kitchen.

I'm about ten minutes from Phyllis' house when I see a number flash on my screen. It's an 803 area code. My heart rate skyrockets. I have to stop the cart and catch my breath. Georgia. Someone is calling me from Georgia. I let the call come through to voicemail, preparing to block it before I even listen to the message—if they leave one. But then a message pops up.

Unknown: Caroline, it's Suzette. Pick up.

It might be Suzette. It might not. The phone rings again, and I take a leap and answer it. But I don't say anything. I wait for the caller to speak.

“Caroline?”

“Suzette?”

“Oh, thank the Lord! What on earth? I get you leavin' and not tellin' Daddy where you went. But why on God's green earth wouldn't you tell me? I'm your sister. I've never been anything but sweet to you.”

A tear leaks down my cheek.

“I had to get out. I didn't want you to be in the position to have to lie for me.”

“I get that. I do. You need to know, Daddy's none too happy. He's got some man huntin' for you. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't have the CIA on your case. He's spun it like you're on a private getaway, recuperatin' before you come home to Sumter.”

“I'm not comin' home, Suzette.”

“Now, now. I understand. We all went through this together. It was a shock. Though, to be honest, I never thought Daddy was completely faithful. He is a politician after all. Most of them don't keep it where it belongs.”

She makes it sound so natural—infidelity, lies, covering up, trying to use the people closest to you to make things

alright.

“She went to school with us, Suze.”

“I know, Sweet C. I know. And it wasn’t right at all how he tried to pull you into this. But you have to know no one sees you as connected to his mess. This was all him.”

“And now he wants me back so he can show off whatever semblance of stability and repentance he’s trying to convince the world of next. I think he wants even more than that. I’m pretty sure he’s trying to put a spin on things to make him look innocent in the first place. I can’t be a part of it. I gave up so much for him. I believed him, Suze.” A sob chokes out of my throat. “I believed him.” I say the words softly, as mad at myself for being a fool as I am at the man who raised me.

Only, he didn’t really raise me. Chancy did. And she raised me right.

“How did you get this number?” I ask Suzette.

“Oh, well. I may have hired my own man.”

“You didn’t!”

“I knew I had to get to you before anyone else.”

“You’re the best.”

“And you’re there in Hollywood, going after your dream?”

“I am. And I’m not giving it up this time.”

It’s not exactly Hollywood, but close enough. It’s better Suzette doesn’t know my exact location in case Daddy presses her for details.

“Hmmm.” Suzette hums, but it’s a sound layered with meaning. She’s not accepting my determination to stay in California.

We southerners have the ability to say one thing and mean another like no one else. *Bless her heart* can mean we actually wish someone a blessing. But, more often, it means we’re judging you worse than the woman in the front pew feigning a nod to the preacher on Sunday. Not that she’d admit to judging you. Oh, heavens no. That’s a sin, don’t you know? So, we

pass out blessings like we're giving out surplus peaches in August.

"I have practice in an hour. I'm about to visit a friend. Can you lose this number now that you know I'm safe?"

"No. I don't rightly think I can. But I'll keep it to myself. I'll call you when I'm sure no one's around. We're not finished talking about this, Sweet C."

Sweet C. She started calling me that nickname long after Chancy had been calling me Sweet Caroline for years. It started out of jealousy, I think, because she always used a teasing tone. But over time, it became a thing between us. Hearing it now makes my heart ache in ways I don't want to feel.

"Be careful. Okay?" Suzette says. "Daddy's on a mission. And you know he's not going to let up until he finds you."

"Well, let him hunt."

The sigh Suzette breathes out says more than any words could.

"I've got to go. I love you, Suze."

"I love you too."

I pocket my phone and take a deep breath. My mind races a million miles an hour. I turn the key and resume my drive over to Phyllis' place.

She's on the porch when I drive up. Her sister Connie's on the porch swing with her.

"Hope you don't mind company," Phyllis says when I walk up the steps.

"I don't think I have half a say as to whether you have company or not."

"Oh my goodness. Your southern accent is impeccable. Isn't it, Connie?"

"Like she was raised on fried okra, pan-fried cornbread, and fried chicken." Connie pauses. "Why do the southerners get all the fried foods? We Californians end up with kale. I

swear kale was made for donkeys and rabbits. No human should be eating that stuff. If it was meant for eating they wouldn't have to hide it in a smoothie!"

"Kale smoothies are good for you, Connie."

"You know I'm too old to concern myself with what's good for me. I'm at the point of no return." Connie looks at me. "There comes a time, Summer, when all the years catch up with you. And then you may as well do what you will because you've done enough of everything else."

"That's horrible advice," Phyllis says.

"It isn't either. Think about it. I've counted more calories than I've eaten. I've done Trim-n-Fit, and Fit-n-Trim." She looks at me. "Those were two different plans. One had the shakes you made all day long. I just wanted to chew on something. That whole three weeks I thought I might start gnawing my own hand off. The other plan had bars you'd eat. Nasty tasting things. Did I lose weight? Yes, I did. And then I put it back on, and then some."

Connie looks back at Phyllis. "Oooh. Remember those pills that were *all natural*?" She makes air quotes. "Whewee. I tell you those things may have been natural, but they gave me the itchies all over my scalp. I think I stayed awake three days straight after the first week. Remember those? I painted the whole upstairs of the house on those things."

Connie shakes her head and Phyllis laughs. "I do remember those."

"Then there was the grapefruit diet, the pineapple diet, the tart cherry diet, the cranberry juice diet ... I've been high-carb/low fat, then I've been high fat/low carb/high protein. At some point a woman needs a rest from all that business. This is the body I ended up with after all that silliness. And I'm gonna live in it happily from here on out. I don't need to cut, count, or constrain anymore. Now hand me a scone and let's get to the good stuff."

I smile. These two are just what I needed after the morning I've had.

Phyllis tells me to take a seat in one of the chairs flanking a tea table on the porch. Then she disappears inside and returns with a tray.

“Coffee, tea, or something else?”

“Anything’s fine.”

“Tea it is.”

Phyllis serves me. Connie helps herself, and when we’re all settled with plates and cups in front of us, Phyllis asks. “So, tell us about this man on the beach.”

I fill them in on Ben from the moment he exited the boat, to the first time he opened his mouth, to all the interactions I can remember between then and now.

They listen. Sometimes they nod. Their eyebrows raise in unison. They definitely have thoughts when I tell them about Ben dancing behind me at Club Descanso. My stories end with this morning, how I was riding over here and saw a man on the beach and how that man turned out to be Ben.

“... so I dropped him to his apartment, helped him up the stairs and left him in the capable hands of his roommate.”

I sit back and take a sip of tea. It’s nearly lukewarm after the last twenty minutes of Ben, Ben, Ben. Still, the tea’s good. And the scones are incredible.

“Well now, this is something,” Connie says.

“Really. It’s something,” Phyllis agrees.

“Okay, you two. Cut it out. What’s the verdict?”

They look at one another again. Then Phyllis says, “I love a good enemies to friends story. Don’t you?”

“I do,” Connie says. “Think of Jack Sparrow and Will Turner in the *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. I thought they’d end up turning on each other, but they fooled me and stood by one another when all was said and done.”

“But I far prefer the Enemies to Lovers trope,” Phyllis says. “Like in *You’ve Got Mail*, or the old Gable-Colbert film,

It Happened One Night. Of course, you wouldn't know that one, Summer."

"I know it!" I say. "Whew. Talk about chemistry on screen."

And wow. Come to think of it, that story hits a little too close to home for me. Ellie Andrews, a young heiress escaping from her controlling father, and Peter Warne, a witty newspaper reporter looking for a big story. They meet under unexpected circumstances and go from enemies to more.

"The banter in that film should be a mandatory requisite study for all aspiring actors," I say.

Phyllis looks at me curiously over her teacup.

"You know the film?"

I nod. "Something you don't know about me is that I'm obsessed with old movies. Some would say it's moved past obsession and traveled well into fanatical territory."

"Well, I could find a whole slew of things that would be far worse than having a passion for films."

"Thank you." I nod, loving the hum of sweet vindication and affirmation pumping through me.

I can't wait to tell Marissa what Phyllis said.

"Anyway, this has potential," Connie says.

"What does?" I ask, naively.

"The enemies to friends progression of your relationship with Ben."

"Ohhhh no. Nope. No."

My protest seems strong, but it lacks the umph it had before this morning.

Phyllis says, "Or, enemies to lovers. Crazier things have happened."

"Trust me when I say there's not a chance we'd be enemies to lovers. Not. A. Chance."

“What is it they say?” Phyllis looks at Connie. Connie shrugs. “Ah, yes. Where feelings are strong, feelings are strong.”

“I’ve never heard that.”

“That’s because I just made it up. But it’s true. Something about this man is under your skin.”

She’s not wrong. No matter what I do, Ben seems to be around. Worst of all, he’s not just around the island. He’s dwelling in my thoughts.

BEN

She is a mermaid, but approach her with caution.

Her mind swims at a depth most would drown in.

~ J Iron Word

“I ’m giving a whole new meaning to Boot Scootin’ Boogie.”

Cam laughs. “Everything’s a joke to you.”

I ignore that comment. Not everything is a joke to me, and Cam knows it. I clumsily sidestep my good foot down one more step on the staircase leading from our apartment to the street. “Get a second story, they said. The view’s great. Yeah. Until you have to make your way down in one of these beauties.”

“At least cutting your foot’s all we’re dealing with. What if you had been seriously hurt? No more solo surf trips.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Cam’s notorious for acting like he’s forty going on sixty. He took it to heart that he wasn’t there for me when I got injured. I already decided solo surfing unfamiliar waters wasn’t the best call. I won’t be doing it again.

In some weird part of my brain, I’m actually glad Cam wasn’t with me. I’m not sure what happened between me and Summer, but I never would have known a softer side of her existed if she hadn’t been the one to come to my rescue. And

now I can't stop wondering about her and wanting to coax more of that side out. Not that I'll get to. She's been radio silent since she made her *we're not friends* announcement and passed me off to Cam.

I've been loaned a golf cart for the two weeks I'm on modified duty at watersports. The resort management has been amazing. They set up a schedule where I only work a half day at the shack, signing in and out rentals and manning the cash register. I'm not allowed anywhere near the water. I miss it, but it's temporary. And, I get to tell my story to guests who ask about my boot.

I don't drive the cart, of course. Cam's my temporary chauffeur. He takes me to and from the shack every day. I've been hanging out at home while he's at work.

Isolating in our apartment the past few days made me stir crazy, so I'm planning to hang at C-Side this morning. I've got a book, but I'm hoping I can sit comfortably at the coffee bar on one of the stools so I can strike up some conversation.

After we park near the cafe, Cam insists on helping me inside. Yes. The same man who let me struggle down our steps, now wants to play human crutch. You might ask why. I don't need to ask. As soon as we walk across the patio and into C-Side, Cam's eyes scan the room. They land on Riley and he nearly dumps me on my backside in his hurry to get to her.

"Awww. Are you helping Ben get around? That's so sweet!" Riley looks at Cam like he cured cancer, then established the first livable city on Mars where stray dogs are fed steaks and given massages and pedicures.

"I am."

"If by helping you mean watching me struggle, then yeah," I mutter from my abandoned spot about thirty feet from the coffee bar.

No one hears me. Those two are deaf and blind to anyone else in the room.

“I just wanted to say good morning, and to remind you I’ll be coming by right after work to help you pack.”

To help her pack? What’s Riley packing?

I finally join them at the counter. Clarissa comes out from the kitchen and greets me and Cam.

“Can we get you anything?” She looks at Cam and then me. “And Ben, I heard about your accident. Sorry that happened. Glad you’re okay.”

“You heard?”

“Summer’s been coming in and grabbing a remote table to practice her lines. She told me.”

Summer told her? That means Summer has been talking about me when I’m not around. I won’t read into that. Well, I won’t read into it too much. Okay. I’m one hundred percent reading into that.

“I don’t know what I would have done if she hadn’t shown up,” I say. “She’s my hero. There’s an extremely sweet heart behind all those daggers she regularly hurls my way.”

The three of them go quiet. I look from face to face to face: Clarissa, Cam, Riley. Then I pivot in the direction they’re all staring, and Summer’s standing in the entryway, obviously having just heard what I said, hands on her hips and the daggers I mentioned moments ago obviously locked and loaded.

I don’t know what I did this time—or any time. I cannot win with this woman. And I no longer merely want to win. I’ve felt drawn to her—attracted, whatever—since that first day on the pier. At first, her rejection spurred something competitive in me. I had to prove I wasn’t the guy she thinks I am. But now, after she showed me her heart that day she rescued me? There’s something more to what I’m feeling around her.

“Hey, Summer!” I shout with an enthusiasm and confidence I don’t remotely feel.

I always feel enthusiastic and confident. Not around her. She's like a confidence vacuum. The Hoover of enthusiasm.

Summer's carrying her script. She gives me a look that's half greeting, half warning. And then she says my name. "Ben."

I smile like a doof because she said my name instead of shunning me. Cam's amused expression doesn't help at all. I played a huge part in guiding him to wake up to his feelings for Riley. Here's my thanks.

"Welp. That's my cue to leave," Cam says, leaning across the bar to kiss Riley—at her place of work, in front of her boss. He's a completely different man since he fell for Riley.

And Clarissa, being who she is, doesn't bat an eyelash at her employee leaning in to kiss a customer.

"See you tonight," Cam says to Riley. Then he turns to Summer. "See you tonight too."

What? Why will Cam see Summer tonight? That's not fair. He's seeing Riley and Summer? While I'm seeing no one. Obviously he's not *seeing* Summer. But what do the three of them have planned? And why am I not included?

"The usual?" Clarissa asks Summer.

"Water and my iced latte, please. And some privacy where I won't be disturbed by other patrons." Summer shoots me a look, granted it's not as full of animosity as other looks I've gotten from her in the past. But it's no welcome mat either.

I smile at her. It's not my smoldering look. It's not even an attempt to flirt or be charismatic. It's just a smile.

Surprisingly, Summer nearly smiles back at me. But she looks away.

I don't care what you do, Summer. I saw that crack of sunshine like the line on the horizon at dawn, and the fact that you almost smiled at me will carry me through the next few hours.

As if she can read my thoughts, Summer lightly rolls her eyes and walks away from the bar toward a table at the back of

the room near the glass partition between the inside of the cafe and the umbrella tables outdoors. I'm surprised she doesn't head for the patio. It's another beautiful day on Marbella. The ocean is calling my name like the wicked temptress she is. I ignore the lure of the ocean, but I can't ignore the woman tucked away in the corner of the restaurant.

"I'll take that for you," I tell Clarissa when she finishes making Summer's latte and pouring an ice water.

"I'm not hiring servers, and I'm pretty sure you can't keep up with the demand when the rush hits. No offense, but I can't afford the liability."

She laughs lightly.

"This is a voluntary service. One customer, Clarissa."

She smiles a knowing smile at me. "And what can I bring you?"

"How about the same?"

"As the actress?"

"The actress. Yeah."

I don't know why this is the first time it's occurred to me that Summer is an actress—genuinely, not just in a high school performance of Peter Pan. She's the real deal. Someday I may go to a theater and see her face on the big screen—larger than life, those blue eyes captivating whole audiences, that shimmering blond hair enticing men to dream of her and women to want to be her.

But that's not today.

Today, Summer's a mermaid in the island production. Playing across from a jerk who isn't good enough for her, making the effort to land herself one step closer to her dream.

I grab the two drinks off the bar. I'd love to tell you I cross the room with such finesse it could be in a movie. Instead, I look like a three-legged dog with a thorn in one of his good paws. But I make it.

Setting the drinks on her table carefully, I say, “May I join you?”

“Seriously, Ben? You heard me tell Clarissa I needed privacy.”

“Most people who want real privacy stay home.”

“And most people who hear someone wants space, give it.”

“Well, then. I guess neither of us is most people. What a pleasant coincidence.”

Summer huffs out an irritated puff of air.

I stand my ground, determined to spend some time with her, like a child who can't help but stand too near a campfire even though they may get burned.

“I hobbled all the way over here to bring you your drink. Let me run lines with you for a bit. Then I'll leave you in peace. I'm bored out of my mind. I've been working half days, then I stay home and go stir-crazy. I needed to get out of the apartment this morning, so I came here hoping for some human interaction beyond the regular role I fill as Cam and Riley's awesome third wheel. Have mercy on an injured man, Monroe.”

She gives me a scolding look when I use the nickname. I'm not making this easy on either of us. I am who I am. I'm not going to pretend to be someone I'm not. And the thing is, I suspect that behind all the barbed wire and no trespassing signs, Summer likes me egging her on. She seems intrigued at the least, and warmed up just the slightest at best. And where there's a little opening, I plan to push for more.

“Okay. You can run lines with me.”

“You don't have to make it sound like you're getting a root canal.”

She shrugs nonchalantly.

Feisty. Strong-willed. Sassy. I've never known how much those qualities would call to me. But in her, I seem to have found this combination that's irresistible. Just my luck, she's

the one woman who barely tolerates me—and that’s only because of my injury. Once I’m back to using both legs, I bet she’ll be back to putting up an impenetrable barrier between us.

I sit in the chair opposite Summer, extending my leg with the boot so it rests on the chair next to her. I’m filling the space. I don’t mean to, but the nature of my situation gives me no choice.

“Make yourself at home,” she jokes.

“Oh, I would. If you’d let me. But, for now, let’s run lines.”

The slightest tint of a blush crosses Summer’s cheeks, tingeing her throat at the neckline of her T-shirt. She picks up her latte and sips. My eyes don’t leave her face. I would look away, but I like looking at her. And she’s not protesting as hard as she has in the past. I’d settle for friendship even though I’m pretty sure I want much more. I feel both energized and cursed at the thought. Whoever pegged men as loving the thrill of the chase should get a Nobel Prize or whatever prize they give to brilliant people who nail down universal facts. Summer gives me the thrill of the chase, even if she’ll never allow me the greater thrill of being hers.

“So, how do we do this? It’s been a while.”

Summer chuckles softly. “A while? As in high school? When you were in Peter Pan?”

Ohhh. I see. She remembers my history. I mentioned that to her exactly once when we first met. And, she remembers. Okay, then. The woman is not as neutral as she wants me to think she is.

I smother my smile. Talk about academy award level stuff. This right here is me doing an amazing job acting like a man who totally does not care that Summer remembers the details I dropped into a conversation weeks ago, while inside I’m jumping up and down like a teen girl at a Taylor Swift concert, squealing out the lines to *Wildest Dreams*.

“Yes. High school. That was officially the last time I held a script in my hands or ran lines. Don’t hold it against me, Monroe. I’m at your service and I’ll do my best.”

She stifles another smile. I see it fighting its way out. She subdues the urge and says, “Okay then,” while she hands me the script.

“We’re here. Running through Act Two.”

Act Two. Where the pirate kisses the mermaid. Talking about recalling a detail. I remember the director’s breakdown of what happens in this Act from the day I stumbled upon the amphitheater.

“How is it working with Jeremy?”

Summer doesn’t even attempt to hide her disdain. “He’s sooo amazing. Just ask him.”

“I don’t have to. I saw enough that first day. What a guy, huh?”

“You don’t get to choose your co-stars. Sometimes working with someone difficult serves as a tool to stretch you as an actress.”

“Well, you’re going to be stretched like Gumby, then.”

She laughs again. This time her eyes meet mine and I feel the warmth of making her smile trickle through me like a tonic. I want to spend the rest of this day making her laugh and smile. If she’d only let me.

“Okay, so. Where do I begin?”

Summer grabs the script and turns it toward herself while I’m still holding it. She points to a line. “Take it from here.”

“Okay.”

I put on a piratey accent—nothing too glaring and over-the-top, just something roguish and commanding. We run through lines. Clarissa brings my latte at some point. She smiles at me from over Summer’s shoulder like we’re sharing a secret. I don’t know why. It’s not like Summer and I will be

running lines daily. This, like my rescue, is a one-time thing. And I'll take what I can get, like a beggar.

Nearly an hour passes, me reading from the script and Summer running her lines in response without holding the book at all. Sometimes I have to feed her a word to jog her memory, but then she's off and running—or swimming, since she is a mermaid.

We come to the point where the pirate is going to kiss the mermaid.

I lean closer to Summer, resting my arms on the table top and looking her in the eyes.

The script reads: Kailani swims to the edge of the water, slowly standing as she dries and her tail is replaced by legs. She hides herself behind a rock and emerges wearing a diaphanous gown.

“Kailani, you're here.” I glance at Summer.

She doesn't look away. *Acting. She's acting.*

“I told you I'd come, Captain Calabran.”

“Call me Mack. I'm not your Captain, and I'd like to think we are friends.”

“Are we?”

Summer's eyes are playful and mischievous, alluring. She's good. Way. Too. Good.

“I'd like to think so, though I'm sure your father would not.”

“My father is of the old ways. His ideas are shallow as the tide pools and rusty as the treasure chests near our sea cave. He doesn't think merpeople can or should mingle with anyone but our own kind. Maybe he's right. He's witnessed many tragedies. Ariel being the greatest.”

“Ah. The famous Ariel. I thought she was merely a story made up by Disney to entertain children.”

“Of course the story is made up, but it's based on reality. She couldn't contain herself. She had to wander. And she fell

for a two-leg.”

Summer’s face looks full of foreboding, as if she really is a mermaid and she’s lamenting the downfall of a woman she cares about deeply.

“That story is meant to be empowering,” I read from the script. “It’s about a woman who followed her heart and met the man of her dreams.”

“Hearts are deceitful,” Summer says.

It’s a line from the script, but she looks at me as if she’s silently telling me something, throwing me a bone or sending out a plea.

“My father and I agree on that, at least.”

“And what about your heart?” I ask her, straight from the script, but wanting the answer more than I want this boot off my injured foot.

“My heart is a tangled mess, like the nets set for the lobsters after a sea squall. I can’t tell what I want or what is good.”

“Maybe I should help you?” I look at Summer.

She seems fragile and wary. The expression on her face makes me want to hold her and protect her from whatever is causing her eyes to look like she’s seen a ghost. This is not the look of a woman who wants to be kissed—in a play or otherwise.

Summer clears her throat and closes her eyes. When she opens them, her face is a mask of fresh determination.

“Help me?” she asks.

“Help you know your heart.”

“And how would you do that, Mack?” Her tone is flirtatious and coy.

Every molecule in me starts flexing and pulsing at the thought of what I’d do to show Summer her own heart. I think I may know it better than she does. But, then again, I may be projecting and wishing for something because of the tone of

this play and the way she's running these lines as if they mean something real to her.

"I would kiss you, if you let me." My voice has a gravelly edge to it. Yes. Piratey, but more. I stare into the depths of Summer's ice blue eyes. Crystal and sharp, yet soothing like the swirl of water in a pool.

"Are you not afraid of me?" she asks.

Summer's brows lift and her eyes go soft. Her expression mirrors the question she just asked me. *She is acting. This is a play.*

"I am." I read my line, but it's an admission nonetheless, whether she knows it or not. "I'm terribly afraid of you. You are the first woman with the genuine power to drag me under."

I pause, not looking up. That line feels far too close to something true.

"Are you not afraid of me?" I read from the script, and then I raise my head and look directly into Summer's eyes.

I want her to toss the script and tell me.

What is it? Is she afraid? Or am I imagining fear in what is really indifference and irritation?

"I am afraid of you, Mack. You are a pirate after all. You aren't like other humans, and we are trained to be helpful, but wary of them. Pirates. Well, you are officially off limits."

"And yet, you came here today."

"I've never been known for my ability to follow my better judgment."

The script says: The two stand close to one another. Mack reaches out and brushes a strand of hair off Kailani's cheek. His fingers trail down her cheek, then her shoulder and then her arm. She reaches up, cupping his jaw. This is the moment of permission. Mack sees his opportunity, bends in, and kisses Kailani on the lips. The kiss lingers and they hold one another.

I look over at Summer, and before I can give myself a pep talk or engage my sense of self-preservation, I reach across the

table, brushing a piece of her hair away from her face. Our eyes hold, and hers flutter shut when my hand grazes down her cheek, her shoulder, and then down her arm.

“Okay!” Summer says abruptly.

She reaches down and snatches the script from my hands. I’m so shocked I sit there, staring at her without saying a word.

“Thanks. Thanks so much, Ben. That helped. I’ll see you. Sometime. Or ... not. But ... probably. Of course. We’ll see one another. So, yeah. Take care ... of your foot.” Summer grabs her purse and turns away. Then she looks back at me over her shoulder and says, “Thanks. I just ... I have to go. Sorry. I didn’t realize ... the time.”

SUMMER

The very essence of romance is uncertainty.

~ Oscar Wilde

I basically run out of C-Side. Speed walk. Power stroll. Whatever you call it, I'm far from graceful, and I'm ninety-nine percent certain Ben knows I'm a flaming hot mess—because he touched me. And I liked it.

I lean against the wall outside the cafe, catching my breath and hoping to gather my wits in the process.

I told Ben I had practice. Yes, it's coming up. In two hours. Not now.

I close my eyes. All I see is Ben, his caramel brown eyes holding mine. He touched me in a way no one has in years. And I felt it. Every tingle zipped through me as his fingers skated along my forehead, over my cheek, across my shoulder, and down my arm. Not once did he look away, flinch, or lose his nerve. He undid me with his gaze while his fingers left a trail of goosebumps in the wake of his gentle caresses.

Ben. That wily, clever, amusing, intriguing, charming, dangerous man.

I feel like someone sent me rolling down a hill in one of those inflatable balls. I can't grasp which way is up or down. I'm cattywampus and fit to be tied. And now my southern brain is callin' up all the phrases that were the soundtrack of my childhood. Mercy. That man could melt butter with his

smile. He sure nearly melted something inside of me. If I hadn't run off I might have turned into a puddle of goo right on the floor of C-Side. I thought he was as crooked as a barrel of snakes, but now I don't know my own mind.

A shadow passes alongside me and I glance over, afraid it will be Ben. I don't want to see him when I'm nearly unraveling.

"Summer?"

It's Riley.

"Yeah. Hey."

"You left your sunglasses on the table."

She hands them over to me.

"Oh. Thanks. I appreciate you bringing them out here."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Yes. I'm great. Thanks."

She smiles. "If I hadn't made you a promise, I would be sharing some thoughts. Because I definitely have thoughts. And I would be asking a lot of questions. Because I have some serious questions. But I promised, so I'm not saying a word."

"I appreciate that more than I appreciate these." I raise the sunglasses and pop them onto my face, grateful for the added barrier between me and the world.

Riley studies me. "Well, I guess I'll see you tonight after you get finished with work."

"Are you regretting the decision to move in with me?"

"Not at all! I'm super excited."

"Me too. And I can't believe we get to move out of the dorms."

I popped in on Phyllis the day following Ben's injury after I finished play practice. While we were sitting together on the porch talking about this and that, it came up that Riley and I were planning to move in together. Phyllis sprung a seemingly random fact on me—she owns a home in Descanso.

I said, “That’s nice, Phyllis,” not following where she was leading the conversation in the least. Phyllis smiled at me and laughed lightly. Later, I understood why.

Then she said, “I want you to do me a favor.”

I easily promised her, “Anything.”

Phyllis smiled. Then she said, “I have the worst time with tenants. When Mila wasn’t so busy with the bed and breakfast, she used to keep an eye on the house for me. Since then I’ve had a few issues. It’s either sitting empty, or someone’s in there who knows me and figures they don’t need to treat my home the way they would any other rental.”

I had said, “I’m so sorry,” still not tracking with where the conversation was headed.

“Well, that’s good. Because my favor is to ask you to move in,” Phyllis said in a tone that was more of a statement than an invitation. “You and Riley can move in there. I won’t have to worry about finding tenants, or letting it sit empty. And before you say anything, I’m only going to charge you what you’re paying at the dorms.”

I sat there in silence. Phyllis’ sister, Joan, had stepped out onto the porch and looked back and forth between us.

Then Joan said, “You’re moving into the rental, right? Don’t try to tell my sister no. Once she has her mind set on a thing like this, there’s no turning her back from it. Please don’t make me live through her trying to convince you.”

The three of us had sat on the porch together while I neatly avoided the topic of renting Phyllis’ house.

At the end of my visit, I broached the rental subject again. “I won’t be on Marbella for long. I plan to move.”

Phyllis had nodded. “I know, dear.”

“Why are you doing this?” I had to know.

“You remind me of a younger version of myself. I was telling the truth when I said it’s sitting empty. But that’s only half the story. I feel a connection to you because you’re an aspiring actress. I see the fire in your eyes and the hunger for

stardom. I had that once. I want to do this for you.” She looked at me, and we shared a silent conversation that ended in an agreement without a word.

Before I left, Phyllis walked inside and came back out with two keys. “I’ve got paperwork and all the rigamarole we have to complete to make this official. I’ll have Mila meet you at the house tomorrow. You can look it over. If for some reason you honestly don’t want to live there, bring the keys back. But you will want it. I just know you will.”

I let Phyllis press those keys into my palm. Never had I accepted any sort of handout from anyone. My upbringing wouldn’t allow it. This felt different. Even though I wanted to resist and question it, something about the whole interaction told me this was meant to be. So, I met Mila the next day, and we toured the cutest little beach bungalow with two bedrooms, a front and back porch, a small kitchen, and two bathrooms.

My own bathroom—I never imagined that would be something I’d covet. Back home I had a bathroom with heated tile floors, rain shower heads, six of them, to be exact, a spa tub and a chandelier. I know. I know.

Here I was, going gaga over my own bath with outdated tile and a curtain on the shower that was also a bathtub. And I had been smiling like a fool by the time Mila had given me the grand tour that took all of two minutes, if that. And that’s how Riley and I ended up with our plan for tonight.

Cam’s bringing a golf cart and I’ll be driving another so Riley and I can move our few possessions over to the little home we’ll be sharing on one of the side streets a few blocks inland from Cam and Ben’s apartment.

Riley heads back inside the cafe. I take a walk down to the shoreline. Bodhi’s teaching a young couple to surf. I watch the lesson from one of the resort’s loungers. When he comes in, he spots me and walks over, holding his board under his arm like he was born with it attached to him—which would be admittedly weird.

“Hey Summer. What’s new in the world of rising starlets?”

“I’m not rising yet.”

“You will. You will. How’s the play shakin’ out?”

“I like the cast—mostly. The director is everything I heard he would be: strict, thorough, gifted.”

“Sounds like my fourth grade teacher.” Bodhi laughs at his own joke. “And how’s Ben?”

I give Bodhi a quizzical look. “How should I know?”

He hums and looks out across the water. “I’ve seen the way you two watch one another. I’m just waiting for the day you give us all something to talk about.”

“Well, you might be waiting a long time for that.”

“He seems like a good guy.”

“*Seems* is the operative word there.” I think. Maybe Ben is a good guy. He’s still a charmer, though. There’s no doubt about that.

“Word spread about you rescuing him. Pretty sweet deal there.”

I think I blush.

“How was your surf lesson?”

“Ahhh. The classic shift of subject. Gotcha. The lesson was good. I always dig it when a Betty outdoes her boyfriend learning to surf. He was a good sport about it too.”

Bodhi shifts his weight, propping his board in the sand. “You coming to the bonfire Friday?”

“I try to avoid those. But I made a deal with Kai the other day, so it looks like I’m going to have to make an appearance.”

“Aww. You don’t know what you’ve been missing. They’re a lot of fun. Casual. Some people use them as a chance to find companionship, but that’s not all we do. I’ll be your wingman if you want to make your move on our boy.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Hard pass.”

“Poor Ben, shot down like the rest of us. Another one bites the dust. You’re a heartbreaker, Summer.”

He winks and we both laugh. Bodhi had initially wanted to see if we could go out and have fun when we first met. I could tell he was harmless and had no intention of anything beyond a date or two. We've ended up with an almost sibling type of relationship where we tease one another. I hope he drops the teasing about Ben soon, though. I'm confused enough about that man.



PRACTICE GOES AS USUAL. Jeremy dominates the stage, overacting the role of pirate. Finally, James stepped up and gave two examples of how the lines should be run in one scene. James exaggerated the first demonstration and then toned it down to show how he wanted it played. Jeremy nodded and gave the appearance of being teachable. If only the rest of his acting were as proficient as his capacity to brown nose. He resumed the scene with a far more subdued approach to his character, but by the end of rehearsal he was back to acting like he was in a commercial for Long John Silver's. I'm relatively sure I'll have nightmares of him adding "Arrrgh," to every sentence.

After practice, I hop in the golf cart and drive toward Descanso. The ocean spreads out to my left as I navigate the winding roads heading back toward the resort.

I let out a long breath. Thankfully, Jeremy and I didn't get to the part in Act Two with the kissing scene. The number of times James had to correct Jeremy kept us from going that far into the script. I'm dreading having to kiss Jeremy. It's part of the life of an actress. We stage kiss, but sometimes the kisses have to be real. Never open-mouthed, but still, I have had to kiss men in plays. Most of them don't make it weird. Jeremy will absolutely make it weird—and possibly gross.

My unhelpful brain latches onto this: *kissing scene*. Reading lines with Ben. His eyes on mine. His fingers tracing across my skin like a piece of silk slipping over glass. I shake my head to dislodge the memories, but it does no good.

Riley and Cam are standing outside the dorms when I drive up. After several trips up to our floor and back outside, the carts are loaded with our boxes and suitcases. I follow Cam and Riley to our new home. When we pull up, Ben is leaning against one of the porch rails, looking like a model for *Hot Surfer Bungalow* magazine. The evening sun is at what's known as the golden hour, making everything look even more alluring and desirable than it really is. *Keep that in mind, Summer.*

And, what is he even doing here? I'd ask Cam, but he's in the other cart with Riley.

"I heard there was a party!" Ben shouts out from the porch. "So I brought pizza."

He holds up both his hands like the guilty man he is, then he points to a little table on the porch where a box of pizza sits next to the door.

Ben gazes directly in my eyes, and even from this distance I feel that problematic tug between us. Bodhi's words ping around in my head. The memory of the touch from when Ben and I ran lines together this morning skitters across my skin like the faintest breeze.

"If you want me to leave the pizza and take off, I will."

Riley looks over at me. I can tell she wants Ben to stay. I don't necessarily want him to leave. I just don't want this unfamiliar territory we seem to have entered to mess with me so much.

"What are you doin' here, man?" Cam asks Ben.

"I'm here to welcome Summer and Rye into the neighborhood. The pizza guy gave me a lift."

Cam rolls his eyes.

"And," Ben's gaze flashes back to mine. "I'm pursuing a friendship."

I shake my head. Only a few days ago I flat out told him we couldn't be friends. Now, I can't find it in me to resist him like I have been. *Friendship, Summer. He's not asking you out.*

Ben stares at me in a way that reminds me of this golden retriever we used to have, Lee—named after Robert E. Lee, of course. When Lee would give me that look, I'd be willing to sneak him my dinner, or let him up on the furniture, even though that was strictly forbidden.

I'm not sneaking Ben anything or letting him up on my furniture, to be clear.

“Summer has to know I'm in hot pursuit of a friendship with her,” Ben says with a wink in my direction. Then he turns his attention back to Cam who is now walking toward our porch, carrying one of Riley's boxes. “And everyone knows how I am.”

Ben pauses, hobbling over to open the screen door for Cam. “I am boldly relentless when I pursue something I want.”

Ben's not looking at me, but his words go straight through me, sending an unbidden chill up my spine.

Riley mouths to me, “Do you want him to go?”

It's so thoughtful that she'd ask that instead of begging for him to stay.

“He can stay,” I mouth back.

“You better be on your best behavior,” Riley shouts up to Ben.

She grabs a box and starts walking ahead of me toward our new house.

When she passes Ben on her way over the threshold, she says, “Pizza or no pizza, I'll kick you out myself if you make Summer uncomfortable.”

I smile. I don't know how I ended up having such luck with roommates. First Marissa and now Riley.

“Moi?” Ben points to himself. “I don't think I could possibly make Summer uncomfortable.”

If he only knew.

The three of us make light work of unloading the carts. Thankfully, Phyllis' place comes furnished. We brought our own bedding and have everything unpacked within an hour of our arrival. Ben's up on the furniture. Not in the same way Lee would be, but there's something equally naughty about the way he's so at home in a place he shouldn't be allowed.

He's been making snarky comments and entertaining us with his attempts to be funny ever since he took up residence on the couch, his foot propped onto the coffee table.

We settle in for pizza after warming it in the oven. Ben and Cam are on the couch. Riley's cross-legged on the floor in front of the coffee table, and I'm in a side chair, a safe distance from the charmer who is taking up space in my home and head.

I glance over at Ben. He's like the car wreck you can't help slowing to watch. Only, nothing's tragic about him. It's his magnetism and good looks. Even if I wanted to stop looking at him, I don't know if my eyes would obey me. He's smiling a carefree smile after having just teased Cam and Riley about their infatuation with one another.

Ben looks ... happy. He always seems happy. And this irresponsible piece of me wants to stand up and move closer to him so I can grab up a handful of his sunshine and store it in a private nook of my heart like a squirrel hoarding nuts for winter.

"Anyone want more soda?" My voice is brighter than expected, like a tightly tuned piano wire.

"Are you serving me now, Summer?" Ben wags his brows.

"Cam? Riley?" I ask, avoiding Ben's boyish brown eyes—boyish in their playfulness, but not in their intent.

"I'll come with you," Riley says. Then she turns to Ben. "You've been warned. I don't want to send you hobbling home. Behave."

"I'm on my best behavior, Rye Rye. Ask Summer. She's not bothered by me in the least. Are you, Summer?"

It's like he knows. He knows I'm bothered, and he knows I won't admit it because of the challenge he just threw down. He obviously doesn't remember how formidable I can be when needed.

"You bother me, Ben. More than anyone I know."

It's the deepest and most disturbing truth. But the tone I use gives no clue as to the nature of my disturbance.

Ben studies me. Then he laughs—it's this full laugh—the laugh of a man amused by me, and not intimidated in the least.

Riley and I grab drinks. She takes Ben's cup and Cam's, saving me again.

When we're in the kitchen, she says, "I can make Ben leave. Cam will gladly drive him home. They both could call it a night, honestly. It's been a long day."

"I'm good. They can stay a little longer. I don't want you to have to tiptoe around because of me. I know Ben's your friend."

"He's a really good guy. I've honestly never seen him so intent on riling someone up."

"I seem to have that effect on men."

"Because you are the one that got away. And, because you're awesome, of course."

I hum. Am I? I'm certainly unattainable at this point, but not because I think I'm better than any of these men. Only because I can't afford to risk my heart being broken again.

Riley and I walk back out into our living room, me carrying Ben's cup by default. Ben's phone rings as I set his soda in front of him and he smiles up at me before answering.

"It's my mom," he says. "Excuse me, I have to take this."

He doesn't stand and leave the area, which makes sense since relocating is a bit of an event for him with the boot on his foot.

"Ben?" A warm voice filled with obvious excitement comes through the phone.

“Hey, Mom. How are you?”

We can hear the conversation, even though Ben’s got the phone to his ear.

His mom doesn’t share how she is. Instead, she says, “How are you? How’s your foot? I wish we were there.”

“I’m fine. It’s healing. I’ll probably have this boot off tomorrow and then it’s another week of healing.”

He mouths to Cameron, “Imagine if she were here.”

Cam smiles and rocks his arms like he’s holding a baby. Ben nods.

He and his mom talk a little longer, and then he says, “Mom, I’m here with Cam and Rye ... and Summer.”

“Oh! Summer is there?”

She knows who I am?

“Yeah. She’s here. She and Riley just got a place together a few blocks over from me and Cam.”

“Well, tell her thank you from Dad and me. We’re so grateful to her.”

“You can thank her yourself.” Ben looks at me, a warm smile spreading across his face. He pushes the FaceTime icon, and before I can protest, his mom’s face fills his phone screen.

Ben turns the screen toward me. “Mom, this is Summer, the girl who rescued me.”

“Oh! Goodness. You’re so beautiful. Wow. Look at you.” She’s beaming.

“Mom,” Ben says with a note of warning and what sounds like embarrassment.

He’s the one who decided FaceTiming was a good idea.

“We just want to thank you, dear. We’re so grateful to you. We don’t know what would have happened to our Ben if you hadn’t come by. We owe you.”

“It was nothing,” I say. “I’m glad I could help.”

I stare at this woman who raised Ben. She's got a softness to her, like someone who would bake you cookies after school and go to all your shows and wait in the eaves with a bundle of flowers and a hug even if you missed a line. She's smiling at me, and I feel myself smile in response.

"Okay, Mom. Well, we're going to hang up. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Wait!" she says. "I want to say hi to Cam and Riley too."

Ben doesn't roll his eyes, but he looks like he's suppressing an eye roll. But the love he has for his mom supersedes anything else. This is one more layer to Ben—one that doesn't gel with who I thought he was. I know he's a charmer. *Charmer*. The word doesn't fit as well as it had. I can't find it in me to hold him in as much contempt as I have up until that morning at Dead Man's. Maybe we could be friends. I'm friends with Bodhi, Kai, and other employees on the island. Why not Ben?

The choice feels slippery, like stepping onto a hill covered in ice. One wrong step and I'll slide from friendship into ... what? I don't know.

Ben indulges his mom by passing the phone around so everyone but me can say hello and answer her questions about their jobs and life on the island.

Ben finally hangs up the call, telling his mom he loves her. My skin feels too tight. I stand and clear the pizza box to the kitchen. I've never been so close to something so ... *normal*. My life has always been curated and lived out in the shadow of my dad's career and society's expectations. I can't ever remember my mom being concerned for me. She definitely wouldn't have nearly begged to talk to my friends. If she had thanked someone who saved me, it would have been done in a formal way, with no show of emotion. Botox helps with that.

"Sorry about her ... effusiveness," Ben calls out from the living room. "My mom can be a bit extra. Now you see I come by it honestly."

I don't know what I see anymore. Definitely not a charmer with a heart of deceit. There's more to Ben than I had allowed myself to see. I think I may have misjudged him. And I'm not sure what to do about that.

BEN

Karma, she'll bite you in the butt every time.

~ Unknown

“**F**riendship, huh?” Cam asks me while we ride the tour bus to the backside.

The wild backside. I chuckle. I’m a simple man, and that joke does not get old for me.

It’s Cam’s day off. My boot came off two days ago. I’m allowed to walk on my foot now as long as I keep it protected until it fully heals. Cam and Riley met for breakfast and then Cam surprised me by suggesting we take a tour of the backside of the island.

We’re taking one of the few motorized vehicles on the island over. Our tour guide is an old man who grew up on Marbella. His sense of humor consists of a series of one-liners, and he’s a great storyteller. He’s rambling on about the Davis foundation and the wild animals who came here as a part of a movie production and now roam freely on the island full time.

“We don’t have any T-Rex on this side of the island,” he jokes. “They didn’t eat chocolate or drink coffee and look at what happened to them. Drink your mochas, people!”

The group on the mini-bus laughs one of those complimentary laughs. They could be recorded for a sitcom soundtrack. I could totally do this guy’s job when I retire. On

Marbella? I always thought I'd retire in Ohio, near my family home and everything I've always known.

“Of course, we're gonna have a T-Rex population inhabit the resort this coming week. So, guard your little ones, and if you see a stampede, move out of the way.”

He's talking about the next convention to be held at the resort. While the majority of the time we're hosting affluent guests, the resort is also a highly sought after location for destination weddings and various conferences. Kai told me we host a hobby horse convention every spring where grown men bring their mock steeds in the form of broomsticks with stuffed equine heads and engage in “horse shows” including dressage, jumping competitions, and barrel stunts.

The resort also hosts normal events like the meet-the-authors gathering coming up later this month.

But not this week. This week a world-wide group of T-Rex aficionados are converging on Descanso for their annual foot race through town. The contestants put on those blow-up dino costumes and waddle along a course through neighborhoods, up hills and down the beach.

The tour guide wraps up his spiel and finds parking in a dirt clearing at the top of a hill. The ocean spreads out below us, a wooded area is to the south, and open grassy land stretches to the north.

“Out here, among other animals, you'll see wild emu, zebras, ostrich and two species of monkeys,” our guide explains. “Be very respectful of the wildlife. While they are usually harmless and are somewhat acclimated to being around humans, you want to keep your distance. They are wild animals. Do not approach them, feed them, or touch them. Feel free to hike the trails, but stay on the designated paths. You can also explore the coves and tidepools. Meet back here in two hours.”

Cam and I stand and wait for the people ahead of us to exit the minibus. We thank the driver and step out onto the dirt.

“Do you feel up to walking down toward the tidepools?” Cam asks.

“I’m itching to walk. I haven’t moved enough this week and I feel like a caged animal, speaking of animals.”

“Let’s do it, then. If you start to feel pain, tell me.”

“Then you’ll piggy-back me out?”

I’m joking, but Cam, true to form, says, “If need be, I would.”

“You still wish you had been with me?”

We start walking toward the trailhead leading down to the water.

“I don’t think I’ll completely ever let go of the fact that you were alone at Dead Man’s. So much more could have gone wrong.”

“Stinks to be you.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“You hang onto things and wrestle them through your mind way past their expiration date. I don’t think I’ve held onto much in life. I’m always moving forward. No time to dwell on mistakes or missed opportunities.”

“Except for an obsession with a certain aspiring actress.”

I chuckle. “Obsession is too strong a word. Preoccupation, maybe. Fascination, to be sure.”

The trail narrows. We walk downhill on packed dirt with scrubby, wild grass growing up on either side. The path winds along the cliff in a switchback, taking us closer to the sandy cove and the tidepools.

“So, you said you are pursuing a friendship with Summer? Is that what you really want?”

“Why wouldn’t I want a friendship with her?”

“Because you want something else—something more.”

“I honestly don’t know what I want with her.” I pause, needing to flesh this out.

I haven't had Cam to myself in a while, with the exception of our breakfasts before work and our brief rides in the borrowed golf cart while I was injured. This day together is a gift from him and Riley to me. Usually they try to spend Cam's days off with one another—nights off, days off, any time they can get. They are as they should be at this stage of a love affair—inseparable. I'm well aware they made a sacrifice for Cam to be here with me.

“Summer's the most frustrating, intriguing, mysterious woman. If you could have seen her the day she rescued me. She couldn't help herself. There was this soft vulnerability to her that you would never expect. I saw her heart that day. Before that, I just wanted to mess with her. You know? Not upset her, but prove to her I was better than whatever she thought I was. And poke the bear. Because man is she fun when she gets riled up. I honestly enjoy our banter—and the chase. And I didn't like someone seeming so opposed to me without really having any reason. But I've spent time with her now, and I want to get to know her better. She's guarded, but she's not mean. I want to get behind her walls.”

“I bet you do,” Cam teases.

“Yeah. That too. She's gorgeous. But if it were only looks, I'd be finished and done already. After all, a man can only take so much rejection before he crumbles.”

“Well, good luck with all that. I've never met someone so dead set on keeping you at arm's length.”

“I'm patient when I need to be. For her, I'll be patient.”

“Who are you?” Cam laughs. Then he straightens his face. “In all seriousness, I've never seen you so wound up over a woman. And I hope she starts to see you for who you are.”

“Thanks. I think she's getting there.”

“Ever the optimist,” Cam smiles at me, and then he says, “What are those guys doing?”

I follow his line of sight and see two young men. One has his camera up, and the other is sitting on a huge boulder near

the shoreline. The rock looks smoother than the other rocks on the beach.

Wait. Is that ... ?

“Is that Jeremy, the guy who’s in the play with Summer?” I absentmindedly ask Cam.

“How should I know?”

“It is. Typical, posing for a picture. That guy’s ego knows no bounds.”

“Jealous?”

“Nah. Though he does get to kiss Summer. But if you thought how she treats me was rough, I’d hate to be him. She is not a fan. Not at all.”

We walk a little further down the trail. And I could swear the rock moves slightly. It’s this slow movement, like me when I’m trying to sleep in and someone wakes me.

“That’s not a rock,” Cam says.

“Definitely not.”

That is *not* a rock. It’s a massive sea beast. It’s way too huge to be a seal or sea lion. Jeremy is sitting right on the back of this wild nautical mass of brown blubber like King Triton riding a giant ruddy dolphin. Only Jeremy’s not riding, he’s shifting into yet another pose, propping his foot on the back of the animal and then placing his elbow on his knee, and his chin in his hand.

The warnings we just heard about keeping a distance from wild animals seemed so obvious at the time. Not obvious to everyone, I guess.

The massive beast seems to notice Jeremy for the first time. And, with a speed and agility that should not be possible at its size, the colossal brown mass elevates itself on its front flippers and wobbles like a hairy bowl of jello, turning its bulbous, dangly nose toward Jeremy and letting out a deep, low snorting sound. It sounds like my grandpa clearing his nose, only amplified and with far more bass. A chorus of congested seniors with a bluetooth speaker could not outdo the

sound coming out of this animal. The skin along its sides ripples as it rotates to get a look at the man who disturbed an otherwise serene beachy naptime.

The sudden movement accompanied by the loud snort sends Jeremy running.

He slides off the back of the massive sea animal and starts to sprint in the direction of the base of the path. If you ever watched Scooby Doo, every episode has a scene where Scooby says, “Ruh Roh,” and Shaggy shouts, “Zoinks!” and then they take off running from some ghost or monster so quickly their legs look like blurred circles. That’s Jeremy right now. But he can’t run fast enough to outrun this annoyed sea beast.

“Oh no! That’s an elephant seal! What was he thinking?”

The words aren’t even fully out of Cam’s mouth before the giant mammal opens his jaws and chomps in the direction of Jeremy’s butt. It’s hard to tell if Jeremy was bit or he jumped from sheer fright.

I should look away, shout, do something—anything—but I’m shocked into stunned silence. I’m unable to move or tear my eyes off the sight of Jeremy now running here and there, zigging and zagging like a cartoon character, holding one hand to his backside and yowling.

His wild backside.

Welp. Jeremy got to experience the full meaning of wild backside today, that’s for sure.

Jeremy howls, but he keeps running away from the massive seal-like creature. Jeremy’s friend, who is now jogging alongside him, hasn’t stopped taking photos during the whole ordeal.

I hear Jeremy shout, “Get my good side!”

Cam takes off up the trail and comes back with a naturalist who takes in the scene below us, and then runs down to where Jeremy is on the beach. The elephant seal, having rid himself of the annoying actor who tried to use him as a prop, retreats

into the ocean, and glides away with a grace that should be impossible for a behemoth sack of brown blubber.

The naturalist confronts Jeremy. I'm too far away to hear what he's saying, but his face looks like my mom's did when Cam and I ate through a tray of cold cuts she had set aside for her ladies brunch back in high school.

When Jeremy turns to show the park ranger his rear, his pants are torn and his skin looks like he was dragged behind a truck on a gravel road. It doesn't look as bad as it could have been. Definitely not comfortable, but he's all in one piece.

Jeremy's friend walks around and snaps a photo of Jeremy's rear with the pocket of his pants shredded and dangling, and his butt cheek exposed and raw.

"*That* is not my good side!" Jeremy scolds his companion in a British accent.

I never thought I'd agree with Jeremy on anything, but I do agree with that.

Jeremy's escorted up the path by the park ranger. Cam and I explore the tide pools for a while, but our time is cut short because of the commotion with the elephant seal. We ride back to Descanso. The minibus driver has barely hit the brakes when Cam stands to exit the vehicle. He's standing on the concrete near the bus door with his arms crossed while I make my way down the stairs, hardly concealing his impatience at having to wait for me. Obviously, all he can think about now that we're back is getting time with his girlfriend.

"I'm going to visit Riley. Do you have plans for the afternoon?"

"Are you asking me on a date, big boy?"

Cam chuckles. "I'm absolutely not asking you on a date. I had a great morning with you, albeit an interesting one with that whole sea elephant debacle. What a tool. Who sits on a wild animal? Anyway, I'm about to see Riley—alone. I just wondered if you had plans—separate plans."

"Way to make a guy feel loved."

Cam doesn't roll his eyes, but he gives me a look with his lips pinched to the side and his eyes boring into mine. He's entertained, but he's in a hurry. I get it.

"I'll probably take my bike over to C-Side and hang out a bit. Maybe catch up with Bodhi when he's off tonight. There's a bonfire. I might hit that."

"Sounds like a plan. Maybe I'll take Riley."

"And share her with the common people?"

"Not share her. Nope. Just hang out together around a fire on the beach."

"I'll see you there—if you go."

"M'kay." Cam turns and walks away from the bus, leaving me to get my bike and hope I bump into someone who needs help running her lines.

SUMMER

*Some of us think holding on makes us strong
but sometimes it is letting go.*

~ Hermann Hesse

I'm in my corner. Practice was canceled today. Apparently, Jeremy had an encounter with an elephant seal and he's out of commission, being treated for potential infection, lacerations, and severe bruising. I don't know the details, but I'm guessing the animal was provoked. Oh, sweet elephant seal, I feel you, sister. Or brother.

It's not one of the busier hours when customers line up to get their coffee drinks. Mid-afternoon can be hit or miss here, and I love the quiet that comes when the crowd dies down. Clarissa's here alone. It's just the two of us and a couple who's obviously on their honeymoon or anniversary. I've tried to be stealthy and inconspicuous while I studied them from across the room. It's always interesting to me to watch couples so clearly in love, no walls up, no pretense, just this blissful delight in one another's company. It seems like certain people are cut out for that kind of thing.

I turn my head back to my script. I take a sip of my iced chai and look up at the door when someone enters the cafe.

Ben.

He's like this stray puppy who follows me everywhere. His eyes scan the room. It's obvious he's looking for someone, and

I'd bet dollars to donuts it's me. His hair is disheveled and windblown, he's got aviators on and he pulls them up onto his head to get a better look around. His butterscotch brown eyes catch mine and a carefree smile erupts on his face. I feel my echoing smile, and for once, I don't try to hide it or push it back. I'm happy to see him. It's official, he has eroded my defenses to the point that I smile at the sight of him.

He strolls over—saunters—owns the room, whatever. And he bends down and whispers in my ear in a highly inappropriate level of nearness, considering I've put up every road barrier, barbed wire fence, and padlock to keep him at bay.

“Summer, is that a smile I see on your face, or are you just stretching your lips?”

I'd have some comeback to say, but Ben's breath tickles across my neck as he pulls away, and a wave of goosebumps steals my capacity to speak ... or think.

What is happening? Red alert! Red alert!

I hazard a glance up at him, even though I'm still not fully composed—which is ridiculous. I need to get it together. He's beaming down at me like this is the best moment of his life—which is also ridiculous. It's a ridiculousness-fest around here.

“I might have smiled in your direction,” I reluctantly admit. “Don't let it go to your head.”

“Too late,” he says, grabbing a chair and pulling it out as if I invited him to join me. “It already did. That smile of yours will fuel the rest of my day—possibly my week. I might even get T-shirts printed. *Summer Monroe smiled at me*. That's catchy. Don't ya think?”

I shake my head and look away. He's too much. And by too much, I mean too much.

“Ben, I'm trying to work here. Do you just pop into people's workplaces acting all ... ?”

“All?” He raises his eyebrows in my direction.

I wave my hand up and down him as Exhibit A of a hot guy acting flirty in the workplace.

“Say it, Monroe. How am I acting?”

“Disruptive.”

“I can be so much more disruptive, if you’d only let me.” He pauses, but not long enough for me to respond to him. “But in answer to your question, I came here hoping you’d be here. I like running lines with you. I’m here to offer my services.”

So very up front. Or at least it seems that way.

I put on my natural accent. Ben has no idea it’s real. “Why, Ben. I declare. What are your intentions with me?”

I sound like Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*. Don’t get me started on that movie. I’ll never, ever stop. If only they made books and movies like that one these days. And I don’t care if it makes me sound two or three times my age to think such a thing.

Ben flops back in his chair like someone shot him clear through.

“Oh, Summer. Don’t tell me you can feign a perfect southern accent? It shouldn’t surprise me. But I’ll have you know, southern accents are my kryptonite. I’m afraid you just made yourself completely irresistible to me.”

“Sir,” I say, quoting the movie. “You are no gentleman!”

And in one of the most shocking moments of my life, Ben responds with Rhett Butler’s line. “An apt observation.” He pauses just right. “And, you, Miss, are no lady.”

I fall back into my chair laughing.

Ben props his elbows on the table, cupping his perfect jaw in his hands, and studies me. The grin on his face is wide and full. Land sakes, it’s been ages since I’ve properly flirted with a man. I forgot how fun it could be. And with Ben, of all people. I don’t know quite what to think.

Ben spares me the struggle. “Summer, I believe you have work to do. Are you going to let me help you or not? I mean,

there are probably a whole slew of aspiring actresses around here looking for a bored man on medical leave to read their lines with them. You're making them wait."

"Let them," I say, unsure why I feel so willing today.

He's still Ben.

Only, I don't quite know what that means anymore.

"First, you have to tell me how you know the lines to *Gone With the Wind*."

"A man has his secrets." Ben wags his eyebrows.

He's playful. Also, I'm sure it's a move he's used over the years to get away with everything short of murder. He is a charmer, no doubt. But maybe not all charmers are deceitful.

"So, you won't tell me?"

Ben studies me. He leans across the table, invading my space again. I should protest, or hate it, or set some healthy boundary. But I let him near. When his face is mere inches from mine, he tilts and stands slightly so his mouth is aiming for my ear again.

In a quiet, gravely, private voice, he whispers, "My mom was obsessed with that book and movie. It's part of the soundtrack of my childhood."

He wasn't touching me. But I felt him everywhere.

And when he pulled back, his stubble grazed my cheek. I know I flushed. It feels like the temperature in the room went up ten degrees. I almost fan myself, but I don't. Thanks be.

"I ..." I start to speak, but my voice comes out choked and affected. I clear my throat. "I thought you wanted to be my friend."

"I do. What do you think I'm doing here? I'm being friendly, Monroe. This is me ..." he waves his hand up and down his torso. "Being friendly. Very friendly. Now give me that script and let's get started."

I hand him the script, grateful to move us into a more structured exchange. Only, not completely as grateful as I

should be, considering I should not want Ben to affect me, or hang out with me, or—anything. And yet, today, I do.

We read through the script. Act One. It's more focused on scenes with other characters with dialogue between Captain Mack and Kailani sprinkled throughout.

The door to the cafe opens and shuts. And, I should notice. Normally that would catch my attention. I also would have caught the fact that the madly-in-love couple has left. But I didn't. I was too busy trying to catch a breath in Ben's overwhelming presence. It's not until a man is approaching our table that my focus moves from Ben to him.

James. Our director.

He's here—in C-Side.

“Summer! Summer! There you are! I've been scouring the island for you!”

His face is slightly frantic. It's dramatic, and at first I think there must be some emergency, but then I remember he's in theater. It's how we are—I'm more of the angsty creative type, if you want to typecast me. I channel my big bursts of drama onto the stage, when it's called for. Otherwise, I'm not one to fly off the handle over trifles. I've worked with James long enough now to know—he's dramatic.

“And who do we have here?”

James sizes Ben up, and he's not even discrete about it. His eyes go from the top of Ben's head down to his flip-flop clad feet, even glancing between the foot that's bare in the sandal and the one that's wrapped to protect his healing cut. Then James' eyes rove back up Ben, taking in his trim waist, his muscles that are accentuated by his surf T-shirt, and then back up his face, cataloging every feature.

“I'm Ben.”

“Are you in film?”

“No,” Ben shakes his head, flashing James a full smile.

I'm starting to think this charisma comes to him naturally. Does he use it to his advantage? I'm quite sure he has on many

occasions. Can he be trusted? That is yet to be determined. I only wish I could tell for certain.

“But I heard you running lines with Summer.”

“I’m just helping her out—as a friend.”

Ben turns to me and winks, right in front of James.

I might revoke his friend card—not that I’ve issued him one yet, but I was starting to get there.

“You sounded proficient. Have you acted?”

Please, no. I silently beg Ben. *Not the Peter Pan story.*

“I have not.”

Whew.

“Unless you count being one of the Darling brothers in my high school play, which I’m sure you don’t.”

“Well, that means you aren’t a complete novice.”

What? It means he *is* a complete novice. What is this madness? Is Ben actually, secretly a hypnotist? Is James under one of Ben’s spells? And, why does James care what Ben’s acting experience is? He came in here like a chicken with its head cut off, saying he was looking for me.

“You said you were scouring the island for me?”

“Oh, yes. Summer. Yes.”

I look at James. He keeps glancing back at Ben, sizing him up and then gathering his thoughts as to what to say to me.

“Well, we got news about Jeremy. He’s got a minor infection from his run in with the elephant seal. And bruising. And ... that foolish man. Anyway, we’re out a male lead. But, the show must go on!”

James looks at Ben. Then me. Then Ben. Then me.

“Run lines,” he commands.

“What?” I’m confused.

“Run lines. Pretend I am not here. I want to watch.”

Ben shrugs, like he's fine running lines in front of a man as prominent in the world of theater and film as James Vincent Phillips. But to be fair, Ben wouldn't know James from Ronald McDonald. Because: *He's not an actor!*

"Where should we start?" Ben asks me.

"Take it from here. Where Calabran and Kailani meet." I point to the script, trying to lose myself in the moment like I did when Ben had been flirting with me and I had allowed myself to enjoy it.

Ben looks over at me and when he winks this time, it's a slow, private wink. He reaches across the table, places his hand on mine and says, "Just you and me. We're just running lines."

It's like he read my mind. And, he's touching me. And, James Freaking Vincent Phillips is right here, watching Ben calm my nerves. Which, if you wonder, he is doing. And also, not. My nerves want to find some superglue and permanently attach Ben's hand to mine, only then he wouldn't be able to do that lightly brushing thing he's doing over my thumb. It's so subtle I could almost miss it. But I notice. Boy howdy, do I notice.

I clear my throat, drop my hand from the table onto my lap and look Ben in the eyes. Then I clear my throat and wait for him to read the line of Captain Mack Calabran.

"What is that moving on the horizon?"

Ben's voice has a different tone than his normal speaking voice. He's using his lower register and making it a tad gruff, but not overdone. He *is* a pirate. He's way more of a pirate than Jeremy ever was.

"Johansen! Do you see that? Is it a pod of whales, dolphins ... or ..."

Ben changes his voice to a faster tempo and moves to more of an alto male range. "Sir! Those are not whales!" Ben pauses, putting a hand over his eyes like he's looking out toward the horizon. "And they are not dolphins. I believe ..."

he pulls an invisible telescope up to his eye, and in a hushed voice, says, “They are mermaids.”

“Mermaids? Bah. I have heard the tales of mermaids. Also of sirens, who are far more alluring and malevolent. But these are tales, and nothing more.”

“Yes, sir,” he says in the higher male voice. “Whatever you say, sir. There are no such things as ...” he lifts the invisible spyglass again. “Fishlike women with sparkling hair and iridescent scales on the lower half of their body. Sir. Yes, sir.”

Ben reads the blocking: “The scene shifts to the other side of the stage. Lights go dark over the pirate ship and front stage lights illuminate the merwomen gathered now on rocks.”

“That ship has the flag father has warned us against,” I recite the line of Mariana, my sister in the play. I have memorized her lines as well as my own.

“It’s a pirate flag,” I say. “One that ...” I’m about to recite the rest of the line when James interrupts me.

“Yes. Yes. I know you know the lines, Summer.”

I look to James for clarification. Why did he cut me off?

James extends his hand toward Ben flat palm up, and Ben places the script in it. James flips through the pages, points to a spot and says to Ben, “Start here.”

Ben doesn’t question James. He came here to help me—for whatever reason. He didn’t come to be bossed around by my director. And yet, he’s going along with it as if he takes direction from random strangers regularly.

Ben starts reading and I know right where we are. It’s the scene leading to the kiss.

“And what about your heart?” Ben reads.

“My heart is a tangled mess, like the nets set for the lobsters after a sea squall. I can’t tell what I want or what is good.”

“Maybe I should help you?” He looks at me with the same look he had the first time we read through this scene.

“Help me?” I ask.

“Help you know your heart.” Ben’s brown eyes search mine. *He’s acting.*

“And how would you do that, Mack?” I put a lilt in my voice to make it sound alluring.

Ben licks his lips just the slightest. “I would kiss you, if you let me.”

I take a breath. *He’s acting. And he’s toying with me.* But that look in his eyes says he’d kiss me if I let him. And that kiss would rock my world.

“Are you not afraid of me?” I ask him.

He should be. Not Pirate Mack, but Ben. He should be very afraid. Some women come with baggage. I come with a freight train’s worth.

“I am.” He pauses and his eyebrows lift the slightest making his eyes look more soft and vulnerable. “I’m terribly afraid of you. You are the first woman with the genuine power to drag me under.” He pauses again. “Are you not afraid of me?”

“Okay! Okay!” James claps his hands, breaking the moment.

I sit back, regrouping and looking at James. *What was that all about?*

“So, Ben.” James pulls out a chair at the table. “We are without a leading man. Our show must go on.”

Oh, no. No. No. No.

James’ eyes are fixed on Ben’s face. My eyes are too, only I’m making slicing motions at my neck and pleading gestures with my hands like I’m praying.

“What are your hours here at the resort? Are you full time?”

“I work for watersports. I’m on modified duty because I injured my foot last week. I will be back to full time this week. My hours vary.”

“And you like acting?” James asks.

I shake my head no. James is turned toward Ben so he can't see my freak out.

Ben gives me a smirky look. “I like it. But I'm not very experienced. Why are you asking?”

Does he really not know?

“Ben, do you know who I am?”

“You're the director of the play.”

James chuckles like Ben is the most adorable thing on earth—cuter than a baby rabbit, or baby Yoda, even cuter than Gavin Casalegno.

“Yes. I am the director. I have spent my life directing film and theater.”

“That's awesome! Summer is so lucky to have you as her director. She's really talented, don't you think?”

“I do, or I would not have cast her in my leading role. And I cast that fool, Jeremy, based on a virtual audition and recommendations from his school and a theater in England. Never again. I need to see the acting to know.”

“Yeah. It's a bummer what happened to him. I was there.”

Ben was there? I'll have to get that story later.

“Anyway, Ben,” James says. “I know talent when I see it. You can train a person to act, but you can't teach them the natural inclination toward acting. Contrary to many, I do not believe just anyone can act. And, you. Well, you can act.”

“Thank you so much. That's really kind of you.”

I roll my eyes. How can Ben not see what's coming? It's so obvious.

“Yep. Ben's been great,” I interject. “He's helped me with my lines. I bet he'll keep helping me. Won't you, Ben?”

“I'd be glad to, Summer.” His face contorts with a questioning look.

Before James has an opportunity to plow forward into the territory he's been skating around, I say, "And James, I'm sure we have some other cast members who would like to step up into the role of Captain. Right? It would be great to give one of the lesser roles an opportunity like this."

"Sure. Sure. I'm all for that, Summer." James' voice is nearly dismissive. "But there's one thing I won't have if I choose any of them."

I foolishly open my mouth and ask, "What's that?"

"Chemistry. You two have it. The air crackles when you look at one another. My skin gets goosebumps and I'm no romantic. You have that unspoken tug I couldn't create between actors. They either have it, or they don't. And you do."

Ben's brows raise and his eyes go wide. "You're not saying I should be the replacement lead in the play?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Ben. We can find out your schedule. I know Kai. I can work with him to make it easy on you. We'll modify practices. The two of you can run lines outside of our formal practice times. You've obviously got a grasp on the character. You've been in a play. This will work. Yes. This will work."

James is no longer asking. His voice is definitive.

Regardless of whether I want Ben to be in the play or not, he is going to be the new Captain Mack. And that means he is going to kiss me.

SUMMER

A mermaid's heart is the most fragile thing in the sea.

~ Emm Cole

“**A**rrrggh, here comes the pirate,” Kai growls from across the fire pit.

Riley dragged me out to the employee bonfire, even though I'm too preoccupied to be much fun.

Tiki torches light the perimeter of the sand where young resort employees stand in clusters talking. Couples wander hand in hand near the shore. Intimate silhouettes of partygoers sitting together on driftwood logs dot the beach.

A few heads turn in the direction of Kai's gaze.

I already know who's arriving. I look through the flames at Ben as he hooks his pointer finger and hobbles unevenly toward Kai. His piratey greeting would make an old sea dog smile. “Aye, matey! Captain Mack Calabrian at yer service. I take no prisoners and I tell no tall tales.” His voice is loud enough to carry across the distance between us.

Riley and two women who work at the spa, Trina and Jules, are standing with me on the other side of the pit. I nod my head in agreement with something Trina said, but I'm straining to hear the conversation between Ben and Kai.

“Seriously, dude. You're doing this?” Kai asks Ben.

“I have a soft spot for directors who lose their leading men.”

Riiiiight.

“I think you have a soft spot for someone else, but who am I to judge? We all took our shot and missed on that one.”

I chuckle and take a sip of my drink. Riley looks at me with her eyebrows raised. She doesn't know Ben's here yet.

I don't know what Kai's talking about. Bodhi barely took a shot at me, and we both know he wasn't serious. Kai's been acting like a teasing big brother ever since I arrived on Marbella. If anyone else “took their shot” with me, I haven't noticed. I'm mostly avoiding men, except those who are obviously harmless, like Bodhi and Kai.

My eyes drift from the women in front of me to the man across the fire. Ben's wearing cargo shorts and a tank top. His sandy brown hair is blowing lightly in the wind. He's got his hands tucked in his pockets and that signature carefree look on his face. Warm. Engaging. Face it: Irresistible.

Maybe he's someone I could even be friends with. But the hum in my body doesn't scream friendship. I'm drawn to him like the tide to the shore. And I've forgotten how to swim, especially in waters so murky, yet inviting.

Kai's words stop me from drowning in confusing thoughts about my new costar. “Speaking of alluring mermaids who make men do uncharacteristically radical things ...” Kai tips his bottle toward me from across the fire. “Summer's right over there.”

“Excuse me while I go see about a sea dragon.”

Did Ben say sea dragon?

I turn my head only seconds before Ben glances across the sand and catches me eavesdropping. I toss my head back in laughter when the group of women start laughing at something Riley just said.

Riley nudges me and leans in toward me. “Are you okay?”

Am I? No. I am definitely not.

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

The look of concern on her face morphs into a smirk when she sees Ben approaching.

“Uh huh. Absolutely, my foot.”

Ben’s eyes rove over me, from my gauzy white top to my jean shorts, down to my bare feet, which no longer feel anchored in the sand. I’m buoyant and drifting under his gaze.

I told you I’d come, Captain Calabran.

“Riley. Summer.” Ben greets us as he approaches. The two women turn toward Ben, like metal shavings to a magnet. My stomach turns to lead. Impervious. Heavy. Dull.

“I’m Ben,” the charmer standing next to me announces with a smile.

It’s not the smile he gave me on the pier when he first arrived. It’s not even the smile he flashed at Kai a few minutes ago. It’s a tame smile, leashed and obedient.

“Danger, through and through. Consider yourselves warned,” I say to the two young women who are smiling brightly at Ben.

I grin back at Ben, feeling myself soften, despite the warning bells from what might be my better judgment. If Ben’s a cliff, I’m walking along the ledge—or at least taking a stroll on an uneven trail with a guard rail.

Jules introduces herself and Trina. “I’m Jules. I work at the spa. I’m a masseuse. And this is Trina. She does nails and facials.”

I watch Ben, knowing he’s about to put his flirt on. My heart steps back, withdrawing from the cliffside to a remote plateau, and then hiding behind a rock face.

But Ben only smiles briefly at Jules and Trina. Then he looks at Riley. “Where’s Cam?”

“He went to get us drinks.”

Ben’s standing parallel to me, facing the others. Aligned with me. Opposed to them. Is he capable of drawing lines and

staying within them?

An awkward lull pauses the conversation. Everyone looks at each other and no one knows what to say, until Trina asks, “So Ben, what do you do at Alicante?”

He shifts his body slightly so he’s closer to me. I feel the heat of him, the zing of awareness. If I closed my eyes, I’d still know he was here—still know it was Ben, not any other man.

“I’m in watersports. But I’ve been on modified duty from a little accident I had. I go back to full time the day after tomorrow.”

“Watersports?” Trina says, twirling a lock of her hair in her fingers. “So do you give surf lessons?”

Is she asking for lessons?

Do I care?

Ben runs his hand through his wavy hair. He has no idea that three of the four women standing around him, and a few on the periphery, take note. The move is sexy and effortless and it makes me want things I can’t have and should run from.

“I do a bit of everything. I teach lessons. Sub as a lifeguard at the main pools when needed. Man the rental desk. Take boats out for tours. You know.”

Ben turns his eyes to mine. I study him, trying to ferret out his thoughts like a psychic, only I’ve got no crystal ball to tell me if this man will shatter my heart or protect it like hand-blown glass.

He smiles down at me—a smile for me alone, one I’m holding onto like a promise. His smile says, *I don’t want a massage or a manicure. Not unless you’re giving me one.*

What? No. Am I even reading him right?

And do I want to be the recipient of *that* smile?

I table all those questions. They’re far too weighty and impossible to tackle tonight.

I turn to the group. “Would you excuse Ben and me? I have something I need to ask him.”

Ben gives me one of his classically playful looks, teasingly lifting his brows once and running the tip of his tongue along his lower lip. I don't know what he thinks I mean by needing to talk, but if the look he's giving me is any indication, he thinks it involves a lot more than us exchanging words.

Ben's gaze moves away from Riley, Trina, and Jules to meet mine. He leans in so his mouth is next to my ear, wearing me down with his nearness, his warmth, his easy-going charm. His hand comes up and rests on my bicep. In a private, husky voice, he whispers, "I'm all yours, Monroe."

I clear my throat when Ben pulls away. And I turn to walk toward the shore, nearly forgetting to say goodbye to my three friends.

Ben looks around at the women, and in a nonchalant voice, he says, "Nice meeting you two. Rye, I'll catch you later."

I'm already walking away after waving a quick goodbye.

Once we're a short distance from the group gathered at the fire pit, I turn to Ben. "I wanted to tell you that you don't have to take on the lead role in the play. I know you were trying to be nice. James can promote another actor."

A soft evening breeze blows my hair away from my face. Ben's eyes find mine in the dusky light.

"Let's walk," he suggests. "I'll tell you what I'm thinking."

Ben lightly touches the small of my back as we turn toward the shoreline. And I let him. My heart battles like two politicians. A liberal piece of me longing for Ben's arms to wrap around me. What do his lips feel like? Would his kiss be soft or demanding, playful or tender? The conservative side of my heart feels battle-weary and tender, ready to withdraw from the race rather than endure one more loss.

Ben and I walk together in silence, the sound of the waves pulling out and crashing onto the shore filling the space between us. Stars smatter the sky, and the nearly-full moon casts white streaks across the water.

When Ben speaks, his voice is thoughtful, and more mature than I've heard him before. There's a commanding, masculine edge to his words, as if I could relax and let him take charge, trusting his decisions because he would have my best interest at heart.

"I consider you a friend, Summer—even if you haven't returned that favor yet. You did me a solid, rescuing me when I cut my foot. I like running lines with you. And I can't help but think about what happens in Act Two."

We pause our walk. Ben stands looking down at me. I don't turn away.

"Act Two," I say, knowing full well he's talking about the kiss between Captain Mack and Kailani.

"Yes. Act Two. Do you really want to kiss some random guy when he's playing Captain Mack Calabran? Do you want him running his hand down your face and arm? Staring into your eyes?"

Ben's hand grazes the skin on my cheek and then lightly trails over my arm, but the touch is gone as quickly as it came, making me think I only imagined the moment between us.

"Who would you suggest I kiss? You?" My voice wobbles.

"Welp. You walked right into that one."

Ben's joke pulls us out of deep waters to a safer place where the waves of my misplaced longing won't threaten to drag us under.

"I did. Didn't I?"

"And believe me, Monroe, if I were suggesting we kiss, you would know it."

A million retorts spring to mind. None of them seem capable of passing across my lips.

I don't want to kiss a random guy. *I want to kiss Ben.* And that's all the more reason he should not be my co-star. Lines can blur. Ben can be my friend, at least I think I can let him near enough for that much. But I can't go further ... and a kiss will push me so close to the ledge I'd risk falling.

“I just think you’d be more comfortable with me in the role,” Ben says. “Besides, I think it will be fun. James already went to Kai to work out my schedule so I can be at practice. I don’t think either of us has a vote in this anymore. You may as well face it. I’m your pirate. And you’re my mermaid.”

I look out across the water.

Thankfully, my phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking the building tension between us, and saving me from making the irrevocable mistake of spending more time alone on the beach in the dark with Ben.

“It’s Marissa. Will you excuse me?”

Ben nods. “I’ll see you at practice tomorrow, Kailani.”

It’s simultaneously a promise and a threat. We both know what lies ahead, and only one of us seems completely comfortable with the idea.

I tap my phone screen and answer Marissa without a greeting. “You’re not going to believe what happened.”

“Well, hello to you too, chica.”

“Hey. Sorry. How are you? How are the kids?”

“Oh, no. No, you don’t. You don’t get to tell me I’m not going to believe what happened and then just start asking questions about me and mi familia. I’m fine. They’re fine. Now, tell me.”

I laugh, feeling the weight of Ben lift off me. Not his literal weight. The thought of that has me shivering a little. What would it be like to be surrounded by him, held and ... nope. No. No. No.

“It’s about that pool boy, isn’t it?”

Marissa’s comment has me laughing fully, from the belly—from my heart.

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too. Of course I do. Now tell me about this hot man I knew you’d fall for.”

“One, I’m not falling for him. And, two ... well. I’m definitely not falling for him.”

“But your news is about him.”

“It is. Jeremy, the one I have been telling you about, got attacked by an elephant seal. He’s okay, but he’s out of the play. So we were without a male lead.”

“And Ben is going to step in?”

The hopefulness in Marissa’s voice brings a smile to my face. She’s always so free with her trust, positive and open-handed.

“He is. I told him he didn’t have to. But James heard him reading lines with me, and now it would take a full-scale act of God to keep James from putting Ben in this role.”

“Reading lines with you?”

“He showed up at C-Side and offered.”

“To run lines with you?”

“Yes.”

“Mm hmm. Oh, que bueno. Este es el comienzo de algo muy bueno.”

“Translation, please? I haven’t been speaking Spanish since you left.”

“Que lastima! Well, the translation is that it’s good. I like this very much. Very, very much.”

“I get the feeling that’s not the exact translation.”

“Close enough. So, now Ben is your pirate. This is fantastic. And you will be his seductress of the sea. And ... is there romance in this play?”

“Seductress of the sea? I hope your niece and nephew aren’t around with you talking like that.”

“Aren’t mermaids the temptresses who lure men to their deaths?”

“That is the siren. Not the mermaid. I had to look it up when I researched to prepare for my role. Mermaids help men,

but in the process, the men often endanger the mermaids' lives, intentionally or unintentionally.”

“Well, I’m sure Ben will not endanger your life, my sweet amiga. I’m pretty sure he may save it.”

BEN

*Even if I lost my memory,
I swear I'll never forget our first kiss.*

~ Unknown

The morning sun crests over the horizon on the same beach where I walked with Summer over a week ago at the employee bonfire. I'm waxing my board on the sand in the pre-dawn light. My foot is healed and I've been back to working an early shift, and then biking to the north shore to practice every afternoon.

I look out at the ocean. Waves break consistently, forming perfect curls. A few other surfers join me, like sentries on the shoreline, checking the conditions, zipping up their wetsuits, and leashing their boards to their ankles. It's already fall, so the early mornings are crisper, even though the temps never dip below the fifties year-round here. We get more mist and fog, and the days shorten.

I nearly bent in and kissed Summer right here at this very spot. Of course, she doesn't know that's what I was about to do. Her phone rang, saving me from overstepping a line she's guarding. I'm not even sure we're friends, though I feel her resistance eroding. Like a man on a slippery hill after a mudslide, I'm treading lightly. But I might have made a serious misstep that night if she hadn't received a call from Marissa.

I spend a few hours in the waves. It's my first morning off since I went back to work. Once I'm in the water, I straddle my board with the other surfers nearby, lined up waiting for another set.

Bodhi paddles out and surprises me. He straddles and sits next to me, our legs dangling below us into the water, the bob of the current holding us and giving us a sense of when the next swell will hit.

"I didn't know you were coming out today," I tell him.

"Yeah, man. I didn't want to miss the morning offshore lineup."

"It's been sweet so far. I've gotten tubed twice."

"Striking out with the women; scoring with the waves."

I chuckle. "Not striking out. Summer needs time. And it's not women. She's it."

"I've seen that. But you're like the Pied Piper of men around here. All the female heads turn when you walk onto the beach or approach the shack. You're leaving a trail of disappointment behind you, dude."

I chuckle again. "A trail of disappointment? That's a bit over the top."

Ever since I met Summer, my interactions with women have been different than they've ever been. I've always flirted freely and harmlessly, leaving women smiling when I walk away. Whatever woman met me, after our little exchange, she felt appreciated and seen. I didn't lead women on, but we had fun.

Once Summer gave me the clear message she thought I was some sort of player, I curbed all that. I didn't plan to. It just happened. Now I'm kind, but I keep most of my urge to banter and flirt tucked away, waiting for the moments she allows me to have with her.

A smaller set rolls in with nothing worth taking. Bodhi and I flatten onto our boards and duck dive under the mushier waves, popping up to sit on our boards again once they pass.

“How about that T-Rex convention this past week?” Bodhi asks, laughing at the memories.

“That was wild. Like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

People—mostly men—converged on the island for a few days last week, dressing in dinosaur-related T-shirts, hats, and shoes. Some of them had a full set of scales running down their backs, even when they weren’t in their race attire.

“That guy!” Bodhi says on another laugh.

“Man. I felt for him.”

The race course went through the streets of Descanso near the resort, then down a hill, and ended on the beach. We had a finish line set up in a section far from the loungers and cabanas. Bodhi and I were assigned the job of manning the finish line.

“Those teeny arms, man. He had no chance of saving himself.”

“I know. It was like watching a ten-car pile up in slow motion!”

One of the men, wearing an inflatable T-Rex suit like the rest of the contestants, ate it in the last leg of the race. The guy went down like one of those blow-up clowns, only he didn’t bounce back up. And then a few other dinos behind him couldn’t maneuver out of the way fast enough, and they came crashing down in a pile like prehistoric bubble wrapped dominoes, their miniature arms wiggling in the air as they flopped and bounced off the beach.

“Running in one of those suits is a feat.” Bodhi shakes his head.

“Have you tried it?”

“You’re kidding, right? That would be a hard no. I mean, I’m all for dudes doing whatever floats their boat. But I’m not about to get inside one of those and run through town. Kai would never let me live that down.”

“It’s more of a waddle, really. You would run like that if your pants were around your ankles.”

Bodhi cracks up. “Right? Not the look I’m going for.”

We both laugh.

“And once a person falls in one of those suits, it’s nearly impossible to stand again. Those guys flopped around helplessly on the beach until the Alicante staff members came to their rescue.”

“The fall of the dinosaurs,” I quip. “Have you seen any of the viral TikTok videos other guests posted of the race? They always make me snort laugh. And then Cam points out how juvenile I am. So I remind him he’s a chronic grandpa.”

Bodhi laughs. He’s gotten to know Cam a little since we arrived.

“I’ve seen a few of the videos. I just hope they don’t start changing the types of people who are drawn to Marbella. One annual dino takeover is probably my limit.”

“You’ve got the hobby horse guys too,” I remind Bodhi.

“They’re far more chill. And they can get up on their own when they fall.”

“Give me a couple wanting surf lessons anyday.”

“I hear that.”

The waves pick up and we surf together for about another half hour or so. Once I’m out of the water, I grab a bite and a shower at home, and then I bike over to the amphitheater. We’ve practiced Act One all week. Today, we’ll run through Act Two.

The cast is mingling by the front rows of seats when I arrive. I pull my script out of my backpack and meet everyone by the stage, my eyes scanning for Summer. I’ve never been this guy—the one with his thoughts so focused on one woman. She’s a mystery, but it’s more than intrigue. I’ve seen beneath the way she bristles to keep me at bay, and I want more of that woman. She’s nuanced, funny, bright, and she keeps me on my toes. But deep down she’s got a heart that couldn’t let me sit on a beach with an injured foot. I want to get to know that side of her better and make her feel safe enough to let me.

When our eyes meet, Summer and I exchange a smile, and this feeling like I just caught the best wave of the day runs through me.

“Okay. Okay. Let’s get this show on the road, people.” James claps his hands, and the cast fills the front seats, awaiting his direction.

We run through Act Two, scenes one and two over and over. I’m off script for most of Act One, but for this section of the play, I’m still needing to hold the playbook in my hand to get my lines right—all except the lines I ran through with Summer for the part where Kailani comes onto land and is alone with the Captain.

Every time we come to the kissing scene, James waves his hands in the air dramatically, and says, “Kiss, kiss. Mack and Kailani kiss ... blah, blah, blah ...” And then he picks up the action a few lines after they have their moment.

I catch Summer’s eyes each time James says, *Kiss, kiss*, and make a show of blowing her a kiss, or I’ll make a smoochy face like that one emoji. Summer either rolls her eyes, looks away, or gives me a shy smile. The smiles are my favorite. I count them like points on a scoreboard. I’m winning her over, and she’s letting me.

When practice ends, James asks Summer and me to stay after so we can run through the parts in the script where it’s just the two of us. A few cast members linger around the front of the stage near the seating. Summer, James and I are on stage. He gives us some direction and then tells us where to start.

“Let’s pick it up where Kailani swims to the edge of the water and dries. Summer, stand here.”

Summer follows James’ directions and walks to the front of stage left.

“Ben, stand here.”

I stand center stage.

“Okay. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Other actors who were mingling pause their conversations, focusing on Summer and me as we run through the scene.

We run our lines. Summer moves from the front corner of the stage, following the blocking in the script until she's in front of me.

"Maybe I should help you?" I say the line I've memorized while I stare into her blue eyes.

"Help me?" Summer asks, staring back at me.

"Help you know your heart."

"And how would you do that, Mack?"

Summer's acting now, a fraction of her expression might be saying something more, but I know this is a job to her. She's not talking to me. She's Kailani talking to Captain Mack. And I'm Captain Mack, staring at the beautiful mermaid who has captured my heart.

"I would kiss you, if you let me."

I would. Summer, I would. Will you?

"Are you not afraid of me?" Summer asks, batting her lashes up at me and tilting her head down so her gaze is simultaneously filled with temptation and a warning.

"I am." I pause. "Are you not afraid of me?"

"I am afraid of you, Mack. You are a pirate after all. You aren't like other humans, and merpeople are trained to be helpful, but wary of all human beings. Pirates. Well, you are officially off limits."

"And yet, you came here today."

"I've never been known for my ability to follow my better judgment."

This is the point where I am supposed to reach out and brush a strand of hair off Summer's cheek, then allow my fingers to trail down her face and on.

"Good! Good!" James shouts, breaking the moment. "Now. Let's see you kiss."

Summer and I both turn to look directly at James.

“Come on, we don’t have all day. I want to get a feel for the kiss. Ben, put the back of your hand on Summer’s forehead.”

He walks toward us and grabs my hand as if he’s holding a doll’s. He sets the back of my fingers onto Summer’s temple, and then he drags my hand softly down her face, as if he’s drawing a line with the flat surfaces of my fingernails. James continues to drag my hand down Summer’s shoulder, and then he makes a path down her arm.

Summer and I are staring at one another. But this moment is about as romantic as getting an annual physical, or a root canal.

James, seemingly oblivious to the awkwardness between us, takes Summer’s hand and sets it on my jaw, arranging it like one would arrange silverware for a place setting, just so.

“Okay, okay. Now you kiss.” James steps back and stares at us.

Summer and I stare at one another.

The cast stares up at us.

Summer’s hand rests on my face.

James is close enough that he could kiss Summer himself—or kiss me, which I really hope does not happen.

I lean in and whisper in Summer’s ear. “You don’t have to kiss me on the lips. I can kiss the corner of your mouth instead. I read up on this last night.”

I pull back and she smiles up at me, but then she glances over at James.

“Is this difficult for you two?” James looks between us.

Before we can answer, James claps his hands. “Okay, people. Take the chit chat out of the theater. Leave us alone. We’ll be back here tomorrow. Good day!”

Summer’s hand is still resting on my face. I’m not about to sever that connection, so I put my hand under her elbow to

support her.

“It’s okay to move your hand off me until they leave,” I say softly, hoping to keep our conversation private. “I mean, unless you can’t help yourself. I know my stubble is a real draw with the ladies.”

I give her an exaggerated wiggle of my eyebrows and wink, and Summer giggles just the slightest. “I’m sure it is.”

“My grandma, especially,” I add, since Summer’s seeming playful and receptive to my teasing.

“You’ve got a face a grandma would love.”

Summer drops her hand, so I reluctantly release my light grasp of her elbow.

The stadium clears pretty quickly while we wait to hear from James as to what he wants next. Theater people treat the director like he is God himself. I’ve learned this over the past week. Back home, in high school, the director was my aunt, so no one gave her nearly the same respect James garners from his actors. That’s a small midwest town for you.

When the last of the cast is out of the amphitheater, James turns to us.

“Okay, from the top of their encounter.” Then he pauses. “No. Let’s cut to the chase and take it from where Kailani says, ‘I’ve never been known for my ability to follow my better judgment.’ Then we’ll move right into the kiss.”

James steps back, giving us room to lose ourselves in the scene—in one another.

Summer closes her eyes, takes a long, cleansing breath and lets it out slowly. When her eyes open, she nods definitively.

“Okay. We’re doing this.” Her voice is soft, but determined, spoken between the two of us.

“Monroe, you’re killing me here. This could be Jeremy. Tell me you know you got a major upgrade.” I wink at her.

“Be serious, Ben. Get in character.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is.”

“The play?” James says so loudly he’s nearly shouting. “On with it, you two. We’ll have to work on this after the first pass. And I have dinner plans.”

Summer nods at James. “Sorry. We’re ready.”

She closes her eyes again. I focus. I’m Mack. Captain Calabran. I want to kiss this mermaid. Oh, boy, do I.

Summer looks up at me. “I’ve never been known for my ability to follow my better judgment.”

I lift my hand slowly, allowing the back of my hand to rest on her temple where James had placed it. I trail the back of my fingertips down her face, keeping my eyes locked on hers. *I’m Captain Calabran*, I tell myself. *She is a mermaid*. Unfortunately, a large part of my heart is no longer acting. I drag my fingers down Summer’s neck, across her shoulder, and slowly down her arm. On cue, Summer lifts her hand and cups my jaw. Her face tilts up in the expectant way a woman shows she is waiting for a man to make his move. I study her.

This is our first kiss. If I have anything to say about it, it won’t be our last.

SUMMER

The first kiss can be as terrifying as the last.

~ Daina Chaviano, The Island of Eternal Love

Ben's face moves toward mine and I draw on every acting class I've ever taken, and every ounce of my aspiration to become an accomplished and well-known actress. I am Kailani, the mermaid. And he is Captain Calabran, not Ben, the man who has been carving away at the marble around my heart, gaining access with each pass of his kindness, effortless humor and patience.

"I'm going to kiss you, Kailani," Ben says in the softest whisper.

I nod so slightly my head barely moves. And I tilt up even more, making his job easy.

Yes, please.

Please kiss me, Ben.

My hand cups his jaw, stubble scraping lightly on the tender skin of my palm when he shifts. His head comes closer, and his lips—oh, those lips—they land on mine with a softness that makes me want to scream. He lingers. Our kiss takes on a life of its own, and I lean into Ben, wanting more of him. Opening to him. A warm hum buzzes through me. I'm lightheaded. I run my hand up his jaw, passing my fingers through the waves of hair above his ear and dragging my nails

lightly down his neck until my hand lands on his shoulder and fists his shirt, holding him in place—holding him to me.

“Cut!” James calls out. “Summer, that last movement is not in the script. It worked, but it’s not in the current blocking.”

I step back from Ben. Dazed, but aware. Reeling, but wanting more.

James pauses, furrowing his brow and looking upward. “Let me think about it. I’m all for improv when it enhances the intent of a scene, but I need to be sure this fits their story and motivation at this point in the play. This is their first kiss, after all. And Kailani is torn between her family expectations, the perceived danger Calabran poses to her, and the unexpected desires of her own heart. Give me a night to sleep on this.”

I nod numbly, resisting the urge to bring my fingers to my lips—or worse—Ben’s.

Ben is quiet. He’s not aloof, but he’s not his usual vivacious self.

I’d give up chocolate to know what he’s thinking right now.

“Okay. Sounds good,” I finally say. “I didn’t mean to go off script.”

What is wrong with me? My goal is to make this play a stepping stone. Kissing Ben like he matters, like I can just freely kiss him without recourse, like he’d kiss me and it would matter to him? I can’t.

“Sorry, James. That was all me. Rookie move,” Ben says.

How was it all him, aside from the fact that his kiss would convince a nun to shun her vows, or a contestant on *Survivor* to jump into a vat of bees? Not that nuns go around kissing men they aren’t dating—or any men, for that matter. Gah.

That kiss.

Maybe I’m exaggerating how life-shattering our kiss felt because I haven’t been kissed in so long.

Who am I kidding?

It was him. All Ben.

He kissed me—*me*, not Kailani. And it was *him* doing the kissing, not Captain Mack Calabran.

“Well, you two have some work to do. I want you to practice this kissing scene—especially the actual kiss. We need to get this down to a science. I want you to be able to run through this scene in your sleep. We can’t have you bumping into one another, or moving awkwardly during the show. You need to know what positions come first, second, third ... who moves when ... where your hands should be, how to tilt your heads, what to expect. It needs to be second nature.”

Unfortunately, I’m probably going to be running through that kiss in my sleep, and all my waking hours too. And he wants me to know what to expect? Wouldn’t that be lovely? I have no idea what to expect—from Ben, from life, even, apparently, from myself.

“We’ll go through this scene again tomorrow.” James lifts his messenger bag off the corner seat in the front row, opening it to place the script neatly inside. “I’ll call practice early again so you two can stay after. By then I’ll know if the addition of raking fingers through Ben’s hair works or not. Meanwhile, if you don’t have plans, I suggest you run through this together this evening. Go find somewhere comfortable and kiss until you feel like you’re on *Dancing with the Stars*—only, *Kissing with the Stars*.” James chuckles lightly.

“Gladly,” Ben says, seeming back to his usual impish self. He looks at James, not me. “We want to perfect this, after all.”

Ben winks at me as if this is all fine and dandy, as if we’re kissing buddies who just stand around kissing one another all day and night long without feeling steamrolled by feelings and thoughts about what this could mean beyond the stage.

“Want to practice at my place or yours?”

“Uh.”

Great. He’s rendered me speechless.

When I don’t answer, Ben says, “Cam and Riley are going out for dinner. Why don’t you come to my place? That way

you can leave when you want, and you won't have to worry about kicking me out of your place.”

Am I really going to Ben's place to practice kissing?

“Or, we could practice on the beach?” He offers. “I just figured you would want privacy.”

“Yeah ... Um. Yes. ... Sure. Your place is fine. I need to eat, though. I'll meet you after I get food.”

“No need. I'll feed you.”

“You'll ... feed me?”

“I'll make you a meal. I can cook, you know. Most hot guys can't. They rely on their looks alone. But what can I say? I'm an exception.” Ben laughs like he doesn't have a care in the world.

“You cook?”

“I cook, Monroe. Asian, Italian, American, Mexican. Pick your fave. Not so much desert-nomadic African tribal cuisine, so keep it real, but yeah. I can cook.”

“Do you have to call me Monroe?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I thought we went over that. Besides, you love it. You don't act like you love it, but I'm getting to know you. I know how to peek behind that initial reaction you give me to see what you're really thinking and wanting. And, like I told you, I'm a patient man who is pursuing the heck out of a friendship with you.”

There's so much to unpack in Ben's declaration, it would take me longer than unloading a suitcase after a two-week trip. I'm searching for a response to give him, but I'm feeling like someone spun me in a circle. I'm trying to find my equilibrium—and failing.

James shouts from the top of the amphitheater. “You did great, you two. The chemistry between you is magic. I called it. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, James!” Ben shouts with a puppy-dog grin.

“Thanks, James!” I respond like an actor who knows the type of respect a director expects from his actors.

“So, what’ll it be?” Ben asks.

“What ingredients do you have at your house?” I can’t believe I’m even considering letting Ben cook me dinner.

“I have whatever you want.” Ben wags his eyebrows and his eyes go soft and crinkle with his smile.

“I’m sure you think you do.”

“I know I do. And I think you know it too.”

“Tacos?”

“Tacos. Yes!” He fist pumps. “You are going to be so glad you asked for tacos. I’ve got homemade salsa and I’ll just swing by the market to get fresh cilantro and strip steak on my way home. Be there at six?” Before I can answer, Ben adds, “And don’t tell me you are one of those freaks who thinks cilantro tastes like soap. It’s the capstone to my tacos. You’ll break my heart, Summer.”

“Far be it from me to break your heart.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize the way they sound.

Ben smiles big. “I knew I could count on you to be good to me. It’s just a matter of time.”

If he only knew. I probably will break his heart if I keep toying with him. Not that I want to toy with him. I don’t even know what I want. Him? Maybe. But I can’t. And I shouldn’t.

“Okay, be ready to be wowed.” Ben turns to walk off stage, but then he places his hand on my lower back and moves me so I’m walking offstage ahead of him.

I’ve got a golf cart. He rode his bike over.

“Want to put your bike on the rack and hitch a ride?”

“For old times’ sake? Sure.”

I almost ask what he means, and then I realize he’s referring to the morning I found him at Dead Man’s. That morning changed everything.

We drive into town and I offer to stop at the market. Ben runs in to grab meat and cilantro. I drop Ben at his house and sit in the driver's seat while Ben pulls his bike off the rack on the back of the golf cart.

I should drive away. I haven't turned the key yet. I watch Ben park his bike. When Ben turns around, he definitely catches me checking him out, or at least he knows I was staring. I have to get it together around this man.

Ben says, "You could just come in and watch me cook. Then we can eat and practice."

His face looks so expectant. The golden hour is setting in, shedding a deceptively safe and welcoming ambiance on everything. Not that Marbella isn't safe. It is. Ben ... I'm not so sure. Even though he's obviously not the player I thought he was, I don't know if I can trust myself to keep my heart safe around him.

"I might as well."

If Ben's thinking something snarky, he does a good job keeping it to himself. He just smiles warmly at me, which is worse somehow. He leads the way up the stairs and opens his apartment, which, as he predicted, is empty.

We're alone in his space. I already felt off kilter ever since his lips touched mine over an hour ago.

Ben walks into the kitchen, sets down his grocery bag and pulls out his phone. A moment later a Shawn Mendes song comes through the bluetooth speaker on his counter. It's one of my favorites—and then Ben starts singing along. He looks like that, has charm to spare, and he can sing. His voice is soft and sultry, matching Shawn's but with a different tone to it.

Señorita. He glances at me on the word.

Ben moves through the kitchen, singing and taking things out of the fridge and placing them on the counter, grabbing a skillet, a knife, and a cutting board. I didn't know how sexy it could be to watch a man cook.

We had chefs in our house. Events were catered. I learned how to cook in culinary classes, and Chancy taught me a few

simple Indian dishes, but I don't think I have more than ten recipes in my entire repertoire. And most of what I learned, well, let's just say, it's a good thing we had chefs.

I've never been inside a man's home before. Let alone watched him prepare a meal.

"Take a seat, Summer. Can I get you something to drink? Do you want to snoop around? Or would you like to relax in the living room? You could help me cook ... I just want your shoulders to drop about an inch and for you to breathe. What's that going to take?"

I don't know when it happened that Ben started taking over and leading in our relationship. I definitely held the reins and the key for the bulk of our early weeks. He was on a tight lead and he was effectively locked out of my heart.

Maybe the accident softened me? Maybe running lines together? Maybe it was every little thing Ben's done to contradict my preconceived notions about him.

All I know now is that Ben is making me feel safer than I've felt in months—cared for, maybe even protected. Definitely wanted. And he's making me feel like it's me he wants, not just what I look like, not just another attractive blond. I think Ben wants me.

And, maybe, despite the complications and all the reasons this is a bad idea, I want him too.

"I'll get us drinks. What do you want?" I move into the kitchen—into his space.

"There's lemonade in the fridge. I think lemon or lime goes best with tacos, but let's get real. What doesn't go with tacos?"

He's so at ease. A man in his own place. I lift my shoulders the slightest bit and let them drop, breathing out while I step toward the refrigerator. He wants me to relax. I want to try.

While I pour the lemonade into glasses, Ben chops vegetables and seasons and sautees the meat. He warms tortillas on a griddle that sits on the back burner of his stove.

Songs fill the kitchen: Taylor Swift, more Shawn Mendes, Ed Sheeran, and then some country tunes. They're not too twangy, and they remind me of home.

Ben lays out the taco fillings across the counter. "Let's do this the easy way. We can each fill our own taco shells with whatever we want. I know you like control, Monroe."

He bumps my hip playfully and hands me a plate from the cabinet, his arm muscles flex when he reaches up. I watch, and he catches me again, but has the good sense not to call me out.

"The easy way?" I answer. "Now, you know I don't do much the easy way."

"Well, easy's highly overrated anyway. I'm discovering I like a woman who makes me work for it."

"Is that right?"

Whewee. We are seriously flirting. And I'm not stopping him. Maybe just for tonight this apartment can be a bubble. I can shut out my family, my past, my ambitions, and my future. I can simply be here—a young woman having tacos with a hot surfer who just cooked for her. I hear Marissa's voice in my head: *You'd better, mija. Enjoy the heck out of that hot surfer.* I giggle.

"What's funny?" Ben asks, coming up beside me at the counter where bowls and plates are spread out with asada meat, grilled onions and peppers, cheese, olives, guacamole, shredded lettuce, chopped onions, cilantro and salsa.

"I just thought of something Marissa said."

I look up at Ben. His arm brushes mine. Here we are, side by side, not even an inch between us.

There are distances usually kept between a man and a woman. Strangers should stay at least two feet away, preferably three. Friends can move in closer. But the distance between Ben and me right now, it's not friendly. There's barely any distance at all. And, if I'm being honest, I would like to skip tacos and eliminate that distance once and for all.

I turn and grab two warm corn tortillas and begin filling them. Ben follows close behind me.

“Let’s eat on the balcony.” Ben leads the way, carrying our drinks in one of his hands and balancing his plate in the other. I slide open the glass door and he steps through it.

We take up opposite sides of a bistro table on the small second-story patio. Ben’s knee bumps mine. I glance up at him. He’s staring at me. His plate sits in front of him untouched. He props his elbow on the table and sets his chin in his hand. He’s so relaxed, and I feel wound tight.

“Don’t stare at me like that. I can’t eat while you watch me like my dog.”

“Your dog?”

I look out at the ocean, the sun going down on the horizon. “I had a dog growing up. We weren’t allowed to feed him. He’d look at me like that, and I’d save him scraps.”

“Smart dog.” Ben pauses. “I hope you save me some scraps too.”

“Stop saying things like that.”

“Like what? And, by the way, I’m not eating until you do. I want to see what you think.”

“Oh.” I’m grateful for the distraction from this overwhelming feeling of Ben. He’s so close. Not just his knee—him.

I lift a taco to my mouth and take a bite. It’s good. Really good.

“Mmmm. Delicious.”

I lick my lip to make sure I don’t have anything on it. Ben tracks the movement and the air grows heavy between us.

“Really? You like my tacos?”

“Would I pretend to like something I didn’t?”

He chuckles. “Not even close. You don’t even pretend to like what you do like.”

Then he laughs so freely, ending his outburst with a wink.

I'll take all his winks. They feel like they are mine. He's got them practiced, perfected. I had thought that meant they were cheap—freebies he threw out to anyone. Right now, they feel priceless, and all for me.

We finish our meal, talking and sitting quietly as the sun dips low across the ocean. The longer we spend together, the more relaxed I feel. Ben stands and offers his hand to take my plate with his into the kitchen. I pick up the glasses and follow him.

When everything's rinsed and settled into the dishwasher, he turns to me. We're standing in his kitchen. A low light fills the room with a yellow glow. A lamp is on in the living room.

Ben reaches up and brushes a hair away from my face—the same move he's supposed to make in the play. “Ready to practice kissing me, Monroe?”

BEN

The more I practice, the luckier I get.

~ Gary Player

Summer looks over at me from across the kitchen. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute, Monroe. You know what they say about practice?”

“It makes perfect?”

I’m about a foot away from her now. She’s looking up at me, but her body language is tense, nervous and hesitant. She had relaxed over the course of dinner, but once we came inside and she knew we were about to kiss, she went rigid.

I’ve never been one to force someone to want me. I’ve never had to. But it goes against everything in me to push something with a woman, even a fake kiss for a play. Don’t get me wrong, Summer and I will be kissing tonight, but not until Summer is the one asking me to kiss her.

Then I’ll kiss her. You know I will.

And I can say with almost one hundred percent certainty, she’ll have no regrets.

I’m learning to read Summer’s signals. They’re more mixed than a broken stoplight, but I’m getting to know her, and if I’m right, she wants to take a risk with me.

The way she kissed me on stage told me everything I had suspected and couldn't confirm. If she had been merely acting, she would have followed the script, not run her hand along my jaw, through my hair and down my neck. I can still feel the light scrape of her nails on my skin, and the way she fisted my shirt. I can't shake the sensation of her lips on mine—the way the kiss escalated into something that had nothing to do with the play, because neither of us was acting anymore.

Summer wants me—and she's fighting that want with everything in her.

I step closer to Summer, leaning into her space, only because I know from all the cues she's given me every time I've spoken into her ear that she likes me crowding her. I'd venture to say she likes it as much as I do.

My voice is low and private, but since we're alone in my house and I don't want to run Summer off, I back away as soon as I say, "Perfect practice makes perfect."

And I plan to perfect what's brewing between us.

I could send James a singing telegram to thank him for saying we need to practice our kissing.

Acting. Who knew?

"You're not ready," I tell her.

"What? I am so. Let's do this." Summer pops her hands onto her hips.

"Monroe, I may be a giant goofball half the time. And you may think I'm oblivious or a pain in your tush. But I know when a woman is ready to kiss me. And you, my beautiful co-star, are not. Now, let's go play some checkers."

"Let's what?"

"Play checkers."

"Why would we play checkers when we need to kiss?"

I reach out and brush an invisible piece of hair off Summer's face. It's the move I'll make in the play. She needs to get used to it, but also, I can't help myself. She's beautiful,

challenging, and a mystery. And we kissed only a few hours ago. I might be acting calm and self-controlled. And, I definitely have a plan. But another part of me is privately coming apart at the seams right now.

“We’ll play checkers because we *need* to kiss. And we’re going to wait until you *want* to kiss.”

“I want to kiss.”

If you could see this spitfire of a woman, standing in my kitchen, hands propped on both hips, elbows out to the sides of her, staring up at me with a look of challenge in her eyes, you’d smile like I’m smiling right now.

“You want to kiss me?”

“I do. So ... kiss me.”

“For the play?”

“Of course, for the play.”

“Mm hmm. Of course.”

I run my hand down her cheek again. She might shiver lightly.

I hear you, Summer. I feel that too.

I let my hand slowly drag down her neck. Summer’s eyes lock onto mine. I drag my fingertips over her shoulder. Her eyes flutter shut for the briefest moment. When she opens them, they’re soft and inviting. All the tension has melted away. The blue of her irises is deeper than usual—like the ocean at sunset. I trail my fingers down her arm. The second my hand falls away from her, it feels like I’m missing something vital.

This is the point in the play where Summer should tilt her head up toward me and cup my face.

When she does, I know I’m getting a green light, so I move toward her slowly, holding her gaze until I have to close my eyes. And then our mouths connect. We kiss. And I should pull back. If we were merely kissing for the sake of the play, I would. But I don’t. And Summer doesn’t either. So I lift my

hand and run it down her hair—so soft. I cup Summer’s face in my hand. She lifts her arms and wraps them around me. Our kiss is like a freight train careening down a sloped track. I don’t think either of us is looking to engage the brakes. We’re here for the ride.

Summer may fight me—fight herself—when we’re talking, or even any time we’re in the same room. But when we kiss, she drops all her walls and tells me everything through the way she responds to me, the way she leans in, the way she holds on. I answer her with my lips, my touches, my unspoken thoughts.

I’m here, Monroe.

I’ll wait for you to be brave.

You’re like no one I’ve ever met.

I want to know everything about you.

I want to be known by you.

Summer slows things down, only pulling back a hair’s breadth before her mouth is back on mine, kissing the corners gently, letting her lips softly land on my cheek, and then brushing across my waiting mouth.

I’ve never been kissed like this. Summer’s the version of herself she showed me at Dead Man’s, unguarded, sweet, caring. I lace my fingers through her hair, holding her in place while I return her tender kisses, softly moving my mouth with hers, losing myself in how it feels to be held by her, connected, exploring.

I barely hear the noise of the door knob turning. Both Summer and I definitely hear the loud gasps coming from Cam and Riley when they walk in, catching us making out in the kitchen.

Summer jumps backward as if she’s been electrocuted, smoothing her hands down her hair, then her shirt and pants. She’s looking everywhere but at me, Cam or Riley.

“What do we have here?” Cam says in a teasing tone.

I shoot him a warning glance. He may not realize how skittish Summer can be. She doesn't really come across as someone who needs to be handled with kid gloves.

Riley's not any more subtle. "Were you guys ... ?"

"Kissing," Summer says plainly. "Yeah. We have to practice for the play."

"That's going to be some play," Cam says.

I'm definitely putting Bengay cream in his boxers. Or itching powder in his sheets. Maybe I'll loosen the top of the mustard for the next time he goes to make a sandwich.

Summer's wearing a mask of firm resolve. The vulnerable woman who had been kissing me only moments ago has retreated, and this powerful, impenetrable persona is standing guard in her place.

I don't know why I didn't see it before. This strong version of Summer needs more protection than the other, softer side. She feigns strength to protect herself when she feels the weakest.

I turn, nearly blocking Summer from Cam and Riley with my presence. Then, I make eye contact with Cam.

"We're practicing for our play. Could you two ... ?"

I don't even have to finish my sentence. Riley's eyes meet mine.

She places her flat palm on Cam's chest. Then she looks up at Cam. "Let's take a walk on the beach. The night is beautiful and I haven't had enough time alone with you this week."

She bats her eyelashes at him. Not like she needs to. He's so head-over-heels for her she could ask him to wade through the kiddie pool in an inflatable T-Rex suit singing the theme song from Barney and he would.

"Okay," Cam says with a smile toward Riley.

"Sorry to barge in on your *practice*." He emphasizes the word.

“Bengay,” I mutter under my breath. “I’m so buying Bengay.”

Summer chuckles. “Ben what?”

The door shuts behind Riley and Cam and their voices drift off as they make their way down the stairs.

“Not Ben. Bengay. It’s a cream for old people. It stinks and it has some stuff in it that makes it burn. Nothing too bad. Just enough to get my point across.”

Summer blushes. “So ...”

“Come over here.”

I don’t let her finish her sentence. She might be trying to backpedal out of what we both know that kiss was. It wasn’t play practice. That’s for sure.

“What do you want me to do, Captain Calabran?” She’s teasing, the defensive edge having walked right out the door with my ex-best friend and his amazing girlfriend.

I affect a piratey tone to my voice. “Why, Kailani, if I told ye, I’d have to lash you to the mainsail and then make ye swab the deck.”

Summer laughs again. “Please, no! Not swabbing the deck.”

In my normal voice, I say, “We probably ought to practice—seriously. None of this going off script ... as fun as that was.”

Summer blushes again. I reach out and place my hand on her arm, and in the bravest moment of my life, I say, “I really like you, Summer.”

I’ve got more to say, but before I can, she asks, “Why?”

“Why do I like you?”

“Yeah. I mean, I haven’t given you a lot of reasons to like me.”

“Smoke and mirrors, Monroe. That was all smoke and mirrors. But you gave yourself away. I saw behind all that,

even before you rescued me. But especially after that.”

She smiles at me. It’s a prize for my patience. I’ve run the labyrinth, navigating the maze past dead ends and obstacles. Now she’s smiling at me like we’re standing together in the inner chamber. So few people make it here with her—and I’m one of them—finally.

I had planned to pursue a friendship with her. That’s not going to be enough for me. Not by a longshot.

Summer and I spend the next half hour or so running through the kiss in a far more sterile and clinical manner. Don’t get me wrong, I’m loving every minute of it. I’m still kissing her. But we’re talking through the kiss. “Put your hand here ... Always make sure your fingers touch me here ... Tilt your head to the right each time.” James was right. This is like dancing with the stars, only much, much more fun.

Every so often, I tilt my head the wrong way, or I pull her close so our kiss goes from professional to playful—even passionate. She indulges me, or corrects me, depending on her mood.

When Cam and Riley come home, they ask if we want to watch a movie. I hold my breath while Summer decides whether she’ll stay. When she does, I take a spot on the couch, patting the cushion next to me. And then, like a teen on his first date, throughout the course of the film, I inch my arm up over the back of the sofa until it’s draped across her shoulder. She doesn’t shrug me off.

I don’t know what we’re doing. But I’m going to take every inch she gives me until I’ve gained entrance to every mile.

When the movie ends, Cam walks Riley to the door and down to the street below our apartment. I stand from the couch and walk Summer outside and down the stairs too. We can barely make out the shadowy figures of Cam kissing Riley goodnight a short distance away from us.

“Come ‘ere and gimme a smooch, Monroe,” I tease.

“Dream on, Captain.”

“Oh, I will. You’re all I’m going to be dreaming about. That’s guaranteed.”

Summer leans in and gives me an unexpected hug. I wrap my arms around her and hold her, tucking her head under my chin.

“Thank you, Ben.” Her voice is soft, muffled into my chest.

“For what?”

“For giving me space to figure myself out. And for not being what I thought you were.”

I squeeze her tighter to myself, hoping she won’t shut me out after we’ve come this far.

SUMMER

*Dating can make
even the most confident person lose his cool.*

~ Kelly Starling

“**T**hat’s a wrap!” James shouts from his spot in the front corner seat of the amphitheater. “Tomorrow, I’m going to the mainland to visit a friend. No rehearsal. But you all better practice your lines anyway. I’ll be expecting us to be ready to run through the entire play within a week, sans scripts.”

James turns and says something to our assistant director, Dan. The cast scatters, preparing to go to whatever’s next in their day.

“Hey, Summer. Wait up!” Ben shouts from across the stage where he’s talking with a few other guys who play pirates.

A few heads turn. Subtle, the man is not.

It’s been four days since the night we practiced at his house—since he cooked me dinner, sang in his kitchen, kissed me like he meant it, and held me in his arms before sending me off to face the curiosity of my roommate.

I told Riley I don’t know what Ben and I are doing, what we are to one another, or what’s going to happen. I’d make a horrible A & E reporter. *Rumors have it that aspiring actress Summer Monroe kissed her co-star, Ben Hayes several times*

and can't get him or his kisses off her mind. Will this develop into more? Is this serious? Can you see a future developing between them? We have no idea. Tune in—well, never—for details. Back to you, Joe.

Ben has had to work every day since our night at his place, and my schedule conflicted with his, so we've only been seeing each other at practices. Maybe that's for the best until I figure out what I have to offer him—and more importantly, what I don't.

Do I want more of Ben? Um. Yes. That would be one hundred percent yes.

And, as crazy as this sounds, he wants me. He's been charming me from the first moment we met. I assumed that meant he was like the other charmers I know—especially my dad. The weasel. The underbelly of a weasel. The underbelly of a weasel rolling in compost and carrying rabies.

Despite all my misconceptions, Ben has done what he said he would. He pursued me with an unexpected intensity and patience, even when I pushed him away.

And then we kissed.

Now the idea of only being friends is out the window, down the street, and heading on a boat to China.

He's jogging across the stage toward me, oblivious to the eyes on him. The female members of the cast are like all other women around Ben. He's dragging their attention to himself like a street sweeper scoops up trash.

And his eyes are fixed on me as if I'm all that matters.

That smile is for me alone.

He's breathing just a little faster when he reaches me. "Were you trying to leave before you said goodbye to me?"

He has every reason to think I would.

"No. I wasn't—not at all."

He beams down at me. "Good. That's really good. So, I was thinking, I'd like to take you out tomorrow—like for the

whole day. We don't have rehearsal. I know you don't work. I don't have work. Let's spend the day together."

He's so open with his thoughts and emotions. So earnest and expectant. I can't help but compare him to a puppy, sitting in front of me, tongue lolling to the side, tail swishing on the floor, hoping against hope he'll get a treat. Only Ben's not begging for just one treat, he wants the whole box. An entire day together.

"You're really easing into this, aren't you?"

He looks down at me with smiling eyes. "Monroe, I never promised to go slowly. I promised to be in hot pursuit of you. So, is it a yes?"

"You promised to be in hot pursuit of a friendship with me."

I don't know why I'm belaboring the point. I don't want friendship. He doesn't want friendship. I should scream, "YES!" at the top of my lungs. I guess hard-earned wariness doesn't die off as easily as I wish it would. *What if Ben changes his mind about me after a whole day together? What if half my appeal is just the thrill of the chase? What if my past catches up with me and this beautiful, amazing, kindhearted man ends up caught in the crossfire?*

"It's a yes."

The words are barely out of my mouth before Ben scoops me up, holding me by the waist, forcing me to throw my arms around his neck for safety and stability while he spins me on stage. I catch the smile on James' face when Ben sets me back down.

"Awesome. This is awesome. I've got plans in mind for the whole day. I'll pick you up at ... nine? Is that too late? Too early?"

He's practically vibrating with excitement. It makes me smile, so I do. I give him a smile and he leans in and kisses my cheek, totally seeming to forget that half the cast is still in the theater, and a good number of them are watching Ben gush all over me.

I should care—should make him back down, slow down, calm down. All the downs. Down, boy. But I can't bring myself to say anything to quell Ben's excitement. I had no idea what it would feel like to have all that charisma and desire laser focused on me. It's like nothing I've ever felt before.

"Nine works."

"Thanks, Monroe."

"For what?"

"For giving me a chance. I know how hard you fought this. I give you props for that. And I'm so glad you are taking off the gloves for now."

"I still have gloves."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you. Don't go willingly. It would ruin everything. You have to fight me, I get it. I'll win. Don't worry. But you'll know you fought."

Why does he say things like that?

We walk toward the edge of the stage together.

"And besides," Ben adds. "When I win your heart, we'll both win. There are no losers here, Monroe. It's just up to you how long you make me work for it."

I shake my head, not daring to look him in the eyes. He sees through me like no one besides Chancy ever did. And he's still here, relentlessly pursuing me. I think he may actually know me. *Not everything*, a cruel voice reminds me. I answer myself. *He knows the most important things.*

We part ways, Ben going to work to run a night cruise on a glass-bottom boat, and me heading back to my temporary home in Phyllis' bungalow. Cameron has to work at a reception for the Meet-the-Author event at the resort, so Riley and I will be home alone together. I'm slowly, but surely, converting her into a classic movie fan. Tonight I think we'll watch *Casablanca*. It's got such a bittersweet ending, but it's still one of my favorite love stories of all time.

The next morning, I wake before the sun. My head snaps off the pillow and I flop back down, pulling the covers up

around my chin, but completely unable to settle my racing thoughts—and heart.

The chill morning air keeps me nestled in bed longer than usual. That and the fact that it's dark enough to be the middle of the night. I finally give up and throw back the covers, heading straight for a warm shower. Once I'm dressed and in the kitchen, I debate whether it's a good idea to have coffee. Don't get me wrong, coffee is nearly always a good idea to me. But I'm so naturally wired right now, it may turn me into a jittery mess.

I decide on a cup of tea, keeping only the soft light over the stove on so as not to wake Riley. Just as my water comes to a boil, Riley pads into the kitchen, fully dressed, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, socks on her feet.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.”

“You didn't. I'm a barista, remember? I have to be up before the pre-caffeinated masses descend upon C-Side. I'm not opening today, but I still have to be there by seven. What has you up so early?”

I had neatly avoided the topic of Ben last night, but I don't want to evade Riley now that she's asking a direct question.

“I've got a date with Ben.”

“Hmmm. A breakfast date?”

“An all-day date.” I turn to pour the water over my teabag, grateful for something to do that keeps me from watching Riley's thoughts splash across her face.

“Alllllll daayyy?” Riley lets out a low whistle.

“Yep.”

“I think that's awesome. So. Is this a friend date, or ... ?”

“It's ... an *or*. And I still don't know what that is. He asked me after rehearsal yesterday. He's like a giant puppy. How do you say no to all that?”

“Well, you've done a good job so far. I'm glad you're giving him a chance. He's a really good guy.”

“I think I’m starting to see him for what he is. He’s super sweet. And persistent. I’ll give him that much.”

“He really likes you.”

“I know. I don’t get it. I made it so hard on him.”

“You must have had your reasons.”

Riley walks over to the fridge, opens it, looks inside and shuts it. “I have to get groceries soon. Sorry. I know it’s my turn. Cam had some time off yesterday afternoon since he had a late lunch after the opening of the Meet-the-Author thing, and he had to go back for the reception. I’ll go this afternoon.”

“I’m good. You know me. I’m pretty much the pre-cooked, easy meal kind of girl. I make a mean baked potato, though.”

“Good thing I love baked potatoes.” Riley laughs. “I’d better run. Have a good day with Ben.”

“Thanks.”

Riley grabs her shoes from near the door and slips them on. Then she turns back to look me straight in the eyes. “Try to enjoy yourself, Summer. These early days of dating don’t last forever. Future you will thank the you of today if you just let go a little and enjoy the time you have with Ben while he’s all smitten and head-over-heels for you.”

She opens the door and walks out without another word, leaving me spinning in her wake.

Is Ben smitten?

Are we dating?

If I spend too much time thinking about Ben and me and all the unknowns between us, I’ll chicken out and cancel our date.

I wash my tea cup after drinking two cups worth of Harney’s Hot Cinnamon on the front porch for over an hour after Riley left. I borrowed a cozy mystery from her earlier this week, so that helped me pass the time. I do love a porch. Maybe it’s the southern girl in me. There’s something about a porch that says, “Sit a spell.” My head has slowed to

something short of mach speed by the time I set my cup in the drying rack. It's nearly eight-thirty. Only a half hour left until Ben shows up. If I wouldn't come across as desperate, I'd call him to ask him to show up early. The wait is killing me.

And, when did I become this woman—the one who waits on pins and needles for Ben?

I take my time getting dressed, putting on a pair of tan jean shorts and a navy graphic T-shirt, then switching the shirt out for a ruffled tank top with a blue jean jacket, then switching again for a different shirt that's white and gauzy. I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror, putting on my makeup, finishing with lip gloss that I hope will get kissed off before the morning's out.

The knock at the door sends my heart rate skyrocketing. I shake out my hands and walk over, taking one last breath before opening. And, there he is, wearing aviators, a white T-shirt with a surf logo on it and cargo shorts. He doesn't even try to hide the way he looks me over from head to toe.

“Well now, Monroe. You put some effort into this. I have to say, I'm a fan.”

“Every actress needs fans.”

“I'm a fan of the woman and the actress.”

I hadn't noticed Ben had one of his hands tucked behind his back. He pulls out a spray of wildflowers.

“Tell me you're not allergic. I got these because they remind me of you, a little wild and a lot of beautiful.”

“I'm not allergic.”

And it's too early, with too little coffee in my bloodstream, for a man like him to be saying sweet things like that to me. I almost say, *Tell me you're real.*

Who is this man? And how did I misjudge him so completely?

“Let's get those in some water and then we'll get you a latte.”

Ben steps into my space like he's been here a million times before. He slides his sunglasses on top of his head on his way into the kitchen, opening cabinets until he finds a mason jar which he fills with water. He makes a beckoning motion with his hand. I give the flowers back to him. He leans in and kisses my temple, then plops the bouquet into the jar. They splay out, making the kitchen feel instantly more homey and cheerful.

"Mmm. You smell nice." He closes his eyes. "Did you shower too?"

He looks at me with an impish smile on his face.

I smack his arm. "Of course I didn't shower. What do you think this is, a date?"

He laughs and then spontaneously pulls me in for a hug. His strong arms encircle me when I lean in and rest my head on his chest. It's a very not-first-date move, it's actually kind of boyfriendly-girlfriendly. And I like it way too much.

Ben burrows his face in my hair and makes a show of inhaling deeply. "Nope, you showered. You smell like vanilla and flowers."

"Stop it, you kook." I push off Ben's chest, unable to hide my smile. "And, it's lavender."

"I'm hooked."

I might be too.

"Have you had coffee?" Ben leans back on my counter next to the bouquet of wildflowers, his arms crossed over his chest. Does he know that does an amazing job of popping both his pecs and his biceps? I'm guessing he does. I'm also not filing a complaint. Nope. That display has my full approval.

"I have not. I had two cups of tea while I sat on the porch reading."

"Whatcha reading?"

"A cozy mystery Riley loaned me."

"I thought you were going to say a romance. In which case, I was going to have to read it to you."

“You most definitely were not going to read me a romance novel.”

“I’m amazing at it. I read one to Madeline and Riley on our trip out here. I made that stuff come alive.”

Ben winks. Then he pushes off my counter.

“I bet you did.” I laugh.

“It was just the right amount of sexy mixed with ridiculous.”

That sums him up. And who knew that would be my favorite flavor?

“Let’s get this show on the road, Monroe. I’ve got a big day planned for you.”

He looks me over again. “And you might want something to keep you warm on the water.”

“On the water? Are you taking me boating?”

“Do you like surprises?”

“Wait here,” I tell Ben, holding my finger up as if it’s a stop sign and he has to obey me.

He seems like the type of man who would follow me right into my bedroom, chatting all the way, oblivious as to how many lines he was crossing in the process. Ben does not need to see my discarded outfits strewn across my bed—evidence of how much effort I put into getting ready for him today.

“I like surprises ... a little. Good ones,” I shout out from my room. “I think I’d like a surprise from you.”

It’s a confession. I’ve been surprised in the worst of ways this year. But from Ben? I’d like a surprise. It would feel like something he curated and poured himself into for me. I think I’d like that.

“Well then,” Ben shouts from the living room. But then his voice is nearer and when I look over, he’s leaning against the doorframe of my bedroom, scanning the room, taking everything, including me, into consideration. “I won’t tell you my plans. Just bring a jacket.”

“I said to wait out there.”

“I’m not very good at following directions.” He’s got that boyish look on his face, the one that irritated me when I first met him.

I grab a hoodie out of my closet. It’s not fancy, but it’s warm. Nothing about this hoodie says *impress this guy by looking my best*.

Ben waits for me to pass by him, and then he follows me out of the house, putting his hand on my shoulder and guiding me to the golf cart he’s got waiting out front.

When he takes his seat in the driver’s side of the cart, he says, “Last night, I slept like a boy waiting to open his Christmas presents, Monroe. You’ve got me in knots hoping this date goes well.” He shakes his head and turns the key in the ignition.

BEN

*The perfect date is the one where
anything and everything goes wrong,
but at the end of it, all you want is to see them again.*

~ Dylan O'Brien

First stop on this day I planned for Summer is C-Side. She's smiling over at me when we park the golf cart I borrowed from the resort. Clarissa and Riley are behind the bar when we walk in. Summer takes her seat on one of the high stools and I sit next to her. I can barely take my eyes off her, but I manage when Clarissa walks over to us.

"What can I get you two?"

Clarissa's eyes are full of questions. Summer and I haven't been out and about together, so we may face our fair share of inquisitive looks today. Island living shares a lot of similarities with a small town in that way. I'm used to everyone knowing my business. Growing up, that meant my most embarrassing moments were fodder for all the chatter at the local coffee shop and hair salon.

Marbella might be an island, but it's a small town at its heart. The only difference is the constant stream of tourists landing here, acting like they own the place, and then taking off to go back wherever they came from. The lines are strong between islanders and tourists. They're our guests and our bread and butter, but they aren't locals. Resort employees land

somewhere in the middle of all that. We didn't grow up here, but we live here now. We're one step more welcome than tourists until we've stayed on for a while.

I look over at Summer, encouraging her to make her order first.

"I'll have the usual."

"One iced white chocolate mocha with salted caramel cold foam," Clarissa says.

"Make it hot today, would you? So, I guess skip the cold foam."

"How about I add salted caramel to your foamed milk?" Clarissa offers.

Summer smiles.

"I'll have the same," I tell Clarissa.

Clarissa gets to work, filling the portafilter basket with grounds to make the espresso. She pushes a button, and then her brow furrows. "No. Oh, no!" She pushes the button again, removes the filter, places it in again, and checks a few knobs.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Gimme a minute."

Riley walks away from the register where she was cashing out a customer and stands next to Clarissa.

"What's up?"

Clarissa looks at Riley. "The machine's giving me issues."

They fiddle with the machine while Summer and I sit, waiting for the verdict—and our lattes.

I turn to Summer in the meantime. "So, I want to know everything about you. Is that ... overwhelming? Too much? I can try to tone it down. Though, toning it down isn't really my strong suit ... as you probably noticed."

I'm rambling a bit, but it's more from excitement than nerves. Don't get me wrong. I'm nervous. But alongside my nerves there's this sweet calmness. I'm no longer trying to

convince Summer to give me a chance. She's giving it. She's willingly here with me. She's even agreed to a whole day together.

Summer giggles. "I'm not sure I want you to tone it down. I don't think that would really be on brand for you."

"Definitely not." I pause. "Though, I can be serious. I could spend a whole evening kicking back on a dock, with you seated between my legs, leaning back into me, both of us staring out at the ocean while the sun dips down past the horizon, and I'd never say a word. I'm chill like that."

"So chill." She laughs again. "You're the poster child for chill."

"I know, right?"

"And you've done a lot of thinking about things you could do with me, haven't you? Should I be worried?"

"I have. I'm not sure you should be worried. I'd say flattered would be the better choice. Or in awe. Or equally preoccupied with me. Any of those would be great. Let me know where you land."

Summer giggles again, and I am determined to make her smile and laugh like that all day long. It's stunning when her face lights up, especially because she's not a typically smiley person. Getting her to let loose is like winning the lottery and not having to pay taxes on my earnings.

After about five minutes or so, Clarissa tries something else with the machine. There's a fizzling, spritzing electrical sound. Sparks fly from a socket across the room. The entire cafe goes dark.

"Agh! I blew a fuse!" Clarissa shouts.

While Riley calls maintenance, Clarissa astutely declares the espresso machine obviously in need of repairs she can't do herself. After Riley makes the call, she gets busy writing a hand-written sign announcing, *Sorry, No Espresso or Hot Coffee Drinks Today.*

We say goodbye to Riley and Clarissa and walk out into the sunshine.

“Welp. On to plan B,” I tell Summer. I drive us to the resort, and we sneak into the lobby where I grab two complimentary coffees at the station set up for guests only.

“Act like a guest,” I tell Summer.

Not like we’re going to be in trouble. It’s our day off. Worst thing they’d do is tell us to get a coffee in the on-site restaurant.

Summer puts on an impeccable British accent and starts calling me Benjamin. She asks where we’ll be having tea this afternoon, and says she’ll be needing something to nosh on soon.

I try my best to put on an English accent. It probably comes out more Scottish with a bit of Viking thrown in for good measure.

“You are horrible at accents,” Summer says, still with the refined Brit accent in her voice.

“I’m horrible at tons of things. Stick around, I’ll show you all of them.”

She laughs lightly and takes her coffee from me. We exit the lobby without being detained for our petty theft. I grab us two breakfast burritos from the cafe a few doors down from the resort, and then we walk to the beach, sipping our coffees. I’ve got my backpack over my shoulder, filled with things we’ll need for the better part of the date.

After we eat our burritos and finish our coffees while sitting together on one of the double loungers, I stop at the rental shack and turn toward Summer. “Surprise!”

Summer looks up at me, obviously waiting for me to elaborate.

“We’re going kayaking. But in a double. Unless you want singles.”

“A double’s good. You know I love kayaking.”

“I know you do. I thought we’d paddle up to the north shore and then we can hang out and picnic on the beach.”

“That sounds perfect.” Another smile.

I’m beaming when we step inside the rental shack. Bodhi’s sitting on the stool behind the counter and Kai’s straightening inventory.

“Well, well,” Bodhi says, his eyes shifting between me and Summer. “What do we have here?” Then he looks straight at Summer. “Are you here against your will? Blink twice if you need a rescue. I forgot our safe word, Summer. Man, I wish I remembered that right now.”

“Stop it, you goof,” Summer says. “We’re going kayaking.”

“That’s a *friendly* way to spend the day,” Kai says from his end of the store.

I had been feeling confident up until this moment. Summer and I are on a date, right? She knows I’m taking her out as more than a friend, doesn’t she?

“We’re on a date.”

I almost check if my own lips moved, but I know that wasn’t me. Those words came from Summer. She’s the one who told Kai and Bodhi we’re on a date. I nod my head once, looking Bodhi straight in the eyes while I do, and then I put my arm around Summer’s shoulder.

She told them we’re on a date.

Kai lets out a low whistle and smiles over at me. I know these two tried to ask Summer out before I ever lived on Marbella. I also know they weren’t trying to pursue anything serious with her. None of that matters. I’m the one with my arm wrapped around her. I’m the one taking her out for the day, and as many days as she’ll let me.

“Can we get a double?” I ask Bodhi.

“You bet.” He winks at me, hops off the stool and walks ahead of us to get us situated with our boat.

I take Summer's hoodie out of the backpack and hand it to her. She pops it over her head while we wait for Bodhi to get our kayak off the racks.

I toss my backpack into the spot just behind the nylon backrest where Summer will sit. I place the oars inside, and then we each grab onto the boat and tote it down the sand. At the water's edge, Summer takes her spot up front. I push her into the shorepound and climb in back. My legs are long enough to extend forward so my calves touch Summer's sides. I'm not complaining about an excuse to make physical contact with her. I've been careful, but attentive so far this morning. Today is all about us getting to know one another better. She might have opened the door, but knowing her, she could slam it just as quickly.

We pick up a rhythm with our oars, propelling the boat forward over waves toward the open waters. The day is slightly overcast. Out here on the water, the brisk air reminds me it's officially fall. I hadn't thought about the seasons much since the change is so much more dramatic where I come from in the midwest.

We paddle along in silence for a while, taking in the marine life and scenery. Birds dive for prey, schools of fish swim underneath us. A pod of dolphins leaps and dives much further out.

"How about a game?" I suggest.

"A game?"

"Yeah. Like twenty questions, or two truths and a lie? I told you I want to get to know you better."

Summer hums. "Okay. Twenty questions. How does that work again? Like I think of something and you ask yes-no questions?"

"Exactly. But in this version, you think of something about yourself. And I guess. Then it's my turn, and you guess."

"Should we give a category first?"

"Like what?"

“Like, when I was little I wanted to be ...”

“Oh, yeah. I love that. You’re great at this, Monroe. Why didn’t I already know you would be great at this? You seem to be great at everything.”

“I’m totally not. But ... I guess you’ll have to make guesses to see what I’m bad at.”

“There’s pretty much nothing I’d like to do more.”

I see the shake of her head, and I imagine the smile on her face right now, even if she isn’t smiling. But I think she is. I picture the way her nose crinkles just the slightest, the way her eyes soften and turn up, the white of her teeth surrounded by those lips—lips I’ll hopefully be kissing today. I’m not assuming we’ll kiss. Just because we kiss so much for the play does not mean I’ve got a pass to kiss Summer whenever I want. Not yet, I don’t.

“Okay, when I was little, I wanted to be ...”

“An actress?”

“No.”

“No? Huh. So you didn’t always want to be an actress? Wow. When did you decide to be an actress?”

Summer’s quiet. Then she says, “I decided in junior high. But I didn’t get to pursue it as much as I wanted.”

There’s a story there, but I get the sense she needs time to tell it, so I don’t push.

“A circus performer?”

“No! Circuses scared me when I was little. I only went to one, but it was one too many back then.”

“The clowns?”

“Strangely enough, no. It wasn’t the clowns. It was the tightropes. I had a fear of heights. I didn’t even like looking down through the railing at the top of our staircase back then. Watching those performers up there freaked me out. I was so afraid for them.”

I love knowing this. It's like I'm collecting sea glass that washed up on shore. Each piece of her Summer allows me to touch feels like something unique and beautiful—a souvenir from this day.

I take a few more guesses and finally land on a baker. Summer nods.

“I always wished I could bake sweet things for the people I loved and have them sit with me and eat them.” Before I can ask more about her childhood and whether she and her mom baked together like my mom and I did, Summer turns her head to glance back at me, and says, “Okay, my turn.”

“Hit me with your best shot, Monroe.”

I catch a hint of a smile before she turns back toward the front of the kayak.

“You tell me what you wanted to be when you grew up.”

“Okay.”

“A race car driver?”

“No. But now that you mention it, that would be cool. Maybe we could modify it for island life—golf cart races. Could that catch on? I could be a golf race cart driver.”

“You are so silly.”

“Guilty as charged. But I'm not joking. I wonder how fast those things can go at top speed.”

Summer doesn't answer, but I think she's smiling again. “So, not a race car driver. A watersports instructor?”

“Nope. But it was sports related.”

“You aren't supposed to give me clues.”

“Says who?” I squeeze her with my calves, trapping her playfully before I relax my legs again.

“Says me,” she says.

I see her shoulders straighten with resolve. Feisty. I love that.

“I'm giving you clues. Deal with it.”

“Sassy.”

“What can I say? You bring out the best in me.”

“We both know that’s not true.” She turns and looks at me over her shoulder.

“Right?! Never in my life have I had a woman run from me so hard and so fast. And I tripped over myself trying to prove to you I wasn’t such a bad guy.”

Should we even be talking about this?

“I vote we leave the past in the past,” I suggest.

“I don’t think we should. You brought it up. Let’s talk about that fateful day that we met.”

Summer turns to glance at me again. Lifting her oar so she can swivel. Our eyes meet. She looks relaxed, but there’s still that familiar note of challenge in her gaze. It’s my kryptonite.

“Oh, so you admit it was fate that brought us together?” I tease.

“Fate did an awful job. You were so cheesy.”

“I was, and now, let’s imagine me backing into the bushes like that GIF of Homer Simpson. We are not discussing my epic fails here. Let’s get back to me wanting to be a professional baseball player.”

“You gave it away!”

“Also my prerogative.”

She giggles.

“Man, I love when you laugh. It’s got to be one of my top five things in the world.”

“Do you just say everything that crosses your mind?”

“Basically. I’m not very good at pretending I’m something I’m not. Or tricking people. Unless it’s a prank. I’m so good at pranks. Where I come from we all pulled stuff on one another all the time—for fun.”

“Like Bengay?”

I chuckle. “You remember that, huh?”

“I thought you were joking.”

“I was ... sort of.”

“How about where you grew up?” I ask. “Where are you from, anyway?”

Summer’s quiet for a beat.

When that beat stretches out and starts to approach awkward territory, I ask, “Is this one of those things where you’d tell me, but you’d have to kill me?”

“I moved around a bit.”

“What parts of the country?”

She pauses, and I wait.

Why doesn’t she seem to want to tell me where she’s from?

Finally, she says, “The south.”

“I thought I heard a southern accent out of you once. As if you didn’t have enough appeal without that. Summer, you’re killing me.”

She answers me in a melodic southern voice that literally makes me want to pull the kayak over and kiss her on the spot. “Why Ben, you say the sweetest thangs.”

A hundred questions crowd my mind, the main one being why she doesn’t talk like that all the time. But obviously she doesn’t feel completely comfortable talking about her past or where she came from. And my goal is to lighten Summer up and make her smile and laugh all day, so I veer away from the subject. Maybe she ditched the accent so she could make it in Hollywood.

“Okay, my turn again,” she says.

“I thought it was my turn.”

“You’re not keeping good track. You found out where I’m from. It’s my turn to ask you something. Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. It’s just me. I was so awesome, they stopped at one. They were sure they couldn’t top their first attempt at parenthood, you know?”

“Or you were such a handful they had to stop so they could outnumber you.” She laughs.

“Oh, I’m a handful, Monroe. You already know that. But I think you can handle me.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Okay, my turn. Any siblings?”

“I have one brother and one sister.”

“And you’re the bossy oldest?”

“I’m the youngest, actually.”

“Huh. I wouldn’t have pegged that. Are you close with your brother and sister?”

We’ve completely abandoned the pattern of twenty questions, but it’s fine. We’re getting to know one another and that’s the point.

“With my sister, yes. She’s one of my best friends. My brother is, well, he’s my brother. He’s doing his thing. We don’t have hard feelings per se. Just not a lot in common anymore.”

I don’t ask anything else. Summer Monroe is in my kayak, dispensing details about herself one by one. I’ll take what she freely gives and wait for more in due time.

We paddle up the coast of Marbella, asking each other more questions and sharing our answers—favorite colors, foods, time of day, dreams for the future, pet peeves. By the time we pull the boat onto shore, we’ve managed to cover a lot of ground.

I reach my hand out to Summer to help her step out of the kayak.

She grabs it and stands, and right then the whole boat tips, rocks, and sends her flying out into the water. I dive toward

her to catch her, and we both fall into the shallow water at the edge of shore.

SUMMER

He was the kind of man everyone would fall in love with, even if they didn't want to.

~ Nicholas Sparks

“**O**h! Ben! Watch out!” I shout, but it’s too late.

I’m flying forward and sideways, and Ben’s only thinking of me. He dives to catch me, but the force of my body coming out of the kayak hits him and he flies backward, falling onto the sand in the low waves hitting shore. I land on top of him, his arms around me, him beneath me like a shield. Water washes up over us and back out to sea—over, and over, and over. The kayak bobs next to us like a child after breaking a lamp—innocent, but oh, so guilty.

I look down at Ben and he’s got this wide grin on his face. He starts laughing hard, his body shaking beneath mine.

“Ben!” I shout, but I’m smiling, and then I’m laughing with him.

He doesn’t even hurry to get us up out of the water. We’re already soaked. And he’s the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen, lying there with waves sloshing through his hair, his gorgeous face the picture of unabashed joy. A feeling rushes through me so instantly and unexpectedly, it could drown me—or maybe it’s the very thing that could keep me afloat. He’s amazing. Funny. Sweet. Thoughtful. Silly. Beautiful.

His arms are still wrapped around me—holding me to him, keeping me safe. I shift and lean my face toward his. I can tell the moment Ben senses what I’m about to do. His expression morphs from playful delight to serious and sexy. His eyes darken, pupils widening with desire. He scans my features. A soft smile comes across his lips just before I brush my mouth across them.

Ben hums and tightens his arms around me. I’m freezing, soaking wet, and my clothes are sticking to my skin, but I don’t ever want to leave this place. Ben kisses me tenderly. Our kiss is soft and full of emotion—his and mine. I didn’t just fall out of the kayak. I fell into his arms. And I think I’m falling for him.

Ben pulls back from our kiss and smiles one of his roguish smiles at me. He can tell. I made the move. I’m no longer running from him. As a matter of fact, if he ran, I’d probably chase him down to bring him back to me. I’m about to rest my head on his chest and snuggle into the only warm place I know.

In one swift move, he grips me, and pushes off the wet sand below us, we wobble, but he holds onto me until we’re standing, with the water ebbing and flowing at our ankles now. I shiver. Ben looks down at me and places a kiss on the tip of my nose.

“I’ve got to get the boat.”

“The boat?”

I turn around to see the kayak bobbing about fifteen feet away in the waves north of us, and heading out to sea.

“Oh my gosh! The boat!”

“It’s fine, Monroe. I’ve got it.”

Ben peels his shirt and sweatshirt off, tossing them onto the sand away from the water. Then he walks out until the waves are chest high. He swims over to the kayak and tows it to shore. I think I might be drooling. Something in me has definitely cracked open. My fight has left the building, and in its place, all I feel is this need to be close to him, to thank him

for pursuing me—for seeing past the rough edges that aren't really me.

Ben tugs the kayak onto shore like a model on the cover of *Kayak Rescue* magazine or *Hot Beach Guy Gazette*. Whatever. I want a lifetime subscription to whatever periodical he's in.

Ben lifts the backpack from the boat. "Hey! This stayed pretty dry."

He's still smiling, and I have this odd thought about what it would take to bring him down. He's like this buoy, bobbing in the waves, always staying above the murky depths and rip tides of life. I want to bottle some of his positivity and keep it for myself. Instead, I make an inner vow never to be the one who causes him to feel anything but his natural joy.

"We're soaked!" Ben smiles, looking between us.

He's still shirtless and seems oblivious to the chill in the air, or the way he's affecting me.

I shiver again.

"You're cold. We need to get you dry and warm."

"You need to put a shirt on," I blurt in the blurtiest way possible.

"Oh, do I? Is it bothering you that I'm shirtless, Monroe? Are you finally finding me irresistible?"

If he only knew.

I roll my eyes. "I'm concerned for your wellbeing. I don't want you getting sick with opening day so close."

"Ah. So it's strictly professional. That's why your eyes have been roving from my pecs to my arms and back? Gotcha."

Ben smiles at me. Then he flexes, looking over at me with the most mischievous grin.

"Take your fill, Monroe. It's all for you."

I blush. I can feel the blush rising from my chest to my neck and up my face like a red tide rolling into shore.

Ben winks and grabs the mushy pile of shirt and sweatshirt, which is now coated in sand like a sugar donut. He shakes them out and pops them over his head.

“Show’s over,” he casually announces. “But you’re looking pretty amazing yourself. Waterlogged looks good on you.”

I don’t answer. Can’t answer. Knowing Ben now—really seeing him for the sweet, guileless man he is—each compliment and sweetness has a straight trajectory to my heart. I smile shyly at him, feeling exposed. Does he see my heart, and the way he’s managed to undo me? Will he be careful with me?

“You’re the one with the north island connections, babe. Let’s find out if someone has a spare towel around here.”

“Babe?” I scrunch my nose up.

“I was just trying it out. You know? For future reference, if you ever decide you want to buy the car instead of taking it for a test drive. Though, I’m not complaining. I am thrilled you gave me a day—a whole day. I’ll just be hoping for more until you give me that. And then, well, I’ll hope for more. I’m pretty sure I’ll be hoping for more until you kick me out and tell me to leave you alone.”

“That won’t be happening.” I throw him a bone.

“Yeah?”

Puppy dog face. Wagging tail. Not literally. That would be weird. But Ben looks like the happiest version of himself right now. I did that. I can make him happier. And I will.

“Yeah. I’m not planning on kicking you out or telling you to leave me alone.”

“So, you might even say yes to another date? Even though we blew up a coffee shop, committed petty theft, got teased by my two new friends—ex-friends now, obviously—and I tried to drown you?”

I smile and huff out a small laugh. “Believe it or not, this might be the best day I’ve had since I moved here. Best day in

a long, long time.”

“Oh, I believe it. You’re with me, after all.” He winks and throws his arm around my shoulders, tugging me into a side hug. “Now where are we going to find this towel?”

“We can go to Phyllis’ house. She lives a few blocks up from the beach.”

“Oh, yeah. Good ‘ol Phil.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Good ‘ol Phyl.”

Ben stashes the kayak in a nook in the cliffs. It’s still visible, but people around here don’t mess with one another’s stuff. It’s one of those unwritten islander rules. Ben slings the backpack over the shoulder farthest from me and then he entwines our hands. We walk off the beach like that—like a real couple.

While we walk, Ben surprises me with a question.

“Why do you like me, Summer?”

“Who says I do?” I smile up at him.

We both know I’m full of it. My heart may as well be running ahead of us, screaming out my feelings for the entire north shore community to hear.

“You did—in every way that matters, except with your words. Call me greedy, but I want to hear you say it. Now, indulge me and tell me why you like me.”

I’m quiet for a bit, not too long, but I want to get this right.

Ben gives me space. He did that during that awkward game of twenty questions too. When he treaded too closely to things I can’t tell him, at least not yet, he would just wait for my answer. He never pushed me.

“You are kind.” I feel the blush on my cheeks again. I’ve never done this before. Ben makes me want to say it all, to come undone and let myself be fully me, no guard up, no caution, no second-guessing. “You’re funny. You have this way of putting yourself down, but not belittling yourself, and then acting like you’ve got this huge ego, which also isn’t

really true. You stepped up to help with the play when you didn't have to."

"That was one hundred percent selfish on my part. Any excuse to get nearer to you—and there was the kissing scene. I wanted to be the pirate who kissed you."

I smile. "Well, it showed me how persistent you can be when you want something. You were the perfect balance of persistent and patient."

"Yeah, I'm pretty perfect. Get used to it."

I shake my head. Then I give his hand a squeeze. I stop in my tracks and Ben stops with me.

"I'm serious, Ben. You have gotten past some serious hurdles with me. I kept throwing up roadblocks and you kept blowing through them."

"I only did that, I guess, because I thought in the end you really might want me to. And, also, I couldn't get you off my mind. No one has ever burrowed their way under my skin like you did."

"I like that."

"Burrowing under my skin?"

"Yeah." My voice sounds soft and shy, even to my own ears.

Ben pulls me in for a hug. I rest my head under his chin. Every inch of me is uncomfortable from the wetness of my clothes sticking to me with an adhesive of saltwater. But I've never been more comfortable in my life than I am right now in his arms.

"I like you a lot, Ben." I echo the words he said to me not so long ago.

"I like you too, Monroe. A lot."

We stand like that, at the edge of the beach where it hits the street, holding onto one another—holding onto this moment and the revelation of our hearts.

I hear a familiar voice shout my name from across the street. When I look up, Phyllis is waving to me and Ben.

“Summer! Hey!”

“That’s Phyllis.”

“Meant to be.”

Maybe. Maybe a lot of things were meant to be. I’m starting to feel like that could be true.

When Ben and I cross the street, Phyllis looks Ben over with an obvious appreciation that almost makes me laugh. She could probably be his grandma. But he’s Ben. I’m pretty sure he has that effect on all women of all ages—except me—and now, me more than anyone else.

“Well, who is your friend, Summer?”

“Phyllis, this is Ben. Ben, Phyllis.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Ma’am.” Phyllis fans herself. She literally fans herself. “Oh my, you are in trouble, Summer.”

“Tell me about it.” I concede.

“We had a bit of a wrestling match with a kayak. As you can see, the kayak won.” Ben waves his hand up and down himself and then me. “Would you mind if we dried off at your place?”

“Oh! Of course, you have to come to my house. We have towels.” Phyllis sizes me up. “We have some of Mila’s clothes you can change into. Ben, I think I might have some clothes from my late husband that would fit you while you dry your clothes in the dryer.”

Her late husband? I thought Phyllis had always been single. I make a note to find out the story there.

We follow Phyllis to her home. She produces two stacks of clothes for us to change into. They fit nearly perfectly, though Ben’s are a little tight. Am I complaining? You know I’m not. Then, Phyllis lights a fire in the fireplace and gives us some throw blankets. Joan makes tea, and the four of us sit chatting

about the play, life on the island, and a bunch of other inconsequential topics.

Ben's next to me on the couch, his arm over my shoulder. I'm leaning into him a little. Phyllis keeps giving me not-so-subtle looks with her eyebrows raised. Sometimes she glances between us and smiles the way a grandma would if her granddaughter brought home a catch. I relax into the feeling of being held by Ben, surrounded by warmth, and free of expectations or obligations. Phyllis insists on feeding us lunch even though Ben has our lunch in the backpack. The sandwiches he packed look like they were used for soccer practice, but I'd eat one if it made him happy.

After our clothes have come through the dryer, we say our goodbyes and walk back to the beach. We push off in the kayak and paddle back to Descanso by mid-afternoon.

"I'm still taking you to dinner," Ben announces. "Why don't we go our separate ways and shower? I'll come get you at six."

"Why don't I cook for you?" The words are out of my mouth before I have a chance to think them through.

"You want to cook for me, Monroe?"

"Why not? You cooked for me. I should return the favor."

"She's beautiful, feisty, and she cooks. Ben shoots. Ben scores!"

He adds an exaggerated fist pump and shimmies his shoulders, following that with a three-hundred-sixty degree spin. Then he leans in and kisses my cheek. I want to grab his face and pull him in for a real kiss, but I'm feeling too desperate, adrift on these new waves of emotion and unfamiliar sense of longing.

Besides, I just told Ben I'd cook for him.

And, I can't cook.

BEN

*And she reminds me of the ocean;
so much left to discover, but still feels like home.*

~ Unknown

“L oooooovvve! Looooovvve! Ohhh, oooh, baby, I could fall in loooooove with a girl like you!”

“What in the ever-living love of Mike is going on in here?” Cam’s head peeks into the bathroom, interrupting my shower serenade.

“I’m showering, ergo, you need to leave the door shut. And, oh, I don’t know, knock?”

Cam does not shut the door. “I thought someone needed 9-1-1. Or a wild emu had broken in to take a shower.”

“Har har.”

“I also thought you could sing.”

“I can. And I was. I was improvising from my heart.”

Cam chuckles. “About Summer?”

“Who else? It’s not like I’m falling for someone else. I’m a one-woman man, Cam. And I’m going to her house to eat dinner that she is cooking for me. Did you hear that?” I pop my head around the curtain and make eye contact with my oldest and closest friend. Water and soap suds drip from my hair onto the floor and bath mat. “She’s cooking for me.”

“At Riley’s place.”

“Aka, Summer’s place. Which, by the way, could you have Riley over tonight so I can be alone with Summer?”

Cam smiles. I duck back into the shower.

“It’s the least I can do. After all, you were my wingman when I didn’t know how I really felt about Riley.”

“It’s about time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s about time you had my back in my pursuit of Summer. She’s been skittish. You know she had the worst impression of me. Then you walked in on us kissing and made a scene. I thought she was going to bolt.”

“Sorry about that. You have to admit, seeing it from my perspective, walking in on the two of you making out in the kitchen was a shock.”

“Well, get used to it. Because I think she and I are getting serious.”

I tip my head under the water and rinse the shampoo out of my hair. Then I stick my arm out through the curtain.

“Towel, please?”

Cam hands me a towel. I dry off and wrap myself in it and then I step out and wipe the steam off one spot in the mirror.

“I’m happy for you, Ben.”

“Me too. And I’m usually happy. But this is next-level happiness. She’s a complex woman. I feel like the winner of a gold medal every time she gives me a smile or a little nugget of information about herself.”

“I just hope she sees you for the man you are, and appreciates you.”

“If her kisses are any indication ...”

“Dude. TMI.”

“Okay.” I laugh. Cam’s so easy to rile up. “Seriously, though. I can tell she likes me. Besides, she flat out told me

she did.”

“She did?”

“Don’t sound so shocked. I mean, I asked her. But she told me.”

“You asked her? What did you say? *Do you like me?* Did you send her one of those folded papers like we used to pass around in junior high? *Check yes or no. Do you like me?*”

“Man, I should have thought of that.” I roll my eyes and smile at Cam. “I talked to her like a grown man talks to a woman. We had an honest conversation. And she blushed while she told me what she thought of me. She’s it, Cam. I don’t know what to tell you. I didn’t think much of it when we landed on the island and I said that line that got me into the worst trouble of my life. And I never would have guessed I’d come to Marbella and meet the one.” I pause, taking in what I’m actually saying.

Cam is silent too. This is big stuff. Like, who-do-you-spend-the-rest-of-your-life-with stuff. I picture my parents. They’ve been together since just after the dinosaurs went extinct. They fit one another. My mom’s not a spitfire. She’s more of a natural homemaker and a soft place to land. My dad’s more the one with a little fire in his belly, even though he’s reserved on the outside. She balances him. That’s what a good relationship does. It draws out your strengths and compensates for your weaknesses—or at least graciously endures them.

I don’t want a woman like my mom. I love her more than I can say, but a woman like that wouldn’t interest me. I never realized what I needed until I met Summer. I need someone who can hold their own. She doesn’t make it easy on me. But then there’s this soft side of her that feels so fragile and tucked away. Anyone who gains access to that part of her is part of an elite group. I love that. I want to go toe to toe with her, and then I want to put my arms around her and protect her from everything bad in the world.

Cam’s still studying me, his arms folded across his chest.

“I mean, I’m not proposing over dinner, so wipe that look off your face.”

“I’m ... wow. That’s huge.”

“I know. And I know we’re new. There’s all that brain chemistry popping off like a YouTube science channel experiment. But what I’m feeling goes beyond all those superficial reactions. Don’t worry, though. I’m not pulling the trigger on anything radical. We’re not even officially DTR.”

“DTR?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot what a grandpa you are. DTR: Defining The Relationship.”

“Do you even know if you’re exclusive?” Cam looks like a dad who’s stocking the emergency supply kit and double checking every item is accounted for in the event of a natural disaster.

“I do know we’re exclusive.”

“And how do you know that?”

“She’s either at the play, or she’s working, or she’s hanging with me, or she’s running lines at C-Side, or she’s home with Riley. The woman has no spontaneity in her life. I’m the only one she’s seeing.”

“Well she’s gonna have some spontaneity now. You are the king of spur-of-the-moment, and the captain of whimsy.”

“I need a T-shirt that says all that. Man. That’s downright awesome.”

Cam shakes his head lightly and chuckles. “Be careful. I know you’re head-over-heels. But ... just be careful.”

“I think you’ve got it all wrong. Of the two of us, she’s far more fragile than I am.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am. You’ll see.”

I dress and run a comb through my hair, leaving it wet from the shower. Then I splash just a little cologne on and

walk from our place over to Summer and Riley's house. I pass Riley on the way, heading to our place. She tells me that Summer's at home cooking.

I don't pay any attention to the way her brows raise and she pinches her lips when she says that. Summer said she could cook. Riley's probably just unsure how to act about Summer and me spending time together. She'll get used to it. Cam will get used to it. I may never. I might have to wake up pinching myself every single morning just to make sure this is really my life and not some dream where a woman like Summer falls for a guy like me.

I knock on Summer's door and wait. The sound of clanging and some very piratey language filters out to the porch.

"Summer?"

"Um, yeah? Uh. Coming. Just ... wait. Mokay?"

"Are you dressed?"

"What do you mean, am I dressed? Of course I'm dressed. I'm not in here cooking naked!"

I open the door to a very red-faced, very dressed Summer. I try to delete that last sentence from my brain.

"Hey, what's up? Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. Yes." She looks over at me, throws both arms in the air. "No. Totally not. I'm trying to cook Kashmiri Red Curry but I'm using beef instead of lamb or mutton, because this island doesn't have lamb or mutton ... which is fine, of course. The guy at the store didn't even know that mutton is just young lamb. You'd think they'd have some sheep around here. They've got their fair share of emus and monkeys. Not that I'm cooking those." She looks up at me. "I'm not."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Gah! It's fine. It's finally in the pot. All the spices and sauce and meat are together. I just ..."

"It sure smells good."

“I didn’t even ask if you like Indian food. That’s all I know how to cook. Indian food and baked potatoes.”

She’s so stinkin’ cute right now—frazzled like I’ve never seen her. She’s usually so pulled together, impenetrable. I can’t help myself. I step into her space and pull her to me.

She melts into my arms. Her words are murmured into my chest. “I wanted to do this for you.”

“Hey,” I say, tilting her chin up so she can see my eyes. “I love that you did this for me. I don’t care what we eat. I had planned a dinner out for us before you jumped in and volunteered to feed me here. We could still go out.”

“Okay. But I want to see if this is good.”

“I’m your guinea pig. Hand me a fork.”

Summer opens the silverware drawer and hands me a fork. I stab a chunk of the meat that’s swimming in a deep red sauce and plop the bite in my mouth.

“Mmmm.” I say around the bite. “Mmmm. Wow. Oh. Wow.”

It hits me slowly, but then it’s like someone put a jumper cable in my mouth.

“Wow. Wow! Oh!”

My mouth is on fire. I need water. I need milk. I need a tongue transplant!

I rapidly root around the cupboards for a glass. I’m opening and shutting cabinets like I’m in a timed-trial cupboard slamming contest. Then I remember where Summer keeps the glasses from when I put the wildflowers into the Mason jar this morning. I grab a cup, and without thinking. I stick it under the faucet, fill it, and guzzle it down, fill it, guzzle it again.

When I can finally speak, despite actual tears leaking from my eyes, I turn to Summer and say, “Wow. That was ... good.”

Summer looks at me. Her face is blank, and then she starts laughing. She doesn’t just laugh, she bursts into laughter. It’s

like one sputter of a laugh and then she's losing it. She's bent over, hanging onto the counter with one hand, roaring with laughter. She looks up at me, tries to say something, but she bursts into a laugh again. Her hysterics are contagious. I start laughing too.

She walks toward the fridge, grabbing my water cup along the way. She pours a tall glass of milk and hands it to me. I chug it down. Sweet relief. Ish. Relief-ish. I feel like I could breathe fire if I wanted to, which would be cool, honestly. But I'm not crying anymore, so that's a win.

"That was so spicy." I smile down at her. "Were you trying to kill me?"

"Nooo!" Summer wipes a tear from her eye. She's still laughing, but catching her breath. "Oh my gosh. I totally can't cook."

"You totally can't."

She smacks my arm lightly. I lean in and kiss her cheek.

She surprises me by cupping my face in her hands and pulling me toward her. She slides her hands back along my jaw and loops her arms around my neck, and then she kisses me. I tug her toward me, deepening the kiss. I've never kissed someone after eating something spicy. Summer pulls back.

"I can feel the spice in your kiss."

"That's nothing," I joke. "There's more spice where that came from." I wag my eyebrows playfully.

She giggles, still holding onto me. I can't get over the fact that she initiated the kiss. She wanted to cook for me. She's willingly spending time with me.

"You're blowing me away, Summer."

"You called me Summer."

"And you kissed me."

She pushes off me and walks over to the stove. "You kissed me back."

"I'll always kiss you back."

“I don’t even know if I can salvage this.” She lifts the pan and holds it out into the middle of the kitchen. I instinctively back up. That stuff is category ten dangerous. The CIA could use it to force foreign agents to divulge state secrets.

“Let’s wrap it up for now, and then I’ll take you out like I had planned.”

“Nothing fancy, though. Is that okay?”

“How about we grab burgers and take them to the beach?”

“Perfection.”

SUMMER

I crave a love so deep the ocean would be jealous.

~ Pablo Neruda

Ben. Who knew?

He bought us burgers, and only mentioned the curry-of-death three times—once to the girl serving us. He pointed at me and said, “Thanks for cooking these burgers. You have no idea how this one cooks. She tried to take me out with Indian food earlier tonight.”

Of course that girl giggled like Harry Styles had just shown up and asked her for private french fry cooking lessons.

I’m going to have to get used to being with Ben and enduring the impact he has on every female on the planet. I will get used to it, because he reserves the extra, extra, over-the-top stuff for me—and the soft and serious side of him too—which I don’t think most people see. That’s also mine.

We walk down the beach and Ben grabs a spot on one of the double loungers. They’re sturdy wooden ones on this side of the beach, with a drink holder built in between the two seats. Every night a few of the resort employees come take the cushions off, and every morning, just after dawn, the morning shift comes back out here and lays padding on each lounge, day in and day out, like the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace.

We each take one side of the lounge. The sun is already dipping on the horizon, casting a gray duskiness across the beach and making the water look a dark gray with a shock of white foam when the waves hit the shore.

We chat and eat for a bit—Ben making me laugh freely, then turning the conversation to more serious topics with ease. He flirts. I flirt back. The comfortable ebb and flow between us should surprise me, but it feels like another version of what we've always experienced. I could never simply ignore his presence. He always drew me in, only now I'm willingly succumbing to the tug.

A breeze blows in from the water and I shiver.

“Are you cold?”

“I'm good.”

“You're cold. C'mere. Let me warm you up.”

“You just want an excuse to hold me in your arms.”

“Darn straight, I do. Now get over here. I'm like a human heater. I'll warm you up.”

I think I'm already heating up from that invitation. I set what's left of my burger on the paper wrapper in front of me and stand. As I walk toward Ben, an unexpected shyness fills me, making me pause.

“Having second thoughts?” Ben's voice is playful, but there's a vulnerability there.

“About you?”

“About sitting with me? I won't bite, Monroe.” He pauses. “I definitely might nibble.” Even in the encroaching darkness I can see the flirty lift and fall of his eyebrows.

Ben's voice turns serious and tender. “I'd like to hold you, Summer. Come over here.”

I walk to Ben and turn, sitting on his side of the chair and then scooting up between his legs until my back hits his chest. He wraps his arms around me and tucks me into the cocoon of his embrace. His chin rests on my shoulder.

“You didn’t finish your burger,” I remind him.

“I’m not hungry for dinner anymore.”

“No?”

“Hm mmm. I’m kinda busy right now.”

I chuckle and lean back into Ben. He tilts back, taking both of us into more of a relaxed, reclining position. The last sliver of sunlight drops away. We sit like this for a while, quietly holding one another. I feel my heart rate slow. I could stay here forever and be completely content. No words need to be spoken between us right now. I’m as comfortable with Ben as I’ve ever been with anyone. He feels ... safe.

After a while, Ben shifts a little behind me. I feel his stubble gently graze my cheek. He whispers in my ear. “See how chill I can be?”

I laugh and feel the rumble of his laughter against my back.

One moment I’m being cuddled. The next, I’m being lifted. Ben turns me so that I’m sitting sideways across his lap. His mouth descends on mine in a kiss that’s soft and slow and feels as comforting as the waves hitting the sand—pushing, pulling, bringing water and land together. I run my fingers through his hair. His hands move up and down my back, up to my shoulders, down to my waist. We lose ourselves in this kiss, exploring the connection between us, allowing our hearts to fall and our bodies to say what words never could.

Ben pulls back and rests his forehead on mine.

“Summer.”

His voice is deep and husky—affected.

We’re still leaning into one another, overcome with waves of emotion.

“Ben.” His name sounds soft and reverent, even to my own ears. “I still can’t believe you waited for me.”

He smiles a sated smile tilting his head back the slightest so he can look in my eyes. He holds my chin, turning my face

so I can't miss the intensity of the heart behind what he's about to say.

"I'll always wait for you."

My smile matches his. Bliss. This is what it feels like to be known and cherished. It's like nothing I've ever felt or experienced.

"You make me feel so lucky," Ben says. His brows raise and his eyes go soft.

Does he still need me to assure him? Doesn't he know?

"I'm the one who is lucky. You should have backed off with the way I treated you. I was so standoffish and difficult."

"You weren't that difficult."

"I assumed the worst of you." My eyes flit between his, searching for his forgiveness. It's right there, so easily given.

"You must have had your reasons."

I lean into Ben, tucking my head under his chin. He wraps his arms around me, then one hand drifts down and rests on my leg. The fingertips of his other hand mindlessly play with the edge of my sweatshirt. I wonder if he even knows he's doing that. I rest my palm on his chest, feeling his heartbeat, strong and steady.

"I do have reasons, actually. I've had a rough history with players and charmers. You hit that nerve. I just lumped you in with all the others."

Ben smooths a comforting hand down my back. "I'm not a fan of thinking of you with players and charmers. I like my little mental bubble where I'm the first guy you ever fell for—the last you'll ever fall for—and you are happily smitten with me."

I breathe in, and let the breath out. "Well ... you are the first guy I've ever felt like this about."

"Like this? How do you feel exactly?"

Ben's voice is playful, but serious.

He's fishing, and he deserves to catch something on one of his lines for a change of pace.

"I like you a lot. An awful lot. So much that it scares me a little."

There. I gave him a whole net full of reality with that answer. No wiggling away from the truth, avoiding the risk of being caught. He's got me. Hook. Line. Sinker. He may as well know it.

"Hmmm. I like that answer an awful lot, Monroe. I knew you'd be worth the wait and the effort. And you are. I hope you know how worth it you are. The feeling is one hundred percent mutual. To be truthful, I think I'm only going to like you more and more the more time I spend with you—as long as you don't kill me with your curry."

I lightly swat at Ben. "The last thing I want to do is kill you with curry. Next time I'll bake potatoes."

"I'd love that. We can pretend we're Irish peasant farmers and all we can afford are potatoes."

"Orrrr ... we could buy cans of chili and shred cheese and have a potato feast."

"You've been holding out on me, Monroe. That would be a feast. You actually can cook."

"I can't. Not really. I usually eat what's easy. But the next night we both have off, I'll make you chili baked potatoes."

"Deal. I'll bring dessert."

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I want to ignore it, but only two people ever call me—Marissa and my sister. I pull my phone out and look down at the screen. Suzette.

I heave out a sigh, pushing away from Ben.

"I have to take this call. Wait for me?"

"I just told you I'd wait for you—always, Monroe."

This man. I'm going to spend every spare bit of energy I have letting him know how right he was to wait for me. I'll make sure he never regrets choosing me when he could have

walked away and had his choice of numerous other women in a heartbeat.

“Only for a minute. I’ll be right back. I want to pick things up where we left off.”

“You don’t have to say that twice. I’m here. I’ll be waiting for you. Take your time.”

Ben’s face looks slightly confused. It probably makes no sense why I’d have to walk away to take a phone call, and I hate that I have to. I’m pretty sure Suzette’s not just reaching out to say she misses me. I don’t want to drag Ben into the mess that is my family. He’s too good for all that insanity and drama. Ben deserves so much better than the treatment he’d get if Daddy found out we were together.

I walk down toward the shore while I push my cell screen to accept Suzette’s call.

“Hey, Suze.”

“You sound ... relaxed.”

“I’m on the beach.” *With the most sexy, adorable, thoughtful man.*

“Way to make a girl jealous. Ah-en’t the beaches in LA kind of crowded?” Oh, that accent. I never really discerned it when I was in Georgia, but right now it’s like the first bite of a juicy peach right off the tree in the heat of June.

“They can be crowded—even at night.”

I’m obviously not in LA, and I’m glad Suzette still doesn’t seem to know that. The less she knows, the better. That way she’s not in jeopardy of leaking my whereabouts, and she can honestly say she doesn’t know where I am.

“I have to be quick, Sweet C. I’m outside near the gazebo. I don’t want anyone to see me on the phone and start wondering who I’m callin’ and why.”

“Do you know how that even sounds? That’s not okay, Suze. We shouldn’t have to hide phone calls and tiptoe around him. He’s the one who messed everything up. He’s the one who should be hiding in the shadows—or better yet, coming

clean. He had an affair, with a girl our age, a girl we knew growin' up. And now he wants to make her into the one who looks deranged. It all makes me sicker than sick. I'm tryin' my best to move on and put all that in the rearview. Not that I want to be far from you. I miss you. I miss Georgia. But I need space and a chance to do something else—something without our family name attached to it, something that feels like I'm me, not the daughter of a philandering congressman.”

“I know. And I'm so proud of you. I've done some thinkin' since we last talked. I want this for you. You should follow your dreams. And you should stay out of the fray while Daddy's sortin' out his mess. Don't worry about me right now. Besides, you've got bigger fish to fry.”

“What? What's going on?”

“That's why I'm callin'. I overheard Daddy talking to someone on the phone about you yest-ah-day. So, like the good southern girl I am, I eavesdropped.”

I smile. Not about my father, obviously. I smile because Suzette makes me feel like I'm home—she makes me appreciate the best parts of my life in Georgia, not the ugly parts that came to light this past year.

My accent slips right out as soon as I'm on the phone with her for less than a minute. I miss the melodic, slow cadence in the way we speak to one another, everything sweet as our tea. Only, just like sugar to tea, a lot of that sweetness in our lives was added to something that was naturally bitter to start with. We didn't know how bitter until this year.

“What did Daddy say?”

“I only heard his half of the conversation, and his office door was shut, so it was hard to make out every word, but he knows you're in California. He hasn't figured out it's Hollywood yet. Of course, he probably will put two and two together, considerin' he knows how much you want to pursue acting.

“It sounded like Daddy was talkin' to the guy he hired to find you. Daddy told whoever it was not to give up. Then, in

his I-mean-business voice, he said he wasn't paying for anybody's vacation. He was all, *I have no patience for slackers. I can get more men for this job if I need to.* I figured that meant more people huntin' you down."

I'm silent. My father trailed me as far as California. Will he follow some unintentional breadcrumbs I left behind me all the way to my agent? If he finds her, will he figure out my new name? Could he come here, to Marbella? What would he do to Ben?

Funny. I'm more worried for Ben than I am for myself. Of course, I'm nervous as to what my Dad will pull once he finds me. He's vested in me. If I would come home and play dutiful, forgiving daughter, he would score points. He could spin the story of what happened and manipulate everyone in whatever way he wants. He's unfortunately excellent at gaslighting, and with everything he's worked for on the line—his position, his reputation, his family—he needs me by his side. With me gone, his ace up the sleeve is missing.

"Oh, Sugah. I worry about you." Suzette really puts on that familiar sweet lilt in her voice when she calls me Sugar. I wish I could reach through the phone and give her a hug.

"Well, don't be. I'm fine. I've got friends here, and I'm ... well, I'm doing fine."

"That's right. Don't you go tellin' me what's up. The less I know, the bettah."

"I'm glad you understand that."

"Goodness knows, Daddy might've even put one of them chips in my phone. I wouldn't put it past him. Maybe I oughta go get a throw-away cell. One of those kinds the hackers use?"

"Are you asking me?"

"I'm just wondering what you think."

"It wouldn't hurt. But I don't want you to go out of your way or worry your pretty head. If Daddy comes here, I'll face him. I'm not on the run. I'm just living my life. I'm not under his thumb anymore."

That's mostly true. I am living my life. I came here on the run. I don't know how much longer I'll keep my location a secret. Still, the thought of my father coming here doesn't sit well with me. I don't want him casting his long dark shadow over my fresh start in life—the life I've always wanted—and especially my brand new relationship with Ben.

“Must be nice.” Suzette sounds forlorn.

“When the dust settles, I'll have you out here and you can see how nice it is for yourself.”

“Los Angeles? No thank you, Missy. I think I'm allergic to traffic and smog and people who don't remember their manners. I might like me one of those surfers, though.”

“Tell me about it.”

I glance over at Ben through the darkness. The moon is high now, shining a light on him so I can just make out his features. He's lounging on the beach chair we've been sharing, staring out at the ocean with his arms propped behind his head.

Yes, sir, I do like me one of those surfers. I definitely do.

“Why, Caroline, do you have a particular surfer in mind?”

“I just might.”

“Ooooh. You're going to have to tell me all the juicy details.”

“He's ... special.”

Suzette's voice goes soft. “Well then, you better never let Daddy meet him.”

“I know. And, trust me, I'll do anything to keep them apart.”

BEN

*To be fully seen by somebody, then, and be loved anyhow
— this is a human offering that can border on miraculous.*

~ Elizabeth Gilbert

Summer comes walking back to me, her hair blowing in the breeze, her face barely illuminated by the moonlight and the reflection of the stars on the water. She's like a vision, like Kailani approaching the captain, only she's not a fantasy, she's real. And I think she might be mine.

"Hey." Her voice is soft, laced with something heavy that wasn't there before she walked away.

"Hey. You okay? Come back over here. I'm cold. I need to hold you to warm up again."

"You said you were a human heater." She props her hand on her hip.

"Well, maybe I just want to hold you, then."

"You'll get no fight out of me there."

"Don't stop fighting me, Monroe. I think I've gotten addicted to your fight."

"Maybe sometimes I just want to give in."

"I'll take that too. Now close the distance between us and get over here."

“Bossy, aren’t you?”

“When needed, yes.”

She smiles and takes her place across my lap, not in the chair next to me, not nestled between my legs. I pull her in close, loving the fact that she’s so willing, but still full of the fire that seems to be a part of her nature. I kiss her temple. Drag the tip of my nose down the side of her face. Kiss her neck, and then kiss my way back up to her earlobe where I lightly nip and then kiss her.

She turns and kisses my mouth, leaning into me, holding onto me with a tenacity that echoes the unsettled tone I heard in her voice.

I pull back, running my hand down her hair, while my other arm holds her close to me.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s just ... some things back home. I’m good. It was my sister.”

“Is she okay? Anything I can do to help?”

“It’s fine. She’s fine. And you do help. Being here with you helps.”

“I’m getting the vibe that you’d rather not talk about it.”

“You’re pretty good at that.”

“At what? Tell me all the things I’m good at.”

She giggles. Her laughter’s always a prize—a gift worth working for.

“I’ll tell you all the things you’re good at, but I was talking about you being good at reading me.”

There’s a hint of southern accent still tracing her words. I want to tell her I like it, that I wish she’d let that accent roam free around me. Though, I might not be responsible for what I’d do to her if she did. She’s already irresistible. Add in that accent and I’m pretty sure I’d lose all self-control.

“I just watch you,” I tell her. “That’s all.”

“You watch me?”

“Like a full-scale creeper.” I smile.

She laughs again. “Well, don’t stop. I watch you too, you know?”

“Oh, I know. I’ve caught you on more than one occasion. You like my upper body. I’ve seen you checking out the gun show.”

“Did you seriously just say gun show?”

I pull my arm away from her back and flex it both ways, hand toward myself—bicep show. Hand away from myself—tricep show. Then I flash her a smile. “Gun show.”

She laughs, but she still lifts her hand and gives my arm a squeeze.

Then she tilts her head, kisses my jaw, and leans in so her head’s tucked up under mine.

I hold her like that, and we sit together quietly. I don’t feel antsy or restless. As a matter of fact, this is the most peaceful I’ve felt in years. Maybe it’s twenty or thirty minutes later, or it could be hours, but I wake up feeling a little stiff, the chill of the air has gotten colder. Summer’s curled into me, lightly breathing out what could be a snore, but it’s way too soft and feminine to count as actual snoring. I’m definitely planning on teasing her as if she sounds like a lumberjack, though.

I jostle her a little. “Summer?”

“No!” She grips at my shirt in her half-wakened state. “Daddy, no!” she shouts. Then she sits up abruptly, looking around in a daze. Her face is panicked until she seems to come to herself and figure out she’s here, not in whatever bad dream she was having.

“Oh. Ben. Oh, thank goodness it’s you.” Summer leans into me like a child clings to their mother after a nightmare.

“Summer?” I brush her hair back from her face.

“Hmmm?”

“Are you okay? You shouted something about your dad.”

“I did?”

“It sounded like you were having a nightmare.”

She’s quick to answer me. “I’m good. I don’t know what that was.”

“Well, I’m here.”

“Thank you, Ben.” She lifts her head and looks at me. She looks like she’s seen a ghost. “Thank you.”

“I’m here,” I repeat.

Everything in me wants to stay with her after that outburst. But, I have to work early, and then we have practice. She needs to get her sleep too—in a bed, not on me out on a resort lounge in the cool ocean air. Though, I’d totally stay here if she wanted me to.

“I’d better get you home.”

“Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Of course.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Totally. I’m just dazed. I can’t believe I fell asleep on you. You should have woken me up.”

“I fell asleep too.”

I stand, easing Summer off my lap so she can stand at the same time.

“You did?”

“Yeah. I didn’t mean to. I guess I just got comfortable.”

Summer smiles at me. I extend my hand to her and we walk toward the edge of the beach, back in the direction of our neighborhood.

“Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not dating anyone.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“No! I don’t mean it like that. I mean, I’m not interested in dating anyone—except you.”

“Oh. Oh! Okay ...” I look down at her and she smiles up at me.

I bump my hip into hers while we walk along. “So, are you asking me to go steady, Monroe?”

“You’re such a goof.”

“I know. But are you?”

“I’m just telling you I’m not dating anyone except you. I’m not asking you anything.”

“Well, I’m not dating anyone but you either. Obviously.”

“So ...”

“So, is this the big DTR talk?” I tease. “Because I’m ready to DTR the heck out of you. Are you sure you’re ready for that, Summer? I’m giving you fair warning.”

I’m being playful, but I’m not joking. I’ve been ready to solidify where we stand for a while now. I don’t want to chase her off, though. So, if she needs things to stay nebulous, or to take our time before we talk this out, I want to give her what she needs. I’ve said it more than once—she’s worth the wait.

“Okay. I consider myself warned. DTR me, Ben.”

I chuckle.

“First of all, I’d love to call you my girlfriend. But, if you don’t like labels, I’m good with that. Either way, I’ve never been the type of guy to seriously date more than one woman at a time. You’re it for me as far as any woman I’m going to pursue. I’ve made that clear for a while, I hope. I plan on taking you on dates. I’m going to definitely do that—and not for curry. I may never eat curry again.”

She swats at me, but she’s smiling.

“If you let me, I’m going to date you. And I want to ... I don’t know. I just want to see where this could lead. I’ve never felt like this for anyone. You’re special. So, yeah.”

Man that was awkward. And totally not what I thought would come spilling out of my mouth. But it's all true.

"That sounds ... really good." Summer's voice is shy. "I don't mind the term girlfriend or boyfriend. And I definitely want to see where this could lead. I already told you I really like you. I don't say that lightly. It's not really the most ideal time for me to be getting into a serious relationship, but I don't want to put this off. I don't think I could if I wanted to."

"Because of the play? That's why the timing is bad? Because you're pursuing your career as an actress?"

Summer pauses, staring away and then back at me. "Yeah. That's mostly it. But I want to make the exception to that for you, Ben. I want to be with you as much as you seem to want me."

By the time we walk up to Summer's porch, I'm smiling so big I might never stop.

"Okay. Good talk," I say. Then I wink at her.

Summer shakes her head. "Thanks again, Ben."

"You don't have to keep thanking me." I pause, pulling her in for a hug. "But you can. I'm good with all the thanks and compliments, if you must."

I feel her chuckle against my chest. She tilts her chin up and I kiss her lips. She reaches up and runs her fingers through my hair, kissing me sweetly.

My girlfriend.

"Goodnight, Ben."

I watch as she walks up the porch steps and into her home.

I stand there until the door shuts and I hear the click of the deadbolt. Then I head home, pausing about a block away to let out a whoop and a jump like I'm celebrating a home run.

When I come into my apartment, Cam's still up. I stand right in front of where he's sitting on the couch. When he lifts his head from his book, I do a moonwalk, pivot, drop and do a

breakdance move called the worm, and then pop up so I'm facing him again.

“Oh, yeah! She's my girlfriend! Girl ... friend? Nope. Girlfriend. Smoosh those words together when you say it. She's my girlfriend.”

Cam shakes his head at me. “Good thing she can't see you now or she might reconsider that decision.”

“Not a chance, man. She's been Bentonated. Benmotized. Benverted.”

“What ... ? Nope. Nevermind.”

“Be happy for me. Summer's really into me. She's not fighting it anymore. She actually said she's not interested in anyone else. And she *is* interested in seeing where things could go between us.”

“I am happy for you. Really. That's awesome.”

“Also, if she ever offers to cook, like for you and Riley, or anyone, actually, tell her no. Insist on getting take-out. She cooks at defcon level. It's brutal. Just no. No cooking. She's perfect. And she can't cook.”

Cam laughs. “Duly noted.”

He folds his book closed and stands. “In all seriousness, Ben, I'm really happy for you. You deserve a woman who wants you the way you want her.”

We walk toward our bedrooms and I veer into the bathroom to get ready for bed. I'm still wrapping my mind around the fact that Summer is willingly calling herself my girlfriend.

When I walk back out into the hall, I pass Cam. “She's not fighting me anymore—not fighting the chemistry, or being with me. All the hurdles to us being together came from her not trusting me. But that's behind us. I can't imagine anything coming between us now.”

SUMMER

When life brings rain, you have no need to worry;

My umbrella's built for two.

~ Unknown

The next three weeks are filled with practices getting increasingly intense and consuming. When I'm not at practice, I'm working. When I'm not working, I'm with Ben. We're spending every possible minute together, either at his place, my place, or on the beach. When we have the rare half-day off together, we either swim in one of the heated pools at the resort, hike on the backside, or take kayaks out. Sometimes, after practice, I stop at Phyllis' and hang out with her. She's very pro-Ben. He's come with me a few times to visit her, and she adores him.

Today I'm at Phyllis' house for a whole other reason. Mila popped by with Noah, and we all sat chatting, but truthfully, I've been restless the whole time she was here. I need a sounding board, and I think Phyllis is my best bet.

On the other hand, I really like Mila. If I were staying here, she and I would become good friends, I can tell. She's down to earth, and she's a great mom. Noah's such a well-rounded kid, and I can tell it's partly because of the influence Mila's had as a mom. She doesn't coddle him, but she's attentive and affirming.

I don't want to rush them out the door, but when they stand to leave, a part of me settles. I was wondering if I would ever have Phyllis to myself, and not sure what I'd do if I didn't get the opportunity to pour my heart out to her today.

"Well, now," Phyllis says, shutting the door behind Mila and Noah. "You've got something on your mind."

"Is it that obvious?"

"To me, yes. You barely relaxed the whole time Mila and Noah were here. Is it dress rehearsals?"

"No. We're ready. James has been an amazing director. And the cast has really pulled together. The set is stunning. I'd say, barring any catastrophe, we're ready."

"What a thrilling feeling. I never tire of the way a show comes together. It's one of my favorite experiences in the world—only second to the feeling of performing in front of an audience."

"Agreed."

"So, what has you coming all the way out here to visit an old woman when you could be hanging out with that handsome boyfriend of yours?"

"He's working. Taking a group out snorkeling this evening before the sun sets."

"How are you two doing? Are you falling, Summer?"

"Falling? In love?"

"Well, I certainly didn't mean falling down a hole. Yes. Falling for Ben. Are you?"

"I think so. Yes." I pause.

Thoughts and images of Ben fill my mind. I feel the inevitable smile come to my face.

"I am. I mean, he's amazing. What's not to love? He's funny—goofy even. But able to be serious when needed. And he's so thoughtful and caring. We have unexpectedly deep talks, especially late at night. We'll sit on one of our couches, or out at the beach, and we just talk about anything and

everything. Well. Not everything. But the point is, he listens to me—really listens. He usually even hears what I’m not saying. That always blows me away. He’s interesting, and he wants to see me succeed in my dreams. And then there’s the ...” I blush. “I still don’t know how I misjudged him so completely.”

It’s obvious Phyllis picked up on my thoughts about the chemistry between Ben and me. When we’re together I can’t stop looking at him. I sit and stare into his eyes, or I watch him as he moves through the kitchen cooking, or walks ahead of me on a trail. If I get off from work earlier than him, I’ll make my way to the beach so I can sit at a distance and watch him interact with students for a lesson, or I’ll wait for him to come in from surfing. Then he’ll walk onto the sand, see me there, and that boyish smile that seems to come so easily to him will fill his face. He’ll walk over and shake water on me like a dog, or he’ll kiss me and I’ll taste saltwater and Ben, and wonder how I got so lucky.

“We see life through the lenses we’ve formed over our years of experiences,” Phyllis says.

“That’s definitely true.”

“So, you saw Ben through some warped lenses. But good for you. You stuck around to see if you were right or wrong. You didn’t push him away completely.”

“Only because he’s persistent. It wasn’t for lack of trying. I really gave him the royal brush off.”

“One of my favorite qualities in a man—unless he’s holding a camera and working for a tabloid.”

“Right?!”

“You have yet to know that side of fame, Summer. It’s no party. Trust me.”

“I can’t imagine it would be.”

“But you didn’t stay to ask me about my life as a starlet, now did you?”

“No, ma’am. I didn’t.”

“Ma’am. I love when you say that. I detect a southern accent sometimes when you say things like that. Is it ... Georgian?”

“How would you discern that from one phrase?”

“I have an ear for accents. I’ve heard yours slip out a few times. You drop your middle “r,” or you smooth out the ending of a word. Plus, when you’re really relaxed here, your pacing slows. No one would know unless they had trained their ears to detect and discern between, say, Tennessee, Georgia, and Texas. Those are three radically different accents. And then it depends where in each state you are.”

“Wow.” Since Phyllis figured me out, I drop my perfected California accent and allow myself to talk like I’m back home. “I’m impressed.”

“What I want to know, but won’t pry to find out, is why you would cover such a beautiful accent. Is it out of fear of being typecast in only southern roles? I would surely understand that. I mean, it happened to Julia Roberts at first, but then she was able to break out and do just about anything she wanted because her talent paved the way. And look at Matthew McConaughey.” Phyllis makes a show of fanning herself. “Yes. Let’s look at him, shall we?”

I giggle.

“But, of course, men in the industry make it further by nature of them being men. It is what it is. That’s changing some, but it’s still an unfortunate fact. We say things like, ‘Did you see the latest Tom Cruise movie? It had that one woman in it.’ We are not as good about remembering the names of females in film are we?”

“No, ma’am, we sure aren’t.”

“But again, I’m off on one of my tangents. Reel me in, Summer, or you’ll be here all day and night without spilling the beans you obviously came to spill.”

“It’s Caroline.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My real name. It’s Caroline. Caroline Milton, of the ‘Georgia Miltons.’ You probably heard of my daddy. He’s a Congressman. Mother is an heiress to a shower squeegee fortune. The Showereegee.”

Phyllis is quiet for a beat, but, bless her heart, she recovers quickly.

“I have one of those showereegees. Love those things. And yes, I’ve heard of your father, of course.”

“So ... I ditched the accent as a part of my disappearin’ act when I came out here. Sure, it helps me cast a wider net in auditions. But it served a far more practical purpose—staying under the radar. And, my agent helped me pick a stage name. I left Georgia after the scandal broke. I didn’t leave to pursue anything at first. I just bought a ticket to LAX and got on a plane. Once I got here, I realized why this was the place I chose. I always wanted to pursue acting. So I am.

“Daddy wants me home. He doesn’t know where I am—not yet. Suzette, my sister, knows. She calls me every so often. She tracked me down through a PI. But Daddy hasn’t found me. Though, we think he knows I’m in California now. He wants me to come home and stand by his side while he denies everything he did. If I’m there, colluding with him, I think he believes he’ll be more convincing. He’s already hushed up Lizbeth—the young woman he ... well. I think you know the rest.”

“I think I do too. So you came to Marbella to hide from him?”

“And to pursue acting. I truly do want to be an actress. Daddy wants nothing of the sort. In our world it’s common for people to be in nearly arranged marriages. There’s a small pool of candidates I’m allowed to date. And when I say candidates, I mean candidates—politically aspiring young men with promising futures in government. I’m being groomed like a horse for show. I’m supposed to marry an up-and-coming politician and be his arm candy, or whatever they think I’ll be. Acting is not in that plan.”

Phyllis sits back and crosses her arms over her chest. She looks at me for a good long while without saying much of anything. Then she says, “We need drinks. I don’t have sweet tea. But I do have apple cider we could heat up. Or if you want something stronger?”

“Cider sounds good.”

I follow Phyllis into her kitchen.

“Why did you come here to tell me all this today, Sum ... uh ... Caroline? Should I call you Summer or Caroline?”

“I think it’s best to call me Summer for now. Just to keep things safe and in case anyone were to walk in when we were talkin’.”

“Right. Good. Yes. That’s what we’ll do then.”

“I came to you because I trust you. And I need your thoughts. Well, I need someone’s thoughts that aren’t my own. Ben and I are getting close. Really close. And I haven’t told him any of this. I want to. The longer we’re together, the more I want to tell him. Almost every time we’re together, I nearly bust open and spill it all, but then I think about what this could mean to him. I want to protect him. I don’t want him caught up in this mess. But then, when we go our separate ways, I always feel awful that I’m not letting him fully know me.”

“He knows you, dear.”

“I know. But he doesn’t even know my given name.”

“And you aren’t telling him because ...”

“If my father catches up with me, he won’t be happy. And that’s an understatement. And he’s got plans, like I say. And he will see Ben as an obstacle. To my father, people like Ben are inconsequential. Ben has no connections, no prominent family lineage, no influence in the circles my father cares about. Daddy will go to any lengths to get me back home, under his thumb. And he’ll do what it takes to get Ben out of the way.”

“Well, dear. That’s a fine pickle.”

Phyllis busies herself getting out a pot and pouring cider into it, she plops a few cinnamon sticks and cloves in with the

cider and then she turns on the flame under the pot.

“What should I do?”

“I won’t tell you what to do. But I will tell you this. A strong relationship is built on honesty and trust. It’s built on a whole lot more than that, to be sure. But honesty and trust are critical. I do understand why you’re holding back. You want to protect the man you love from the man you fear. But one day, when you look back on this season—and it is a season because it will pass—you will want to know you did the best possible thing you could for your relationship, especially if that relationship is meant to last past this season.

“So, think well on what you’d want Ben to do if the shoe were on the other foot. And give that boy some credit. I think he’s proven himself time and again. He probably could handle your mess, as you call it, just fine. He’s chosen you. And that means he doesn’t have a taste for the easy things in life. He’s also waited patiently for you to come around. I’m guessing that kind of tenacity means he’ll ride out any number of storms with you. And wouldn’t you like him as close to you as possible through whatever comes next? Riding a storm out together with someone you love by your side makes the storm more bearable and it usually strengthens the bonds you share with that person in the process.”

SUMMER

*Write your secrets in the sand
and trust them with a mermaid.*

~ Unknown

“**H**eyyyy, Chica! How is my long lost roomie?”
Marissa’s energy could fuel a small city.

I turn the key to the golf cart, propping my phone on the dashboard while I put the car in reverse.

“I’m good. Just heading over to C-Side to meet Ben for coffee.”

“Ben, Ben, Ben. Ooo-weeeee. Did I call that or what?”

“Yes. Yes, you did. I’ll be the first to admit you called it.”

“I’m so happy for you, amiga. So happy. And I can’t wait to see the two of you in that play tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to come, you know.”

“I know you didn’t just say that. Of course I have to come. My roomie is in her opening night of the island play. I already got the next two days off so I can be there, so you can forget all about me not needing to be there.”

I smile.

“Thank you for that.”

I take a deep breath and prepare myself for what I'm about to say. "So, while you're here, I have something important I need to tell you."

"What? No me digas! Are you pregnant? Ay! Summer! No! I know that boy is handsome, but ... no. Summer, I leave you for all of one month and you ... Ay! Ay Yi Yi. Okay. Okay. No. Forget all that. What am I thinking? I should be your support. Yes. Okay. We'll deal with this. We will love this little bebé. Yes, we will. Of course we will. What a baby this will be—with you as the mama and Ben as the papa. This baby will be so beautiful—or handsome. Of course, if he's a boy, he will be handsome. But boys can be beautiful, no?"

"Are you finished?"

"I think so. Do you have a name? Is there an OB there on the island? Or do they only have that clinic at the resort? Ay. You will have to come here. My cousins will help you."

"Marissa. I'm not pregnant."

"What?"

"I'm not pregnant." I'm giggling.

"You're not? Are you sure?"

"Quite."

"Why didn't you say so? You let me get all crazy-loca over here. So, you're not pregnant? Are you engaged? It's soon. But I've seen that man. I get it. I don't blame you. Put a ring on that. And put me in the wedding. I don't have to be the maid of honor, but I'll be a good bridesmaid. I'm not insisting on being in the wedding. But I was the one who told you to go for it. Remember that when choosing your bridesmaids. I won't be upset if I'm not picked. Not too upset anyway."

"Marissa. I'm not engaged. Sheesh. Let me speak already. I have something to tell you in person. But I'm not pregnant. I'm not getting married. And no one died. Okay?"

"What could it be that you can't say it over the phone if it's not a wedding, a birth, or a funeral? You can tell me now."

"No. I need to tell you in person. Trust me."

“Of course I trust you.”

“I’m at the coffee shop. I’ve gotta go. I can’t wait to see you, though. I’ll see you tomorrow. Okay?”

“I’m so excited to come see you. Break a leg! Only don’t really. That’s the weirdest thing to say to someone.”

“It is weird. In the old days of theater it meant getting your leg over the line where you actually got to perform and get paid. It has nothing to do with crutches and bones.”

“Well, then, break a leg. I know you’ll be amazing.”

Marissa and I hang up. I look over at the door, Ben is leaning against the building, wearing his Ray Bans, looking sexy and sweet and irresistible.

I’m going to tell him everything about me, my family, my past. He deserves to know. My gut clenches at the thought. I’ve hidden so much from him. First, because I didn’t really know if I could trust him, and then because he swept me away and I lost myself in the early feelings of romance with him. But now, I don’t want to hide anything from him. I want him to know me. And if he doesn’t accept why I’ve held back from sharing my past, I understand. I’ll wait for him, just like he’s waited for me. He deserves that much—so much more than that. And I’ll give him all I have to give if he’ll let me.

“Get over here, Monroe.” Ben pops his sunglasses up on his head. “It’s been too long since I’ve seen your blue eyes up close. And calling you Kailani on stage doesn’t count. I want to look into your eyes and call you by name, and then I plan to kiss you.”

He’s talking loudly—like, he should dial it back, but I really don’t want him to, except people are staring. And he’s still standing leaned against the outside of the shop. I’m in the driver’s seat, giving him a look with my head tilted down just the slightest so I’m staring at him through my lashes—intentionally coy and playful.

He’s issued a challenge. He knows better. And he wants this—the pull we have between us, the one that makes us both bring our A game. I hope we’re still playing some form of this

tug-of-war when we're eighty. That thought makes me smile. It should make me recoil, put the cart in reverse and hightail it out of this parking spot. But I'm done running from Ben. I want him to catch me and keep me.

Ben pushes off the wall. "Always making me work for it, aren't you?"

"You like working for it."

"For you, I do."

He reaches me. And I think he's going to lean in and kiss me, or pull me out of the cart. Instead, he props himself on the roof of the cart with his arms folded overhead, and he bends so his head is above mine. He's a foot away, if that. I smell the mint of his mouthwash or toothpaste, the fragrance of his cologne, musky and spicy. And then this indescribable scent that is just Ben.

"Good morning, Summer."

He's oozing with appeal right now. I want to grip the lapels of the polo he's wearing and drag his face down and kiss him silly. But I sit still, waiting. Taunting him.

He smirks. He knows what I'm doing—what we're both doing.

"I'm going to get a coffee. Care to join me?" he smiles.

A lock of his hair falls forward.

I reach up and push it back, allowing my fingers to run through his hair and land on his neck.

"I'm here for you, Ben."

He grabs me so quickly and swiftly, I squeal. And I'm giggling as he lifts me so my feet don't even touch the ground. And then his lips are on mine. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back. He leans me into the frame of the cart, and deepens our kiss. When he pulls away, he's smiling like he won a prize.

His voice is gravelly and soft. "Mornin', Summer. Why do I miss you so much after such a short time away?"

He carefully lowers me. My feet hit the ground, but my arms only slide down to hold around his waist.

My voice is breathy. “I don’t know, but if you figure it out, let me know.”

“You miss me?”

“I do.”

“Well now, that pretty much made my day.”

He slips his hand into mine and leads me into C-Side. “Whatcha gettin’? Iced coffee or hot?”

“Hot. I want something to warm me from the inside when the morning feels foggy and chilly.”

“I’ll still warm you up.”

I giggle—like a proverbial schoolgirl. Free. Light. Safe. That’s how Ben makes me feel.

“You’re the best.” I look up at him, my face serious and open.

“I am, right?!”

“Ben. I’m serious. You are the best. You’re literally the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

His expression turns earnest, intimate. He stops walking toward the coffee bar. “And you’re the best thing that’s happened to me. I ... yeah. You are.”

His smile lights up his face. He places his palm on my back and walks us the rest of the way to the bar. We take two stools.

Riley’s already here working. “Hey, guys. What can I get you?”

We place our order. Ben regales me with a story of a boy he was teaching to surf yesterday. He gets all animated and excited when he talks about the boy finally catching a wave.

I glance over Ben’s shoulder. A middle aged man in a pair of khakis and loafers is staring at us intently. My skin gets goosebumps and a chill runs up my spine. The man doesn’t

look like he's here on vacation. There's a look to him that says *business*. He's definitely watching me, and not even hiding it. I should tell Ben, but I don't want to drag him into this if it's what I think it might be.

"Let's ... um ... take our coffees to go. We could walk on the beach."

"Uh. Okay. I thought you were cold." Ben's brows draw together.

"And I thought you'd warm me."

"You know I will." Ben turns to Riley and says, "Make those in to-go cups, would you?"

"Sure thing," Riley answers in a sing-song voice.

The guy is still staring straight at us. He gives me the creeps. Not that he looks shady. But that's the problem. No one my father deals with seems underhanded or questionable. They all appear to be upstanding and reliable. Wolves in sheeps' clothing.

Ben and I grab our coffees and leave C-Side. We walk out the back patio doors and stroll along the sand, sipping our drinks and talking. When I shiver, he pulls me near. I glance over toward the patio of C-Side and that man is standing near the edge of the concrete watching me and Ben.

"I've got to tell you something."

"Anything."

"I hope you mean that."

Ben stops walking and turns me toward him. He sets his coffee in the sand and braces my upper arms in his strong hands. "I mean it. But you're scaring me just a little. You're not breaking up with me, are you Monroe?"

"Not even close." I look up into Ben's warm brown eyes. "To be honest—completely honest—I never want to break up with you, ever."

Ben smiles. He leans in and places a kiss on my mouth. It's slow, and soft, and tender. I want to stand here soaking up his

kisses, but I have to get this out.

I pull away from the kiss, running my free hand down Ben's jaw and cupping his face. This is the last time I'll look at him before I spill everything. I'm hoping it won't be the last time he lets me touch him like this.

"Can we find somewhere to sit?"

"This *is* serious, huh?"

"It is."

"I'm all yours. Let's grab a bench."

The edge of the sand next to the street has a little walk path running north from the cafe. Benches are scattered every half-block or so. We find one and sit together.

I jump right in, knowing I can't wait to feel ready.

"So, I haven't told you much about my past—where I'm from, my family, a lot of things."

"Right ..." Ben's voice lifts like he's asking a question, or leaving me room to say whatever it is I have to say.

I take a deep breath. Then I look him in the eyes. "I came to California about five months ago—from Georgia. I didn't move around the south like I told you I had. I've lived in the same home—manor—all my life. It's a family estate."

"Okay." He's not ruffled yet.

As a matter of fact, he reaches out and clasps one of my hands in his, rubbing his thumb across my knuckles like I'm the one who is going to be blown away—like I'll need support and comfort. Maybe he's right.

"Anyway, my family is the Milton family. The Georgia Miltons?"

Ben shakes his head. Of course he doesn't know. I freaking love that about him. He's a simple man, open, candid, hilarious. He's focused on his close circle of people—his own family and friends. And now, on me. He's not keeping up with the Joneses, or the Miltons, for that matter.

“My father is a congressman.”

Ben lets out a low whistle. “Impressive. No wonder you didn’t want to give me the time of day.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No. That wasn’t it at all. Not even close. I’m not like that, Ben. I don’t care what someone does or where they’re from.”

“I know. I can tell that by the way you treat everyone in the cast, and by the way you came to my rescue even when you weren’t yet convinced of my utter awesomeness. You’re good people, Summer.”

“Maybe. But my family isn’t all good people.”

An unexpected tear comes to my eye. Ben’s face softens with compassion.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Come ‘mere.”

Ben extends his arms and I fall into them easily. He wraps me in the cocoon of his embrace and I nestle close. The tears come in waves. I’ve been holding all this in ever since I left Georgia—staying strong, pushing through, keeping my eye on the prize, trying to stay one step ahead of my father.

I push off Ben’s chest so I’m sitting upright again. I need to see his face when I tell him everything.

“My daddy ... well ...” I’ve never said it so plainly, or out loud. “He had an affair. I’m pretty sure he had plenty. But this last one was the doozie. It was with a girl who went to school with me and my sister. Her name is Lizbeth. She came forward with accusations, but now she’s retracting her story. I’m pretty sure she’s being coerced or paid off to keep silent. Daddy’s desperate. We know it’s true. It happened. Suzette, my sister, has evidence. She did her own sniffing around. I swear that girl could run the CIA. But God willin’ she won’t ever. Politics is something I hope we both steer clear of forever. Daddy doesn’t know that Suzette has proof. He’d go to any lengths to get her to suppress it. Anyway, when it all came to light, I took off.”

Ben tugs me in again. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart.

“You kept all this to yourself?” He searches my face. He’s not angry. Just confused. “Why? I would have been here for you. I want to be. I never want you to go through something like this alone again.”

Ben moves me back so we can look into one another’s eyes. His hands gently grip my upper arms. “Please promise me you’ll let me be there for you. I know we haven’t been seeing one another that long, but I hope you know you can trust me by now.”

I nod. “I do. I will. I wanted to tell you, but we’ve been so busy with the play. And I’ve been enjoying the sweetness of us getting to know one another. I didn’t want to mess that up with all this drama of everything I’m going through with my family.”

“I get that.”

“You do?”

“If I could build a fence around the bubble we’ve been sharing to preserve it somehow, I’d do it in a heartbeat. I’d give up my savings—which isn’t much, I’m sorry to say—to build a wall around us, to keep you to myself. I’d do anything to make sure you never change your mind about me.”

“I’m not going to change my mind, Ben.”

“You say that.”

His answer is raw. He’s not being a jokester to keep things light. I can see the questions in his eyes. He’s not sure I’m certain about him.

“I mean it,” I say, brushing my fingers along his jawline. “I want you to believe me. I might be hard to get close to, but once you’re in, you’re in. And you are as close as anyone has ever been to me. I’m not letting you go unless you want me to.”

“I don’t. I won’t ever.”

“You haven’t heard everything yet.”

He’s quiet, staring at me.

I take one more breath. I need to get this all out, even if it means Ben might change his mind.

BEN

*All the world's a stage,
all the men and women merely players.*

~ Shakespeare, As You Like It

I haven't taken my hands off Summer. I wish I could pull her closer, somehow take away the sting of what she's lived through. I want to be a buffer for her. One word fills my thoughts—alone. She's been facing this nightmare *alone*.

She's the strongest person I know. I already knew I was falling for her. This added knowledge about her family history and the courage it took for her to leave to follow her dream only intensifies my feelings for her.

She looks into my eyes like she's searching for something and I hope with everything I am that she finds whatever it is in me, in what I feel for her, in my willingness to be what she needs.

Her voice has a renewed steadiness. "I was in LA for a little while before I came over to Marbella. I found an agent through a series of events and a few connections. She's amazing, and she believes in me. One of the first things she did was to help me pick a name."

"For when you're in the movies."

"For that, yes. But she also knows my story. A lot of people out here don't know who the governor of Georgia is, let

alone our Congressmen. But, when she saw my name, she said, “Oh! You have the same name as the daughter of that congressman in Georgia—the one being accused of having an affair with a young woman half his age. I paused, unsure how to respond. She caught me off guard. My reaction gave me away.”

I nod, even though my mind is whirling. The reality washes over me again, like a returning wave. All this time, Summer’s been facing this situation, dealing with unthinkable stress and grief with no network of support—no best friend like Cam, no parents like mine, no community back home who would fly out here in a heartbeat if she needed them. I’m glad she has this agent. And I wish she would have told me sooner.

“Anyway, my agent, Elaine, didn’t dwell on the details. She just brushed her hands as if she were dusting away crumbs and said, ‘Well, let’s pick a stage name for you.’ And then she stared at me for less than a minute. It seemed to take her no time at all. ‘Summer! Yes. Summer. Look at you—blond, blue eyed, gorgeous. If you aren’t the epitome of summer, I don’t know who is. Tell me that’s your natural hair color. Oh, who cares? Just keep it dyed that color. Agreed? Agreed.’ She talks like that, all rapid-fire and down-to-business.”

I chuckle a little. Summer smiles. It’s a weaker smile than usual, though. I can sense how draining it is to share her past with me. I almost want to tell her to stop talking. She’s obviously reliving the pain while she discloses everything to me.

Summer takes a deep breath. “And then Elaine said, ‘Monroe. Like Marilyn. Yes! You’ve got iconic seductress written all over you.’ The heat of my blush rose up my face like a flame when she said that. But, I know Marilyn’s story, and I always thought of her as a phoenix, rising from the ashes of her past. And that’s what I wanted to be. So I took the name. Summer Monroe.”

“It fits you. And, yeah. You’re totally an iconic seductress.”

She laughs and smacks my chest. “Right. So iconic. Such a seductress.”

“You cast your spell over me the first day I met you. I couldn’t get you out of my head. You’re not like other women. Yeah. Face it. You seduced me.”

“Oh. My. Gosh! Ben!” Another smack. Then she gets a saucy look on her face. “Yeah. Yeah. That’s what I did. I seduced you—if by seducing you mean shutting you down like a leaking nuclear power plant. Oh, yeah. I seduced you.” Summer shakes her head lightly. Then she smiles up at me. “You’re too much.”

“You’re too much. You’re irresistible. I couldn’t have left you alone if I wanted to. Thankfully, I didn’t want to.”

“I’m just me.”

“Exactly.”

She studies my face. Then she leans in again, placing her head onto my chest. I wrap my arms around her, soaking up this feeling of holding her, being here for her. This is what I want to do for her for as long as she’ll let me.

“My real name is Caroline Milton.”

“Caroline?”

She lifts her head to study my reaction.

“Okay ... Caroline.” I try on the sound of the name. I look into her crystal-blue eyes, at the shape of her perfect nose, her defined cheekbones, the point of her chin, those lips that always beckon me to connect with her, to kiss her, to show her what she means to me.

Caroline.

It fits, and then it doesn’t. To me, she’ll always be Summer. Summer Monroe. My Monroe.

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

“I’m just taking it all in. And I’m trying to see you as a Caroline.”

She giggles a little. It's a bit nervous, but mostly she looks relieved.

“Does it suit me?”

“In a way. But I think it's going to take me a little while to get used to it.”

“You don't have to. I don't feel like Caroline Milton anymore. I like being Summer—being your Monroe.”

“I thought you hated when I called you that.”

“I did, but that was when I was resisting everything about you—resisting how you made me feel.”

“And how did I make you feel?”

I'm fishing. But also, I need to know.

“Crazy. Annoyed. So overwhelmed. But beyond all that, I couldn't stop thinking about you. It wasn't only because you wouldn't leave me alone. I kept trying to figure you out. That's the other thing I wanted to say to you.” She pauses. “My dad is such a charmer. He's got classic southern charm, but he's also manipulative and underhanded. I believed in him. I adored him. In my eyes, he could do no wrong. When his house of cards came crashing down, I was shattered. You came into my life right when I had hung a huge red flag over anyone who was remotely charming. I was sure you were a player—one more man using his looks and charisma to get women to adore him and do his bidding.”

“I'm sorry you went through all that you have. And I'm grateful you told me.”

“I wanted you to know. Also ...” Summer glances back at C-Side. “There's more.”

“About you?”

“About my dad. He's coming for me. Maybe not physically coming out here, but I wouldn't put that past him. Suzette keeps calling me every few days to give me an update. He's hired a P.I. He wants me back home. I think he's under the impression that I will help corroborate his lies.”

Summer looks over at C-Side again. “And today, when we were getting our coffees, I saw a guy. Maybe it’s nothing, but when we left, he followed us out and then he was standing on the patio watching us. He wasn’t merely looking in our direction. He was definitely watching us. I sound crazy. But I know what I saw.”

“I believe you. What did he look like?”

“Brown hair, wearing khakis and loafers.”

“Never trust a man who wears loafers.”

“Ben.”

“Right. No. Yes. Serious. I *am* serious—and I’m taking your situation super-seriously. I don’t want you to be alone today. Stay with me. If you see the guy again, tell me. You’ve been handling all this alone. You don’t have to anymore.”

“Thank you. I didn’t know if you’d be mad.”

“Mad?” That thought never occurred to me. “Why would I be mad?”

“I lied to you. I hid things from you—big things.”

“You had big reasons. I remind you of your dad—because I’m so charming. I get it.” I wink at her.

Yes. This is serious. And, I’m dead serious about protecting her. But I also want to lift some of the heaviness off her heart. And humor is my best available tool.

“You’re ridiculous. And charming—in the best way.”

“I am, right?”

“But you aren’t even a little mad?”

“Nope. It takes a lot to get me mad. I like giving people the benefit of the doubt. All I feel is concern for you. And I want to keep you safe.”

Summer puts her hand on my jaw. “You are the best kind of surprise.”

“I’d say the same about you.”

I want to kiss her so badly it almost hurts not to, but I don't want to make this moment about kissing. Summer's sharing her heart. A threat looms over her life, even now. I want to show her there's more between us than the obvious physical attraction.

But then Summer shifts and she puts her hand behind my neck and tugs me toward her. She kisses me like I'm her next breath. There's a newness to this kiss. Summer's all in, wanting me, giving herself more fully to me. Our mouths don't separate when I lift her and move her onto my lap. We wrap our arms around one another. But I can't get enough. My hands move down her arms, to her waist. I hold her to me, and then I trace my fingers gently up her jaw, trailing them above her ear, and down through her hair. She's gripping onto me, raking her fingernails over the back of my neck.

"Thank you," she says when she pulls her lips away from mine. She leans in and places the softest kiss on my mouth. Then she rests her forehead on mine. "Thank you for understanding, and for being here for me."

"I'm in your corner, Monroe. I'll be by your side in this from now on."

Another tear tracks down her cheek. I lift my thumb and swipe it away.

The words *I love you* sit on the tip of my tongue.

It's not time to say them. Not yet.

But I do love her.

I love this fiery, independent, soft, vulnerable, amazing woman. She's nothing like I expected the woman I fell for would be, but she's everything I never knew I needed.

Summer and I spend the rest of the morning together. I won't leave her side. I can't tell if that makes her happy, or if she feels like I'm being overbearing. Either way, I'm not leaving her alone with the possibility that the guy at C-Side actually is here on behalf of her dad.

Dress rehearsal that afternoon lasts nearly three hours. We run through the show from start to finish. At the end of the

final scene, Summer's gaze drifts up to the back of the amphitheater. She looks at me and mouths. *He's here.*

I turn my head in the direction Summer was looking and see the guy just as he walks out the back entrance toward the dirt path that leads to the main road. I have half a mind to follow him, but I hang back, following Summer's lead.

The next day is opening night. I work at the shack all day, so I can't be with Summer. She's working too—giving tours of the resort to guests and then she was assigned to be on call for the resort owner's visiting friend. Cam's at work, so I know he's got an eye on Summer. I didn't tell him details about what she's going through, but I told him I want to hear from him if Summer needs anything from me today. That at least put him on alert to keep an eye out for her. He doesn't know what he's watching out for, but he'll be my eyes on the ground.

I pick Summer up at five. Showtime is seven, but we need to be there early for costumes and makeup. As soon as we're in the amphitheater, all our thoughts turn to the play. There's a buzz you only find in theaters on opening night, people rush around getting dressed, fixing last minute snags in costumes, searching for props, running lines out loud. It's a purposeful mayhem of activity. And within an hour, the sound of the rows of seats filling with people filters backstage.

About ten minutes before "curtain," James steps onto stage to thank everyone for coming. He gives a short speech about the play, describing the pirate life and Captain Mack Calabran. Then he talks about the legends surrounding mermaids and the difference between mermaids and sirens. His speech is flowery and engaging, one showcasing his well-honed gift as a storyteller.

He finishes by saying, "Without further ado, my cast and I humbly welcome you to join us as we go *In So Deep.*"

The play goes off like clockwork. No one drops a line. The musicians accompanying us play flawlessly. The audience laughs, cheers, and holds their collective breath at all the times we would hope for those reactions. Both cast and audience are swept up into the lives of the characters as the story unfolds. I

am Captain Calabran. And Summer *is* Kailani. Intermission is a buzz of excited chatter. The smell of popcorn fills the amphitheater as vendors on the ground level pop fresh bags for the audience to enjoy during the second act.

When it's time for Summer and me to kiss, the amphitheater goes quiet. It's choreographed perfection. This is the captain and the mermaid, but it's also us. I cup her jaw, lean in and kiss her, my mermaid, my girlfriend, the woman who won my heart even though we are from different worlds.

The rest of the second act is filled with more action, including a full stage sword fight. The climax involves a confrontation between Kailani's father and the captain, where the actor playing King Aquatheus is raised at the back of the stage on invisible wires with multi-colored iridescent sheets surrounding and flowing down so that he looks like he's growing like a creature out of the plywood carvings made to look like waves beneath him.

And before we know it, we're performing the final scene.

I'm alone on stage with a single spotlight, certain Kailani has chosen to return to her life as a mermaid. Knowing she has to make a choice between a life with the captain on land and her life with her community of merpeople in the water.

Summer walks onto the stage wearing the flowing white gown she wears when she's on land in the play. The layers of silky, transparent fabric billow behind her and around her when she walks from the front corner of the stage to meet me at center stage. I have this flash of Summer, walking toward me down an aisle, but I shake that thought away. Right now, she's the mermaid, and I'm the captain.

"Kailani, you can't be here. Your time is up. If you aren't in the water by midnight, you will forever be human."

Summer answers me with her line. "I've considered my options."

She's now standing directly in front of me, sharing the spotlight on an otherwise pitch black stage.

"And you are willing to give up everything for me?"

“What would be better? A life in the sea without you? Or a life with you, but never to be a mermaid again?”

I look at Kailani—Summer. Counting to seven in my head, as James has taught me to do. Reaching out, but not touching her, a gesture of longing and release. When James coached us through this moment, he had said, “You love her enough to want what’s best for her, even if it means living the rest of your days without her.”

Summer says, “My choice is easy. I choose you.”

I lean in, putting my hand on her shoulder as Captain Calabran touches Kailani, but also as myself touching Summer. “You are greater than any treasure, wilder than any voyage, more captivating than any sunset over the open sea. I will make sure you never regret choosing me.”

And then Summer is on her tiptoes, and I am bending in to place a kiss on her lips. We remain connected as the amphitheater goes dark. And then the house lights are on and the crowd is on their feet, cheering and clapping. Roses fly onto the stage. The rest of the cast rushes out while music swells overhead—a jaunty pirate song. We take our bows. I never release Summer’s hand. She’s beaming—in her element, made for this. I’m so proud of her. So in love with her.

The cast takes one final group bow, and then people start to mingle. Audience members come up through the wings. Actors jump off stage and walk out to thank people for coming. The music continues to play, but it’s almost hard to hear the songs over the happy mingling of the crowd.

Summer’s grip on my hand tightens. I glance at her and then in the direction where she’s focused. This time, though, the man walks out from the wings and heads straight in our direction. I step closer to Summer, putting my arm around her shoulders.

She is not alone.

The guy approaches us, his gait purposeful, his eyes fixed on Summer. I feel her stiffen in my arms. I squeeze her shoulder, reminding her I’m here.

“I’m just going to tell him he has the wrong person. I don’t know any Caroline Milton. I’m Summer Monroe. He has the wrong girl. We must be doppelgangers.” She mutters, almost to herself.

“Good plan.”

The guy comes closer, and then he’s standing right in front of us, sticking his hand out to Summer as if she’s going to shake it.

“Summer, is it?”

“Yes?”

She doesn’t take his hand. I stand quietly, my arm around her, tugging her into my side.

“May I have a word with you?”

“You can talk to both of us,” I say before I think. “Unless you want to go alone,” I add as an afterthought, turning my head to look at Summer.

“No. I want you with me.”

Summer looks back at the P.I. “Anything you have to say you can say in front of him.”

The guy sticks his hand into his pocket, and when he pulls it out, he’s holding a business card, which he hands over to Summer.

Blithe Talent is embossed across the top of the card in a formal font. The man’s supposed name, *Jack Fielding*, is underneath, followed by *Talent Scout*.

“I’m representing Turner Brothers Studios for a film they have in the works. Auditions start in four days. We heard about you from your agent. Elaine Sharpe? So, my agency sent me here to scout you. You were everything she said you’d be. Captivating. Emotive. Versatile. You made this play come to life. In the best of ways, you stole the show.”

“Thank you.” Summer’s voice is soft and hesitant.

I give her shoulder a squeeze.

“We’re casting the new film by William Saint. It’s called *Untethered*. The premise is a young woman, coming of age. She’s left her childhood home in the US and she’s making her way through Europe. She meets a young man at a youth hostel in France. They spend a magical day together and part ways.

“This young woman ends up with the book he was reading in her backpack. She doesn’t know how it got there, but assumes it was a mistake. She thinks she has no way to reach out to him. They didn’t exchange personal information. She only knows his first name. She goes through the rest of her trip around Europe. We see her interacting with other people, yada yada. Reading the book on a train, in a cafe, at a farmhouse in the Black Forest region of Germany, at a cafe in Italy.

“Throughout the course of the movie, she experiences more self-discovery—like an *Eat, Pray, Love* thing, but in a coming-of-age version and with a far more artsy vibe. You’ll see. But she continues to miss this young man with whom she shared that one magical day. When she reaches the end of his book, she finds a note from him inscribed to her on the final page along with his address and an invitation for her to visit if she still wants to see him again. You would play Millie, the young woman. Riggs Mahone is already cast in the role of Stefan.”

I look down at Summer.

If this is real, she’s getting the big break she always wanted. Turner Brothers is a huge studio. Riggs Mahone is one of the top five young male actors in movies right now. Opportunities like this don’t just land in your lap. Even I know this is the chance of a lifetime.

SUMMER

If you give up on your dreams, what's left?

~ Jim Carrey

I walk Marissa to the dock the following morning. She keeps reaching out and holding my hand, or interlocking our arms at the elbows. I miss her more than makes sense, and she hasn't even left yet. We weren't roommates that long, but Marissa managed to storm my gates and make her way inside my heart in that short time. It would be easy to believe Marissa's like that with everyone, but I know her well enough to realize I'm as special to her as she is to me.

The sun is peeking through the haze and foggy morning mist, promising a sunnier day. Seagulls and pelicans dip and dive for their breakfast in the low waves nearer to shore. A breeze blows our hair around our faces. The moment feels nearly perfect.

After the play last night, Ben escorted me and Marissa home. We met Riley and Cam at the house after they stopped to pick up tacos for everyone on the way back from the amphitheater. The five of us hung out, staying up way too late laughing, eating and talking. The cast went out as a huge group, but I didn't feel like being surrounded by a crowd, so we celebrated opening night quietly—well, as quiet as it gets when Ben's in the mix and he's ramped up.

Once Ben and Cam left for the night and Marissa and I were alone in my bedroom, I told her everything about my dad, my decision to come to California and what the supposed talent scout had said. Marissa squealed and jumped around, insisted on meeting Riggs if I get the part, and then she immediately got on the internet to investigate the talent scout like some amateur hacker.

I let her dig.

I also had a very convincing voicemail from my agent, Elaine, who informed me she's known Jack Fielding for years. Jack already sent her the script for *Untethered*. He's seemingly legit. There's a small chance my dad somehow got to him, but I'm probably being paranoid by even thinking that.

The role isn't automatically mine. Everything hangs on how my audition with the casting director goes. Elaine told me to call Jack Fielding to set up the audition as soon as possible. She'd do it, but I know my schedule, so I'm making the call.

Marissa and I hug goodbye on the dock.

"You call me right when you have the audition. Not during the audition, obviously. Though, if you want to sneak footage of Riggs, I won't be mad. You know, you could even send me a selfie of you and him hanging out together like besties. I won't cut you out of the picture and tape myself into it. Nope. Don't even imagine me doing that. And, as always, no pressure. Just remember the little people." She pinches her fingers together with only a small space remaining.

"You're so ridiculous. I don't know if I'll even see Riggs. Or get the part. Or if this scout is really legit."

"Trust me. He's legit. I used all my top secret sleuthy skills to find out what's what. He's the real deal and you have a genuine chance at your big dream. Besides, your agent knows him. Relax, Summer. And, own this. They'll be lucky to have you. Remember that. You're not begging them. They are begging you."

"I'm not Zendaya. I'm nobody to them right now."

“No, you’re not. You’re not a household name—yet. But you’re Summer Monroe. You’ve got your own stamp of specialness. Specialty? Specialism? Ay! You’re special.”

I giggle lightly. Marissa pulls me in for a hug. I let her go when the boat horn blows, and then I stand there while she walks away. She pauses to wave to me and then she dramatically blows me a kiss before she boards the ferry that will take her back to the mainland. I don’t turn toward shore until the boat is out of sight. Then I stop at the shack, where Ben and Bodhi are working today.

I need to call that talent scout, but I feel unsettled. Maybe because I won’t know if this is real until I follow through with it. Maybe because I’m so close to my dream and it feels like a feather perched precariously on the edge of the outer railing at the top deck observatory of the Empire State Building. One untimely gust of wind could swish it away forever.

The shack door is open, but Ben and Bodhi aren’t inside. They’re sitting on a bench outside the shack, soaking in the sun and laughing when I walk up.

“There she is!” Bodhi says.

Ben stands and walks over to me, scooping me into his arms and planting a kiss on my lips right in front of Bodhi.

“Man, you two. You almost make me want to get serious with someone again.”

“Oh?” I ask. “Were you ever serious—about anything?” I smile over at him.

He knows I’m joking.

“Believe it or not, I had a serious long-term girlfriend. It was a while ago. She and I were on the circuit together. Big wave surf competitions. She could hold her own against any guy in the water. Still can.”

Kai rounds the corner and appears from behind the surf shack “Yeah. She’s the best of the best.”

Bodhi nearly blushes. He glances sheepishly in Kai’s direction.

“She’s my sister, Kalaine,” Kai says plainly.

Bodhi’s lips tuck in and draw thin. His usual playful flirtiness seems to have vanished like a fog off the coast.

“And it didn’t end well between one of my best friends and my baby sister.” Kai tips his head sideways toward Bodhi.

Bodhi raises his hand, confirming the accusation. “That would be me.”

“Which is why I warned them both to steer clear of one another in the first place. But of course, they had all the feels, and I was just the meddling older brother. But ...” Kai claps Bodhi on the back—loudly enough to make a smacking noise. “It’s water under the bridge, a wave that rolled in and went back where it came from. No harm, no foul. She’s still my sister and he’s still my friend. We all moved past it.”

“Yeah.” Bodhi rubs the back of his neck. “What he said. We’re past it. Totally over everything. So, yeah. Water under the bridge. Bygones and all that. The way I look at it, I’ve had my shot at something serious. And now I’m in love with the ocean. And life. It’s strictly bromances for me from here on out.”

“I’m not in a bromance with you,” Kai says. “That’s not what this is.”

Kai waves his pointer finger back and forth between himself and Bodhi.

“Man, rejected by both the Kapule siblings. I’m oh for two.” Bodhi laughs, seeming unaffected, but there’s a ghost of something in his eyes. Maybe it’s a ghost of someone.

Ben, ever the man to bring things up to a buoyant level, says, “You guys make a super-cute bromance. Just sayin’.” Before either of them can make a retort, Ben looks at me. “Well, Summer? Did you call that scout?”

“Not yet. I was hoping you’d be by my side when I do.”

“Of course I will. Want to call him now?”

“It’s not going to get any easier.”

After quickly filling Kai and Bodhi in about the talent scout, Ben tells the guys he's going to take a break. We walk down the dock a short distance from the shack and sit on the edge with our legs dangling toward the water. I pull out my cell and dial the number on the card.

"Blithe Talent, Jack Fielding's office. May I help you?" The woman's voice is crisp and professional. If he is faking this, he's going to extreme lengths.

He's not faking. This is it. This is your big break.

Ben's hand rests on my knee, as if he knows I need a physical reminder of his support.

"Yes. Hi. I'm Summer Monroe. Mr. Fielding told me to call him about *Untethered*."

"Oh, yes. Summer. He told me to prioritize your call. Let me put you through to Mr. Fielding. Hold please."

An instrumental version of a Taylor Swift song fills the line. I look over at Ben and mouth, "I think that was his secretary. She's getting Mr. Fielding."

Ben squeezes my knee. The last thought I should be having is about how his touch makes my skin tingle and come to life. But more than that, Ben anchors me. Getting this role suddenly feels secondary to what really matters. I look over at Ben. His brows are tugged together in a look of concern. I place my free hand over his.

"Summer?" Mr. Fielding answers.

"Yes. Hello, Mr. Fielding. I'm calling you back about the movie. *Untethered*?"

My voice does not sound like I'm a confident rising star. I sound more like a pre-teen shoving a cardboard display box in his face, asking him to buy non-name-brand chocolate bars to help support my trip to science camp.

Marissa's words filter through my head as if she's a little angel on my shoulder, only she's an angel in a cheerleading outfit with a shield and sword. Whatever. She's my angel. I get to dress her how I want.

They'll be lucky to have you. You're not begging them. They're begging you.

Maybe one day I'll believe that sentiment with the same enthusiastic assuredness Marissa does.

"The studio has Riggs scheduled for auditions in three days. His audition is more of a formality. Ideally, you would be there at the same time as Riggs. You two could run lines. The casting director can observe your chemistry that way. He's the one that wanted someone new—a fresh face. He told me, *We want to wow audiences with someone they haven't seen before.* And if I'm right, you're that fresh face, Summer. Would you be able to make the timing work?"

"I can make it work."

"I'm glad. They're really pulling out the stops to give you this opportunity. Normally, you'd go to an open casting call, and then possibly a second and third set of auditions before you would get to stand across from Riggs. We all saw your stock audition tape. The director also viewed it. That's why I was sent over to Marbella to watch you in person."

"I don't know what to say. You won't regret it." *Don't grovel, Summer. Rising star. Rising star.*

"Alright then. I'll send preliminary paperwork to Elaine. She'll get you the details as to time and place. I won't be there. My job here is done. I found you and vetted you. I'll send you the name of your contact at the studios in the information I send Elaine."

"Thank you, Mr. Fielding."

"Call me Jack. And, you're welcome. Now, go make me look like a genius for scouting you. Years from now, I want to be known around this town as the man who discovered Summer Monroe. Think you could make that happen for me?"

"Yes, sir." My southern accent slips out just the slightest under the influence of my emotions.

"Alright then. I need to get back to another call."

I say, "Goodbye," but Mr. Fielding's already hung up.

Ben's hand hasn't left my knee. I look down. My hand is gripping the top of his. He gives my leg a little squeeze. I look him in the eyes—those brown eyes, so honest and warm.

“I've got an audition. In three days. I'm actually auditioning for a role opposite Riggs Mahone.”

“He's nice looking. For a famous guy.”

“Ben. Oh my gosh. Are you jealous?”

He frames his face with his hands. “With this face? Me? Jealous? ... Should I be?”

“I don't want Riggs Mahone. I want you, Ben. I want you so much.”

“In that case, I think Riggs Mahone is about to be jealous.”

Before I know what's happening, Ben stands and lifts me off the dock. I grip around his neck and he spins me. He whoops like his team just won the Superbowl. Only, I'm his team. He's cheering for me. My insides feel like pure helium, pink clouds, soft rays of light and wisps of air. Ben's celebration catches me up and carries every part of me away on the easy breeze of his joy. I have the opportunity to audition for the role of a lifetime. Ironically, that's not making me nearly as giddy as the man who can't stop saying, “You did it! Monroe, you did it!”

When we stop spinning, I wrap my legs around Ben's waist and he holds me close. He tilts so my head falls away just enough for our eyes to meet, my hair falls like a curtain behind me. His eyes fill with sincerity. “I'm so proud of you, Summer.”

I don't have words. My emotions swirl and bubble, float and swoosh. I'm not even interested in making sense of them. My whole universe consists of two things: this smile on my face that won't quit, and the strong arms of this gorgeous man holding me. So, I lean in and kiss Ben. His lips meet mine and his grip around me tightens, pulling me near, holding me, suspended in his arms. I deepen the kiss. It expresses all my innermost thoughts I can't say yet:

You're everything, Ben. I love you.

He separates from me, kissing along my jawline, planting soft kisses on my eyelids and the tip of my nose. Softly brushing his lips across mine. “You’re amazing. You know that, right? You’re going to be ... anything you put your mind to, Monroe. This is it. I feel it. This is the beginning of your career. Buckle up. It’s about to get real.”

I nuzzle into his neck and whisper, “I hope so. I really hope so.”

SUMMER

*Sometimes it's the smallest decisions
that can change your life forever.*

~ Keri Russell

The next two days simultaneously drag along and fly by. I've got work. Ben's got work, but at night, we walk along the shoreline, sit on a lounge on the sand, kiss, hold hands, and talk until way later than we should. I'm short on sleep, but I feel anything but deprived. Ben's becoming a constant in my rhythm like the moon in the night sky, shedding all the light he gathers into my otherwise dark and murky life. And when he's near, everything is just a little more magical and a whole lot more luminous.

My audition is tomorrow. We only had one show opening weekend, but next weekend we have three: Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday mid-afternoon.

Riley and I are getting ready to go out on a double date with Ben and Cam in less than an hour. The four of us are unofficially and preemptively celebrating my audition. They all say they're celebrating me getting my big break. I'm not as optimistic. Okay. I'm not optimistic at all. Maybe I was a carefree child, but if life has taught me anything, it's how disappointment can lurk around any corner. Then again, these past few months I've learned something else. If you let it, hope

can be around the corner too, chasing disappointment down and bringing it to its knees.

“Do these shoes match my shirt?” Riley pokes her head into the bathroom where I’m putting final touches on my beach waves before swiping one more pass of mascara over my lashes.

“They do.”

I whistle like a group of construction workers watching a bombshell walk by in a pencil skirt.

Riley laughs hard. “Oh my gosh! Where did you learn to whistle like that?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I used to whistle for our dog when he was loose on the lawn. It just about killed my mother. So very unladylike.”

I told Riley everything too. Ben encouraged me, promising I could trust her. I didn’t even need his endorsement. I know Riley has my back. Now, five people know my past and the present threats I’m facing. They know the scandal surrounding my family, and they know me. I hadn’t come here planning to find a network of support. I actually thought I’d avoid entanglements, keep my head down, and make my way in Hollywood. But people like Marissa and Ben, even Riley, won’t stand for letting someone navigate the treacherous experiences in life alone. Persistent, relentless lovers—that’s what they are. They refuse to give up the hope that you will someday let them near enough to show you how much you matter—how you are not as alone as you imagined you were.

The guys show up and each of them make their own respective beeline to their girlfriend when Riley opens the door. Ben holds me back at arm’s length, taking me in from the tips of my red high-heeled sandals, up my tanned legs and along the flowing skirt and shape-conforming bodice of my ruby dress, up to my lips, painted the same color as my dress and shoes. His eyes are molten, a brown ember of longing. His face fills with a playful promise that he’ll reward me for the effort I put into looking my best. I’m the only woman in the world as far as he’s concerned.

“I think we ought to stay in. You’re far too beautiful to take out where men will gawk and women will end up with inferiority complexes. Let’s spare them all and order in.”

“No way, Jose.” Riley gives Ben a teasing sidelong glance. “We got all dressed up. You two are taking us out to eat and then we’re going dancing. No reneging.”

“I’m kidding, Rye Rye. I want to celebrate Summer properly. And I want to dance with her—this time, with her facing me and cooperating.”

Riley’s face scrunches up. I know exactly what Ben’s talking about.

“Let’s go. Reservations are at seven thirty,” Cam says, holding the door so Riley can pass in front of him.

“Okay, Dad,” Ben teases. “But I’m not coming home before curfew, so you may as well ground me now and get it over with.”

Cam shakes his head. He laughs, though. The two of them are such an odd pairing, but in another way they make good sense. Kind of like me and Ben. We balance one another.

I look at Ben, his hair is styled back with some sort of product—maybe a sea salt spray—making the waves more pronounced. He’s wearing a navy polo shirt and cotton shorts. He looks casual, but dressy, and my heart can barely contain the way I feel about him. I’m pretty sure the feelings I have for Ben might be the strongest any human has ever felt for another. Maybe only eclipsed by how he seems to adore me.

Is everyone this wholly consumed by another person when they find the one they’re meant to be with? Like they’d do literally anything simply to see them smile? Like life only makes sense when they are in the same room as you? Like nothing matters but a future with them in it?

I walk over to Ben, stand on tiptoe and place a soft kiss on his cheek. He’s clean-shaven, and he smells of cologne and saltwater and the residue of sunscreen that seems to linger even after he showers.

“What was that for?” he asks.

“Just because.”

“Just because is my favorite.” He leans in and kisses my temple. Then he breathes these words into my ear. “You’re my favorite, Monroe.”

“And you’re mine.”

I reach up and rub the light red mark from my lipstick off his cheek.

“Let’s go, you two,” Cam says from the doorway. “Unless you want Riley and me to go ahead?”

Riley grabs Cam’s hand and tugs him a little.

“He’s really not that ...” Ben starts to say. “Nah. No. He is. He totally is.”

“Punctual? Responsible?” Cam supplies, walking slightly ahead of us.

We step out the door and follow Riley and Cam down the walkway.

“Uptight, rigid ... grandfatherly.” Ben counters.

“Adorable, cinnamon roll, thoughtful, sexy,” Riley shouts back to us.

“Love is blind,” Ben says in a stage whisper, totally intended for Cam’s ears.

“That explains a lot about why Summer gave you a chance,” Cam shouts back.

They both burst into full laughter.

I smile. I’m not used to this kind of easy banter between men. Usually it’s a lot of posturing and blowing smoke where I come from. Everyone wants something from everyone else, only they are all trying to act like they aren’t using one another.

“He’s great,” I say in a low voice to Ben.

“He’s totally not,” he says with a wink. Then his voice grows serious. “And I’d die for him. And he’d return the favor. Except. I’d be dead, so he wouldn’t have to.”

I laugh softly. “I love that you have one another.”

“I love . . . that I have you.” Ben gives my hand a squeeze.

“You do, you know. You have all of me, Ben.”

He wags his eyebrows down at me. “That’s all I want, Monroe. All of you.”

We catch up with Riley and Cam as we approach the quaint Italian restaurant a few doors down from the resort. The small tables for two or four diners each are scattered through the room, covered in white table cloths, one lone tea light in the middle of each. Italian music plays through overhead speakers.

We’re seated. The waitress brings us bread and makes a show of pouring oil on a salad plate in the middle of the table, followed by a drizzle of balsamic and a sprinkle of herbs. We dip our bread into the mixture while we talk and laugh, put in our dinner order, and talk and laugh some more when the food comes.

We’re finishing our meal, reclining at the table. The mood is light and easy between the four of us. Cam leans back in his chair, looking deceptively relaxed and unintentional.

“What’s going to happen to Ben, Summer?”

Ben’s gentle grip on my hand tightens just the slightest. He seems to always need to touch me, putting his hand on mine, wrapping an arm around my shoulder, resting his palm on my knee. It’s like he’s afraid if he disconnects, I’ll float away. Or maybe it’s just the chemistry between us—and the overwhelming tug to be nearer. Always nearer.

“What do you mean, Cam?” Ben answers for me.

“I mean,” Cam turns toward me from his angle across the table. “Will you expect him to go with you when you start filming full time?”

“Go with me?”

“This isn’t your business,” Ben answers almost on top of my response.

“It’s my business. You’re my best friend. You’ve never been this swept up in a woman. I like her for you. I really do.” Cam turns to me again. “I really like you, Summer. I’m not trying to be difficult here. I just want to know if you plan to stick this out or leave him now that Hollywood came calling.”

Riley scolds Cam. “Babe. That’s still pretty harsh. We’re enjoying a meal here. It’s Summer’s big night. Let’s focus on that.”

Ben pulls me in, tucking me close. My chair will tip if he pulls on me any more than he is.

Cam looks at Riley. “I’m just trying to look out for my best friend.”

“He can look out for himself,” Riley says at the same time Ben says, “I can look out for myself.”

I cut in. “I’m not planning on leaving Ben. Not at all. I actually understand why you’re asking.”

Ben looks over at me with a baffled expression.

“He’d give his whole heart to me,” I say to Cam. “I get it. You want to protect him from heartbreak.”

Then I turn to Ben. “You would. And if I weren’t going to be worthy of that, I’d want someone to make sure you knew the score. But I’m not going anywhere. I mean, I may get this role. And we’ll have to work that out. But I have no intention of leaving you.”

“I have no intention of leaving you either.” Ben kisses my temple.

Then he turns to Cam. “Happy?”

“Extremely. I’m happy for both of you.”

Cam sits back with a posture that says his work here is done.

“Who wants to go dancing?” Riley asks.

We pay the bill and walk the few blocks over to Club Descanso, the first place Ben ever danced with me, only this

time I want to dance with him. I want it more than just about anything else in the world.

We're showing the bouncer our IDs when my phone buzzes. I pull it out of my purse and check who's calling.

I look up at Ben. "It's Suzette. I'll be right in."

Ben looks at me with a questioning expression. "I'll stay out here with you if you want."

"I know you would. Just go ahead in. Grab a table if you can get one. I'll be right there."

Ben reluctantly leaves my side.

Suzette doesn't even wait for me to say, "Hi." She just jumps in with "Daddy's in California!"

"What? What do you mean he's in California?"

My body feels like ice. Ice and lead.

"He flew there yesterday. His guy traced you to Hollywood. He found your agent."

"He what?"

"I'm sorry, Caroline. He's there. Daddy isn't waiting for anyone else to look for you. He's there himself."

Breathe.

Breathe.

In. Out.

In. Out.

He still doesn't know where I am. He's in L.A. I'm in Marbella. Elaine won't tell him. I trust her. She's in my corner.

Ben.

I can't let Daddy get to Ben. I don't know how, but if I have anything to do with it, those two will never meet.

I feel my grip on my phone tighten to the point that it's digging into my fingertips and my knuckles are straining.

"Caroline?"

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m just thinking. Did he tell you he’s here?”

“I overheard him telling Mama that he found you and your vacation is over. He said he was coming to bring you home.”

“He’s not. I won’t go with him.”

“I know. And he won’t force you, not physically, at least. But he’ll do everything he can to make you choose to come.”

I breathe again.

In. Out.

In. Out.

“Thank you, Suze. Don’t worry about me, okay? It’s going to be alright.”

“I hope you’re right. Of course you are. You’re definitely right. Don’t stress, Sweet C. It’s going to be alright, like you say. He might have some strings to pull, but he can’t touch what matters most.”

“Right? Right.”

“Are you alone?”

“No. I’m with friends. I just stepped away to take your call.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re with friends. Go be with them. I’ll call if I hear anything else.”

“Thanks, Suze. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s all manis and facials over here. September means a new fall wardrobe. Can’t be wearing last year’s fashions. You know how it is.”

I laugh. It sounds tinny and shallow to my ears, but it’s still a laugh.

I glance over at the doorway of the club.

Ben’s stepping past the bouncer and slowly walking toward me.

“Suze, I have to go. I’ll talk to you in a few days, okay?”

“Love you, C.”

“Love you, too.”

Ben walks up to me as soon as I hit END.

“Everything okay?”

His face is gentle—brows tilted up together, eyes soft, lips tucked in slightly.

There’s this sliver of a moment where I consider hiding this new revelation of Suzette’s, going into the club, dancing like nobody’s watching, letting Ben hold me under the flashing lights, drowning myself in the roar of the music and the thrum of the bodies on the dance floor.

I can’t. Somehow, over the course of the past few months, Ben has chipped away at the stone around my heart, climbed the barbed wire fencing, and legitimately charmed his way into a space never occupied by any other person. My heart is so full of Ben, I can’t feel where it starts and he stops. He is my heart now. And that means he needs to know everything. No holding back. No hiding. No walking this labyrinth alone.

“That was Suzette. My dad is in California. He found my agent. He’s here to try to take me home.”

Ben steps closer to me. He reaches his hand out to cup my face.

“I’ll go with you to your audition. I’ll sleep on your couch. I won’t leave your side. Tell me what you need. I’m here. You’re not alone in this.”

“I know. And, thank you. But you can’t do all that. You’d have to give up your job and everything else that matters to be with me every moment. That’s irrational and it would be unhealthy. You need to live your life. I need to live mine.

“I know my father. He wouldn’t ever endanger me physically. He’ll play dirty, but he won’t ever outright harm me. I can handle this. It just caught me off guard.”

“Come ‘mere.” Ben pulls me in. I tuck my head under his chin and wrap my arms behind him.

“We’ll get through this, Summer. We’ll face it together.”

“Thank you.” And there the words are again, resting on the tip of my tongue. Barely constrained, tickling and pushing to fall out, to be heard.

I love you, Ben.

Love isn't even big enough of a word.

You are everything I never knew I needed in a man, in a friend, in a soulmate.

I love you.

I love you.

But I can't tell him—not now. I want to tell him when we're cuddled up somewhere, our breaths mingling, our hearts beating together. I want to say the three most important words I'll ever say to him when we have time to let our kisses linger and when my words won't feel like a life ring I'm throwing or clinging to in the face of danger.

We hold onto one another for a while, across the street from the club, with the bouncer as our only witness. Finally, when my heart rate has returned to normal and the music catches my attention over the roar of my fears, I ask Ben if he still wants to go dancing.

“With you? Monroe. All I want to do is dance with you. But only if you do.”

We cross the street and enter the club. For the next few hours, I move my body to the music, dancing to the up tempo songs with Riley, Cam and Ben, and losing myself in Ben's embrace as we sway together to the slow songs.

I Knew I Loved You by Savage Garden plays, and Ben leans in, singing the words into my ear in that voice of his that feels like buttery leather with just the slightest rasp to it. I melt into his arms, wrapping my hands behind his head and tugging his face until his lips are right in front of mine.

“You gonna kiss me, Monroe?”

“If you keep singing like that, I am.”

“Good to know.”

His smile matches mine, and then our lips are together as we sway to the lyrics about finding the one. I might not be able to verbalize all my feelings yet—but this song and the way we’re holding one another like we’ll never let go—maybe that begins to say everything for me.

Ben pulls his mouth away, leans our foreheads together, and rests the tip of his nose against mine. He’s smiling a sated, private smile. I know my smile is a mirror of his.

The next song starts. An upbeat old-school disco tune. The crowd descends onto the dance floor. Ben and I stand there, swaying in one another’s arms, oblivious to the beat, or the people, or anything that isn’t just me and him and this undeniable pull that we’ve always felt since that first day on the pier.

We don’t close the club down, but we’re out later than I planned, considering I need to hydrate and sleep. But I wouldn’t have slept anyway with the call from Suzette setting all my nerve endings on edge.

After a goodnight kiss on our porch, Ben reluctantly leaves to walk home with Cam. He asked one more time if I wanted him to stay on my couch. It wouldn’t make a difference. And I’m not about to start asking him to bend his life for remote possibilities and boogie men. For all I know, my dad will never find me. His trail of clues may end at the mainland shore.

Even as I think that, I know it’s wishful. My dad will not give up. And he wouldn’t have come all the way out here if he weren’t very certain he’d find me—or that he already knows where I am.

I wake early to catch the mid-morning ferry. I’m brushing my teeth when my phone rings.

It’s Elaine.

“Summer, I’m so sorry.”

“What? Elaine? What’s wrong?”

“The audition has been canceled. The studios are very apologetic and also vague. They said they realized you weren’t

the talent they were looking for in this role. After all the standard protocol they bypassed to get you in there, it doesn't make sense."

"It's my father."

Elaine is quiet.

"He came to you, didn't he?"

"He did. But I didn't say a thing. I told him I don't have any clients named Caroline Milton. He ranted on asking if I knew who he was. I told him I did, but that didn't change the fact that I don't represent a Caroline Milton. That's the best I could do."

"Thank you, Elaine. You are the best."

"I am, aren't I? And believe me, if there were any way I could have salvaged this for you, I would have. Turner Brothers' rep was just so vague. It's not usual for them to pursue someone so relentlessly without any major filmography in their background, and then to simply turn and change their minds. Studios can be fickle. This whole industry is, but this is exceptional both in the way they sought you out, and the way they flipped the switch. I'm sorry."

"I understand. My father's trying to smoke me out. He has connections everywhere. I'm sure you know politics and Hollywood are bedfellows. He's probably figuring I'll come out of the woodwork if he gets my auditions shut down. I know how he operates. I'm not going to play by his rules, though."

"I'll keep knocking on doors, Summer. We'll find you something. This is by no means the end. This opportunity was a surprise. It would have skyrocketed your reputation—put your name out there, kickstarted your career and made the next offers roll in. But losing this isn't the end of your road. We'll get the next opportunity lined up soon. Besides, you still have to finish out the play over the next month."

"Thank you, Elaine."

I can't help thinking Daddy will knock on doors at twice the speed of Elaine Sharpe. And he'll make sure each one is

locked behind him.

I know the truth.

Now that my father has found a way to stop studios from working with me, he will barricade every opportunity until Hollywood ghosts me and my dream is buried in a shallow grave.

BEN

*The sun loves the moon so much,
he dies every night to let her breathe.*

~ Jeffrey Fry

I've just taken a group out for an early snorkel around the kelp beds. We're a cluster of rubber-clad bodies, stripping wetsuits on the dock around the shack, glowing with the aftermath of a visit to what feels like another world full of multicolored fish and softly swaying sea vegetation.

I glance across the sand and imagine I see Summer strolling along the shoreline. That woman could be the twin of my girlfriend, right down to the way she moves. I look away. There's only one woman for me, and she's on a ferry halfway across the channel right now. I wanted to see her off, but I had to work early for a dawn surf session this morning, and then I had this group to organize and lead.

I start to gather fins to place in the Rubbermaid tub so we can rinse them before restocking the rental slots for the next snorkeling outing. My gaze lifts as the woman on the beach walks closer to the shack. It is Summer.

I drop the fin I was holding into the bin and run toward her in a slow jog.

When I reach her, I stop in my tracks. Her eyes are rimmed with red. Her head bowed down. She doesn't even seem aware of me.

“Hey,” I say softly. “What’s up?”

Her head lifts. She swipes her hair back off her face.

In a voice too soft and resigned to be recognized as hers, she says, “Oh. Ben. Hey. The audition was canceled.”

“What? How? Did they reschedule?” I already know from her posture and the look on her face they didn’t. She lost the audition.

I step in and pull Summer into my arms, wanting to absorb all her pain and heartache—to suffer so she doesn’t have to.

“It’s my daddy. I’m sure of it. He got to them. He’s making sure I don’t have a chance. He wants to narrow the road until it only leads to one destination—our home, in Georgia. I tried buying a coffee this morning. My card was declined. I have another account, so I’ve got some funds for now. But the main money I was living off ... he shouldn’t even have had access to that. It had thousands, Ben. Thousands. Like, more than thousands. A lot more. And now, the account is locked. I can’t get into it.”

She tips her head up and our eyes meet. She’s burrowed into me. My hands are rubbing her back in what I hope is a soothing rhythm.

“He’s going to play dirty,” Summer says. Her eyes glisten with leftover tears, or maybe fresh ones not yet shed. “I knew he would. He figures if he puts up roadblocks to my dream and cuts off my finances, I’ll leave California and come back with him. I’m not, Ben. I’m not.”

“Darn straight you’re not. If I have to fund you and we have to make Indie films until doors open, that’s what we’re doing.”

One corner of Summer’s mouth lifts in an attempt at a smile, but it drops again too quickly.

I don’t understand a father who would thwart his own daughter’s success. The concept feels so foreign to me. All I want to do is see Summer soar as high as she can go. I’d give up everything to see that happen. And if I ever have a daughter, the world better make way for her. I’ll be the crazed

dad making a fool of myself just so she never has to wonder if anyone's in her corner.

“He might be out to sabotage you.” I give Summer a squeeze. “But I'm here to make sure he doesn't have the final word.”

She snuffles. Her eyes are still trained on mine, blue like a stormy ocean before a squall. Intense, deep, full of mystery.

“I ... thank you so much.”

“Me too.” I say, hoping that the “*I*” she started with was about to lead to a big profession, one I'll make when she's not one brush away from crumbling. *I love you, Summer. I love you with every breath. With every molecule of who I am.*

“What can I do for you today?” I offer. “I get off early.”

“Nothing. I'm just going to take this walk. Then I'm going to go take a nap and hope I wake up to something more promising. Maybe I'll wake up to discover I've been having a nightmare and it's actually the morning of the audition and I still need to catch the ferry.”

I nod, not knowing what to say to that.

“Can I come over after work, or do you need space?”

“I'll just be drowning my sorrows in old movies and homemade popcorn. I can make that without burning the cottage down.”

“I love old movies and popcorn.”

“You do not.” She chuckles lightly, her body softly moving against mine with her laughter.

“Okay. I don't love them. I like them well enough. But I love sitting on your couch, holding you while you watch them.”

“I think I could be into that.”

“I'll be there after I shower from work.”

“I'd like that. I promise not to cook anything besides popcorn.”

“Sounds just right. I’ll bring you something from Gabby’s. How about a beef dip and their seasoned fries?”

“Definitely. You know the way to a girl’s heart, charmer.”

“I only care about knowing the way to your heart, Monroe.”

Summer tilts her head up and stands on tiptoe, brushing a careful kiss across my lips. I tug her close and hold her. Then I remember I’m on the clock.

“I’ve gotta run. We have a group that’s turning in their snorkeling gear right now. I’ll see you around four, okay?”

“Sounds perfect.”

I reluctantly release Summer and head back toward the shack. When I look over my shoulder, she’s strolling back along the shoreline, looking out at the ocean in the direction of the mainland, where all her dreams have risen and fallen in the short span of a week. And where the man who should be her number one fan is strategically dismantling her opportunities.

An idea forms in my head. I don’t know if it will work, but I have to take a shot.

I check on the group of guests, who are mostly out of their wetsuits and toweling off in the swimsuits they wore underneath. Rubber suits line the dock in piles with snorkels and fins scattered in the mix. I’ll clean it all up shortly. Once the tourists clear out and head back toward the resort, I leave the mess on the dock and go into the shack to grab my phone. I look up a number and make a call. Then I text Summer.

Ben: Change in plans. I’m going to run an errand after work. I’ll be to your place closer to six. Is that a problem?

Summer: No problem. Whenever you get here will be fine. I’ll just be watching a themed marathon of movies: *Love Affair* from 1939, *An Affair to Remember*, the more recent *Love Affair* from 1994, and *Sleepless in Seattle*. It’s about seven and a half hours of movies.

Ben: Should I be worried?

Summer: Because three of those films are based on near-affairs?

Ben: Exactly. And also, you're planning on slipping into a movie-induced coma.

Summer: How did you know what they're based on?

Ben: My mom. I can't wait for you to meet her. You two will bond over old movies, and so much more. She's going to want to keep you. Consider yourself warned.

Summer: Maybe I want to be kept.

Maybe she wants to be kept? Oh, I'm keeping her. I hope she knows that.

Ben: I think that can be arranged. I'll keep you if you keep me.

Summer: Deal. And stop making me smile when I'm trying to play the part of the brooding actress who lost her chance at her big break.

Ben: I'm making you smile?

Summer: You always do.

Ben: I always will.

I watch my phone screen as a photo of Summer smiling shyly, but sweetly, pops up.

Ben: My new screensaver. I have to go. Alicante's paying me to do things besides flirt with the local starlet.

Summer: Pesky jobs. They ruin everything.

Ben: They won't ruin everything forever. You're going to rise above this. We will. Trust me.

Summer: I do.

I send her a heart emoji and that one emoji face with all the hearts floating around it. I think that means kissing. I sure hope it does. Half the time I avoid emojis hoping I don't send one that means something other than what I want to say.

Summer sends me the same floating hearts emoji back and that one of the lips covered in red lipstick and puckering. I'm

ready to clock out and jog the four blocks to her house when I see that one, but I busy myself rinsing and restocking wetsuits instead.

After work, I leave Bodhi and Kai at the shack and grab a golf cart to drive toward the north shore. I park the cart outside the older home and stride up the porch steps in two bounds. My knock is firm. Phyllis opens the door right away.

“I love the sight of a man on a mission for his woman. This is the stuff all great love stories are made of.”

I chuckle. “I’m not very well versed in what love stories are made of, though Summer’s teaching me by way of old flicks. She loves those things. Half the time, I drag her out of the house to walk on the beach with me or to go kayaking or hiking. But the other half the time, she’s got me curled up on her couch so we can watch two people who died years ago in a black and white film, or when I’m lucky, color. Sometimes it’s a musical. I like those. My mom was into all that too—still is. So, I recognize more of them than I’d like to admit.”

“Sounds like you come by romance honestly. Either way, this idea of yours is genius.” Phyllis steps inside. I follow her. “I’ve just got to grab my purse and the tray of lemon bars.”

“Lemon bars?”

“They’re Alana’s favorite. Can’t hurt.”

“Should I be nervous?”

“No. That wouldn’t suit you at all. I can’t imagine you get too nervous over much. You’re sort of a leap first, look later type. Aren’t you, Ben?”

“My dad used that exact expression about me many times over the years, only not with as much affection. He kept telling me I ought to look before I leap. I would. If I could.”

Phyllis’ laugh is raspy and worn in like a favorite pair of old shoes.

“Well, I say, keep leaping first if it’s worked for you this far.”

Phyllis ducks into the kitchen and emerges with a glass casserole dish full of what I assume are lemon bars, and her purse looped over one arm. “Well, let’s get to it. If you drive, I’ll be the best back seat driver you ever knew. But I think I’ll drive. It’ll keep you on your toes.”

“Do you have your license?” I regret the question as soon as it’s out of my mouth.

Phyllis smiles. “Careful, young man. I’ll retract everything I said about you being naturally romantic. I live on an island. And, I’m about to ‘do you a solid,’ as you young people call it.” She makes air quotes around, *do you a solid*. It’s hilarious. “You need me right now. I can drive, and I’d like to meet the person who tries to stop me.”

Hoo-boy. This should be interesting.

“We’ll take your cart,” Phyllis announces when we step out the door.

I don’t see an alternative. No vehicles sit outside Phyllis’ home or in the driveway. That should be a sign for me to put my foot down, but I need Phyllis right now. If she wants to illegally drive me to Alana Graves’ home, so be it. As long as we make it in one piece.

Phyllis sets the tray of lemon bars in the back seat, places her purse on the floorboard behind the driver’s seat and twists the key. I should grip something. I really should jump out when she rubs her hands together in anticipation. Then she cracks her knuckles. She actually cracks her knuckles.

“Um. Phyllis?”

“Yes, Ben?”

“How long has it been since you’ve, you know, been out driving?”

“A little while. But it’s just like riding a bicycle. Or a horse. Or ... any skill. You never get rusty.”

On that statement of complete non-fact, she depresses the gas pedal to the floorboard and we lurch forward like two passengers in the Mister Toad’s Wild Ride at Disney. Phyllis

overcompensates her turn pulling away from the curb, so she has to twist the wheel a bit more to jerk us back into our lane. We weave and bob, lurching and slowing uphill toward the less populated parts of the north shore.

I am clinging for dear life to the bar that supports the roof since there is no “Oh Crap!” handle on this thing. And why not? I’ve seen men on golf courses after a liquid lunch at the bar. There definitely need to be a few extra safety features installed in these things.

“Woo hoo!” Phyllis shouts out. “This is great! Isn’t it, Ben?”

I need her. She’s key to my plan.

“Yep. Great!” I shout back.

She swerves around a trash can someone left out for the garbage collection, I am thrown over toward her side of the cart, and my head nearly hits her shoulder. Then she swerves the opposite direction, and I am certain if I weren’t hanging on, I’d have tumbled out. My head actually extends out the opening on my side like I’m a dog with my tongue out to catch air. I don’t know how the lemon bars are faring, but I feel like I could hurl.

We wind through back roads until we approach some larger properties. The driveways head back into copses of trees. You can barely see a main house on most of these lots. People who live up here want privacy, and then some. It’s not completely reclusive living, they are still on the grid. It’s definitely a place where you’d go if you wanted to escape civilization and control who you see and how.

“If I remember right, we turn here,” Phyllis says at one particular driveway.

She makes a hard turn, causing me to slide to the center of the front bench seat. I hear the pan of lemon bars smack the back wall. Phyllis mutters to herself as we pivot a little too dramatically to stay on the driveway, “It’s all the way back. Then there’s the gate ... with the code.”

We arrive at a large wrought iron gate with a keypad set inside a metal box on a pole to the left.

“Hop out and punch in the numbers, Ben.”

I do as I’m told. Phyllis recites the code to me. I enter the numbers, and the gate swings open.

When I take my seat again, Phyllis says, “I’m trusting you won’t share that code with anyone. Alana lives up here for a reason.”

“No, ma’am. I won’t.”

It occurs to me at that moment that I’m about to meet Alana Graves. *The Alana Graves*. She’s won Academy Awards. Her name is known by people around the world. She’s a movie star of the same caliber as Julia Roberts, Scarlett Johansson, or Millie Bobby Brown. And I’m rolling up to her doorstep to ask her a monumental favor as if I’m about to ask a neighbor for a cup of sugar.

Phyllis parks the golf cart. I exit the vehicle and resist the urge to kiss the ground. I shake my hands out and remind myself that Alana’s got parents, and favorite foods, and fears, and hopes, and hangups—just like the rest of us. At the end of the day, we all sleep. We all wake and face another twenty-four hours. She’s not more or less. She’s human. She just happens to be a human who got into film and did well—really, really well.

Okay. Now, I’m ready.

“Come on, lover boy, let’s get this grand gesture underway.” Phyllis laughs as if Summer isn’t curled in a ball on her couch watching nostalgic films to cope with her disappointment and discouragement right now.

“I ... okay. Yeah. Here goes nothing.”

BEN

Fortune sides with him who dares.

~ Virgil

I walk up to Alana's door and knock. Phyllis comes up behind me.

When Alana opens the door, my jaw doesn't drop, which is probably helpful. She is stunning. The words star-quality come to mind. Some people have it. Summer is one. Stars are the people who sort of glitter from birth. They enter a room and heads turn. They possess something extra—this intangible magnetism—that makes the rest of us feel innately drawn in, while we also feel a bit inferior in their mere presence.

Only, in Summer's case, the awe and intimidation I initially felt has morphed the more I got to know her. Now I just see her as Monroe. My girl. The one I'd do anything for. Like this. I'm doing this for her.

"Alana, thank you for seeing us." Phyllis speaks up, since I've apparently been reduced to staring like a fangirl ... fanboy ... is that a thing? Fanboy? It sounds like a guy who stands around fanning people. I should probably fan myself. Not that I'm looking at Alana that way. It's Summer for me. She's it. But I'm in danger of overheating from this reaction I'm having to being so near to an iconic celebrity.

"Of course, Phyllis. You know I'll always set aside time for you."

“Yes. Yes. Well, let’s get to it. This fine young specimen of manhood is Ben.” Phyllis waves up and down my torso with her hand as if there were someone else out here who might qualify as a fine young specimen. What a way to be introduced! Unfortunately, I’m it. The specimen.

“He’s dating Summer Monroe—a woman who has promise. As I told you, she’s aspiring to a career in film. I would bet my velvet Elvis that she’s going to be a name we’ll be hearing in years to come.”

I look at Phyllis, about to ask a question when Alana asks it first. “Do you really have a velvet Elvis, Phyllis? Please tell me you do. I’m dying now. You have to have one.”

“Of course I do. The King resides over my bed. I don’t pray to him before I go to sleep or anything absurd like that, but I do say, *Goodnight, Elvis.*”

Phyllis gyrates her hips, Elvis style. I look anywhere but at her—at the trees, the golf cart, at Alana. That doesn’t help, because Alana is bursting into full-blown laughter.

I attempt to keep my amusement tucked in, but I can’t help the smile that breaks free at the thought of Phyllis dressed in a gown that resembles the woman in *A Night Before Christmas*, blowing a kiss to the velvet image of the King of Rock and Roll on her wall every night.

“So, come in. Come in.” Alana steps back, making a modified sweep of her arm.

“Thank you,” I say.

Whew. I haven’t lost my entire capacity to speak in her presence.

Alana’s home is gorgeous, but not as extravagant as I would have thought it would be. Tasteful. Modern, but with a beachy feel to it. Everything is open and airy. The plate glass windows at the back of the great room look straight out into the woods with a view of the ocean off in the distance through the trees. There’s a deck off the kitchen area that’s adjacent to the living room. A long dining table fills a room off to the side of the entrance. Everything is in whitewashed wood and light

blues and grays. The cabinets in the kitchen are a darker gray with white marble countertops and light wood flooring.

The large sectional in the living room faces a cabinet that must house a television. Everything is neat as a pin, as my mom would say. But, there's a throw blanket in one spot on the couch and a book splayed open face-down on the coffee table, marking the spot where Alana obviously stopped reading. The title of the book, *Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing: A Memoir*, catches my eye. It's by Matthew Perry, a star in the TV show, *Friends*.

"Busted!" Alana says from behind me. "I'm a total *Friends* fan. And *This is Us*. I probably love that show even more. The writing is exquisite. And *Gilmore Girls*. I'm a cliché, I know. I should geek out over some obscure Cannes film no one's heard of and spend my private days poring over books about method acting. But I'm a sucker for a good TV series—the word *good* being relative here, I guess."

"How about you, Ben?" Alana asks as if we're old friends and I just happened to pop by for a chat about our favorite television shows.

"I'm more of a Marvel movie guy, myself. But honestly, I like being active more than I like watching shows of any sort, unless it's with Summer. She can get me to curl up with her for hours watching her favorites."

"Here, sit. Sit," Alana says. "And what are Summer's favorites?"

"Not so much television shows as movies. She's a fanatic about old films."

Alana and Phyllis exchange a glance. Phyllis looks like a proud grandma when her granddaughter nailed the role of Goldilocks in the elementary school play.

"Old movies. Well, you can't go wrong there," Alana says.

There's a lull in the conversation. I feel suddenly awkward, like a presumptuous commoner approaching the queen for a stay of execution.

"So, you're here to ask me a favor?" Alana asks.

“I am. And I apologize to have only just met you and then to go right into asking something like this. When Summer lost her chance at the audition she had lined up, I called Phyllis. I figured she knew people—from her history in the business. Phyllis said you’d be able to pull more strings than she could. I believe in Summer. She’s a really good actress. I’m not just saying that as her boyfriend.”

“I know. I saw you two in *In So Deep*.”

“You did?”

“The chemistry between you two.” Alana makes a show of fanning herself. “I should have known you were dating in real life. I sat in the back on opening night. Most people around here know to leave me alone if I’m out in public. I come here to my home on Marbella to escape the paparazzi and all the rest of the constant demands of my life in L.A. I have a home there too—in Malibu. But sometimes I just want my space—to pretend I’m not famous, and just to be me. So I come here when I’m not filming. Trader Joe’s in Ventura sends me a weekly grocery shipment on the ferry. I order everything else I need online. I pay a pretty penny for deliveries. And then I have people over to visit when I feel like it, or I go on a trip to the Riviera or Tokyo or Provence when I feel antsy. You know.”

“Oh yeah, me too. I just work the rental shack for the resort. In-N-Out delivers a burger and shake when I get a hankerin’. Or I jet off to Hawaii or Bali if I feel twitchy.”

Oh. Heck. Did I just say that?

Alana studies me for a beat and then a laugh bursts out of her. Phyllis laughs too.

“Well ...” Alana catches her breath. “When you put it that way. I sound like a stuck-up, spoiled celebrity, don’t I?”

“No. No. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just ... I’m not used to your lifestyle. It must feel normal to you.”

“I’ve grown accustomed to it. My lifestyle has its perks. And it has its definite downfalls. I can’t just hop on the public ferry—not unless I want to sign autographs the whole ride

over to the mainland and then have someone possibly trail me once we dock. I have to charter my own boat to come and go. Thankfully, I can afford that. And, the worst part is, when a man shows interest in me. I always have to wonder if he likes me, or if he likes Alana Graves, Academy Award winner and famed actress.”

“That would suck.”

“It does.” She huffs a small laugh out. “I’ve dated co-stars, as I’m sure you know, but that’s usually been an epic disaster over the long haul. We actors tend to have big egos. Two heads that big in one relationship doesn’t work out so well.”

“You do not have a big head, my dear.” Phyllis chimes in. “You just had the worst luck in co-stars. They were pompous and shallow off camera. Not your fault.”

“You are definitely biased.”

“I am no such thing. I know you. I’d tell you if you needed to take yourself down a peg or two. Anyway, who needs men? No offense, Ben.”

“None taken.” I smile.

“I dated men who weren’t in the business too. The average guy, even if he’s not enamored with my status, isn’t cut out to date someone famous. He ends up feeling less than or jealous. If I had to do a romantic scene with a co-star, the guy I was dating would obsess about whether I had feelings for this coworker of mine. It wore me out. Men who don’t live with the stress and all-consuming life of filming a movie often demand more from me than I can give when I’m shooting a film. Phyllis knows. Marriage to a star isn’t easy. That’s part of why so many Hollywood relationships implode.

“But I’ve also had an amazing career. I’ve lived my dreams. I’ve been in roles that still make me proud to this day, and I’ve won awards that confirm I’m doing well in the eyes of those who matter most—my colleagues and fans. I’ve provided entertainment, and I’ve honed my craft. It’s been an adventure—one with a hefty price tag, but one I wouldn’t trade.”

Alana pauses, looking out her back windows and then back at me. “You need to think about these things, Ben. If you are at all serious about Summer and she goes far in this industry, she’ll be known. And if you are at her side, you’ll be known too. And your family and hometown will not be immune to the curiosity of the press. No part of your life will remain private or off-limits. It’s not an easy life. At least the two of you met before she hit it big. She can trust you weren’t after her for her notoriety or fortune.”

I consider what Alana’s saying. I never thought about Summer’s rise to fame spilling into my life. Am I willing to endure all that for her? It’s not like I have a choice. If she wants this, I’m along for the ride. Whatever the ride, I’m in it with her.

“So, someone undermined her audition?” Alana shifts gears abruptly again.

I’m not about to mention Summer’s dad. That part of her story is private.

“Yes. Phyllis probably told you Summer had an audition scheduled opposite Riggs Mahone.”

Alana nods.

“It’s for a new movie and they want a fresh face as the lead actress.”

“Well, you’re in luck. Riggs and I share an agent. I called Felix after I spoke to Phyllis.”

“Felix?”

“Our agent, Felix Jones.”

“Ah.”

“He got ahold of Riggs.” Alana pauses. “Turner Brothers really wants Riggs on this project. He’s the big ticket name. In every movie, a big factor in who the studio casts is based on who will boost the box office revenue. As far as the studio’s concerned, Riggs is it for *Untethered*. Of course, they have a second-string of choices. They always do. But they want Riggs.

“They’re also banking on the fact that Summer will bring the curiosity factor. Instead of billing a known actress, they’re hoping a new face brings more ticket sales because people will buzz about the young woman who played opposite Riggs. *Who is she? Where did she come from?* That sort of thing. People love something new if it’s presented in the right light. So, Turner Brothers wants someone like Summer. We just need to convince them they want her, not just someone like her.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It’s not. But we have some strings we can pull. I know the casting director on this film, so I’m planning to call him. I wouldn’t usually get so involved in a movie I have nothing to do with, but Phyllis is like an aunt to me. And I was a young actress looking for my big break once too.”

“Older sister,” Phyllis amends from her spot on the adjacent couch. “I’m like your older sister.”

“Riiight. Older sister,” Alana says with an amused grin. “And I really have had my fill of the underhanded methods used in the industry. It’s not always that way. But it happens often enough to make us all quietly outraged.” Alana’s eyes squint and her lips draw thin. “Summer got her break. She deserves to keep it or lose it on her own merit, not because someone meddled to make her lose the audition.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. What good is all this ...” Alana waves her hand around herself at her home and the woods beyond. “... if I can’t help someone with it?”

“Thank you.”

Stop thanking her, Ben. She gets it. You’re grateful.

“So, Riggs is supposed to have called Steve, the casting director, today to tell him he wants an audition with Summer. I’m going to call Steve now.”

Alana reaches into a pocket on the side of her yoga pants and pulls out her cell. Before any of us say another word, she has a number dialed, and the phone set on the coffee table on speaker.

“Hey, Alana, baby! What’s happening?”

“Hey, Steve. I think you know what’s happening. Did Riggs call you?”

“He did. Are you behind this new complication in my life?”

“Thank me later. I am.”

“And I’ll be thanking you because ...”

“You saw Summer Monroe’s audition tape. The talent scout you sent over here confirmed your interest. And he obviously came back with what you hoped to find in her or you wouldn’t have invited her to audition at this level in the first place. I saw her in the island production of *In So Deep*. She’s good.”

I can barely breathe. I feel like I’m in the oval office while the CIA negotiates a hostage deal, only this is Summer’s future we’re toying with.

“Remember that favor you told me I could call in?” Alana winks at me and Phyllis.

“You’re going there?”

“I am.”

This Steve guy chortles like Alana’s the top-billed comedian at The Laugh Factory. “Are you trying to get preferential treatment for an upcoming audition?”

“No. No. Not for me. I’m about to start filming the new Simon Chron film, *You Wish You Were Me, Don’t You?* in a month. This is strictly for Summer.”

“She must be something for you to spend a favor from me on her.”

“Consider this me paying it forward. Besides, you and I both know I’ve got more than one favor stockpiled with you.”

“Don’t remind me.” Steve groans a little for emphasis. “And Riggs already called me. I was getting ready to call Elaine when my phone rang and I saw it was you.”

“Elaine Sharpe?”

“Yeah. She’s Summer’s agent.”

“Awesome. That’s what I wanted to hear. I guess someone wanted to pull the rug on her audition?”

“I was told it was canceled by her.” Steve says, matter-of-factly.

I almost chime in to say in no way did Summer cancel her own audition.

“No. It was foul play,” Alana tells Steve.

“Gotcha. Well, I’ll see her tomorrow afternoon if she can make it. Riggs is only on the West Coast through the end of the week and then he’s off to New York for some commercial photo shoot and a fundraiser.”

“She’ll be there. Just call Elaine.”

“By the way, my cousin was asking about you the other day.” Steve moves from the topic of Summer to Alana so quickly. It makes me wonder if he’s actually going to do anything on Summer’s behalf after they hang up.

“Your cousin from Italy? The one you tried to fix me up with after the Oscars?”

“Yeah. Sicily.”

“No. Steve. I’m not dating your cousin.”

“He’s big in Italy. You two would hit it off. Come on, Alana, baby. Give a man a chance. What about coming to the bash I’m throwing next weekend? He’ll be there.”

Alana rolls her eyes at me and Phyllis. “Sorry. I’m busy. I’ve got a thing over here.”

“A thing. Wow. On a remote, sleepy island. That’s super-convincing.”

Alana laughs. “Okay, Steve. I’ll see you. I’ll let you go so you can call Elaine.”

“Got it. I’m calling. I literally was about to call her when my phone rang. Take care, baby.”

“Mwah.”

Alana hangs up after the air kiss and looks back and forth between Phyllis and me.

“Well, that should do it. Steve will call Elaine. Elaine will reach out to Summer. The audition will happen. Now all Summer has to do is show up and shine.”

“She will,” I assure Alana.

“I believe it, or I wouldn’t have gone to all this effort on her behalf.”

“Thank you so much. I’m so grateful.”

“You mentioned that.” Alana chuckles.

“I did, didn’t I? I’m just really ... there aren’t words. Summer thought this was a done deal.”

“Well, I’m glad I could help. Can I get you two anything? I don’t know where my manners went. I’m out of practice hosting people up here.”

“No, thanks,” I say.

“The lemon bars!” Phyllis says, standing up abruptly.

“Lemon bars?” Alana looks at Phyllis.

“They’re a bribe or a thank you, whichever way you prefer to view them.”

“Definitely a thank you. Oh my gosh. I love those things. Have you had them, Ben?”

“No. I haven’t.”

“Well, you’ll have to stay and have one before you go.”

“Okay. And, one more thing.”

Alana looks at me.

“Could you leave my name out of all this? I’d rather Summer feel like this opportunity came back around for other reasons than my meddling.”

“I think your meddling is sweet.”

“Maybe. And she might too. But I’d rather remain anonymous if you don’t mind. Besides, I didn’t do much. You did it all.”

“You pulled the trigger of calling Phyllis so she would reach out to me. I wouldn’t have gotten involved if she hadn’t called, and she wouldn’t have called if you hadn’t reached out. So, it really boils down to you setting the ball rolling. She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

Phyllis disappears out the front door and returns with the pan of lemon bars. They are a little ... tilted. One side of the bars has scrunched toward the edge of the pan, and the other side has a space between the edge of the bars and the glass baking dish. I say nothing.

The three of us stand around the kitchen island eating lemon bars, and then Phyllis and I take the death-defying ride downhill back to her house. I drive back to Summer’s cottage, a smile on my face the whole way. She’s going to get her audition after all.

Her dad won’t have the final say.

SUMMER

When the waters of life are rough, be a mermaid.

~ Unknown

Ben shows up on my doorstep at six, a little earlier than he had said he might. He's carrying a brown paper bag that smells like heaven, if heaven is a place with deep fryers and a lot of melting cheese. In his other hand, he's carrying a plate of what looks to be lemon bars wrapped in Saran. It's not what he's carrying that makes me get up off the couch. It's him.

He's got that lopsided smile that makes my stomach do a little flip every time it cracks across his face. His eyes take me in, curled on the couch, wearing sweats, my hair piled on my head in an I-give-up style. I won't give up. But for today, I am. This audition came from out of the blue, but once I knew it was mine, I hadn't considered the alternative of losing it before I had a chance to prove myself. If I had lost the role due to a poor performance on my part, I'd live with it, dust myself off, and press forward. Knowing my dad stepped in to stop me from reaching my goals took all the wind out of my sails.

But Ben is like a breeze off the water. Just one look at his face, his rumpled hair, his strong body, the way everything about him says he's here for me—audition or no audition—he's breathing hope into my veins. I can go forward, eventually. It will be a longer road and a steeper climb, but I'll get there.

“What did you have to do after work?” I ask as I rouse myself from the couch and walk into the kitchen. “And it’s just your luck. The 1994 Version of *Love Affair* just started. I’ll rewind and we can watch it together.”

“No need to rewind. I’ll pick up on the gist.”

“Because you don’t care?” I turn my head after setting two plates on the kitchen counter.

Ben walks up behind me, setting the to-go bag down next to the plates. He braces himself around me and I turn to face him.

“I care about *you*. The movie is whatever.”

“Whatever?” I’m horrified. “How can you say, whatever? It was Katherine Hepburn’s last time filming a major motion picture. Her very last time on the big screen. The stars are Annette Bening and Warren Beatty—who are married in real life. *Whatever?* Ben. You’re killing me here.”

He reaches up and brushes his fingertips down my temple and around my jaw. “I love when you get all fiery. It’s so hot.”

I chuckle. “You are hopeless. How do you expect to date a movie star if you don’t even like movies?”

“I’m not dating the movies. I’m dating you.”

“You are, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’m not even dating the movie star. If you’ll recall, I had a thing for you long before I knew your lofty aspirations. Always remember that, okay?”

“Yeah. Of course, I’ll remember that. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I dunno.”

He looks pensive. His eyes flit between mine. He’s got something on his mind.

He cups my jaw and leans in for a kiss. His other hand is still perched on the counter, caging me in. If this is a cage, I never want to break free. Lock me up and throw away the key. I’d happily spend my life caged in Ben’s arms.

Ben moves in slowly. His soft, full lips meet mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him toward me. Ben lets out a growly noise. It's not loud or rough. It's like a bear waking from hibernation. A hungry bear who just stumbled across a berry patch.

I lean back, giggling.

“What's so funny, Monroe? You're going to give me a complex, laughing while I'm kissing you.” He doesn't move. He makes a cup out of his hand and brushes the backs of his knuckles down my arm from shoulder to fingertips. I fight a shiver.

“Nothing's funny.” I straighten my face.

“Oh, no. You laughed.” Ben pokes me in the ribs. I jolt away from his hand.

“Ticklish? How did I not know this yet?”

He gets a mischievous look on his face, wags his eyebrows and makes an exaggerated display of pinching his thumb and pointer nearly together with enough space to grab me between his overeager fingers. Then he goes in for the same spot. He barely has to touch me and I'm clinging to him, laughing hysterically, shouting his name. “Ben!” I gasp and let out a peal of laughter. “Stop. Stop. Stop!”

“Stop this?” he gives one more little squeeze to the one spot that sends me squirming and bending in a fit of giggles.

“Yes! Oh my gosh! Yes!”

I reach out, my own pinch on the ready, snapping my fingers like the claws of a crab, and nip at his side. Nothing. He pokes me in the same spot. I nearly shoot up through the roof, and I'm giggling again, tears on my face, breath ragged with laughter. I try a few other spots along Ben's side. Then I poke under his arm and he lurches backward and then toward me again.

“Oooh! I found it! I found it! Your spot!”

He's laughing, grabbing at my side. I'm cracking up, trying to poke under his arm while he squeezes his upper arms

flush to his sides to keep me from gaining full access. We're bending and dodging to avoid one another, and simultaneously reaching out trying to get one more pinch or poke in. When we make contact with the vulnerable places that send one or the other of us yelping or hopping, we devolve into fits of laughter. And then we're falling into one another's arms, breathless, smiles stretched wide.

"Truce!" I shout, still catching my breath.

"Truce," he answers, tugging me in, lifting me, and plopping me neatly on the counter next to the bag full of our dinner and the plates yet to be filled.

He moves in, nestling himself between my knees, running his hand down my hair, then cupping my jaw.

I grab his face with both hands. "Ben."

It's almost all I can manage to say through the swell of emotions. I love him so much it's like a sweet venom overtaking my very bloodstream.

"Summer." He nuzzles his nose to mine.

I'm still cupping his face when he maneuvers to slant his mouth over mine. He tugs me forward and we lose ourselves in this kiss, in the safety of what we've found together, in the hope of what we will have for years to come.

When we stop kissing, Ben smooths his hand down over my side where he had been benignly assaulting me only moments ago in our tickle war.

I'm still catching my breath. And I'm still clinging to him. He leans into me and kisses me again. Then he pulls back.

"This is serious business, Monroe. When I'm kissing you, it's serious." His mouth quirks up into a crooked smile.

"I'm nothing but serious about you," I tell him. "And that sandwich and fries you brought. I'm super-serious about those. I haven't eaten."

"Dinner?"

“All day.” My face drops a little thinking about why I lost my appetite.

“What? You need to eat. Here.”

The air cools as Ben moves from his spot in front of me. I instantly miss him even though he’s only a foot away. I hug my arms around myself and watch while he gets busy taking things out of the bag and placing them on plates: paper-wrapped sandwiches, small, plastic lidded cups for the au jus, a dill spear placed just so, and then he dumps an equal amount of still-warm fries onto each plate.

When the plates are filled, Ben wraps an arm around me, pulling me off the counter.

“Let’s go cuddle, and eat, and watch Katherine Hepburn.”

“I’ve been waiting all my life for a man to say those exact words to me.”

“If only I had known, I would have led with that line when we met.”

I laugh, nearly forgetting how sad I’ve been all day. The tears I cried while watching the first version of *Love Affair*, and then again during *An Affair to Remember*, feel like I shed them weeks ago, not mere hours.

“So, what were you up to when you left work?” I ask again as we take our places on the couch, legs crossed, knees touching, plates balanced in our laps.

“Nothing important. Just dropping ... well, running an errand.”

“What kind of errand?”

“Nothing big. Let’s get this movie started. You want to get through this one, and ... was it *Sleepless in Seattle*?”

“Yeah. Right.” I grab the remote.

I want to ask Ben again. He’s never hidden anything from me—at least not that I know of. Call me crazy. I probably am hyper-sensitive because of my dad interfering, and as a residue from all his deception over the years. My radar is fine-tuned to

detect any hint of secrecy. And I'd bet my first Oscar—I'm planning on receiving one someday—that Ben is hiding something right now.

He looks over at me and smiles. "You seem to be feeling a little better."

"I am. You're here."

"I am. And I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere. We're Team Monroe."

"No. That's no good. We can't be a team that's named after me."

"So you want one of those Hollywood names where they smoosh two names together?"

"No. I'm just saying our team can't be named after me."

"So what about Sumben?"

I wince.

"Or Benmer?"

"Definitely not." I shake my head.

"It's not bad. If you say it fast, it sounds like an expensive sports car ... No! I've got it! We're team Bummer!"

We both laugh.

"Don't change it," he says with a playful plea in his eyes. "I want that to be the name that ends up on *People Magazine's* cover when you hit it big."

He frames his hands like he's holding a magazine and emphasizing a caption.

"Summer Monroe, new sensation, says she'll never leave her long-term boyfriend, Ben." He pauses and wags his eyebrows at me. "Hashtag Bummer."

"Oh my gosh! We need a different name."

"We don't. It's perfection. Humor me."

"Okay. Team Bummer it is."

I snuggle back into the couch, devour my sandwich and fries, and then Ben lifts both our plates and tugs me into his side for the rest of the movie. We're about to cue up *Sleepless in Seattle* when my phone rings. I pick it up.

"It's Elaine. That's so weird. She never calls this late."

"Yeah? Huh."

There's that unusual look on Ben's face again.

"Hey, Elaine. What's going on?"

"Well, you won't believe this. Riggs insisted on giving you a chance. He talked to Felix, his agent. Felix reached out to the casting director at Turner Brothers. They want you there tomorrow afternoon. I don't care if you have to swim the entire twenty-six miles to shore, ride a Sea-Doo or befriend a school of dolphins. You get to the studio by two."

I'm stunned into silence.

"Summer?"

"Yeah. Okay. Wow. Okay. Yeah."

"You're in shock too. I get it. I was beyond a state of shock, which I snapped out of as soon as I hung up the phone and went to my email to check the details they sent over. And the studio was very apologetic, just so you know. They better be. I know you're new, but this kind of emotional roller coaster is going to make me permanently dependent on antacids. Anyway, enough about me. I'm sending you an email with all the details."

"Okay. Wow."

"Summer, I'm not hanging up until you speak a full sentence. I'm not sure you've absorbed the details. You need to be at Turner Brothers at two."

"I will be. I'll be at Turner Brothers at two."

"Okay. Good. I'll let you get back to your night."

"Thank you, Elaine. Thank you so much."

"Of course, dear. This is my job, you know."

“I’ll never forget this.”

“Good. I intend to cash in on that promise. Now go. Get beauty sleep. And hydrate.”

I say, “Goodbye,” but Elaine has already clicked the line from her end.

SUMMER

*I fell in love the way you fall asleep:
slowly, and then all at once.*

~ John Green

I squeal into one of my throw pillows, toss it back onto the couch, turn, and jump into Ben's lap and awaiting arms.

I lean back so I can see his reaction. "I got the audition! Something crazy happened and I don't care what it was! Riggs asked to audition with me. Isn't that weird? He wants me there to run lines with him at two tomorrow. Oh! My! Gosh! Ben! I'm back in business. This actually might happen!"

"I'm so happy for you. This is awesome! I knew they wouldn't push you down for long."

His smile matches mine.

"Thank you! Oh, my gosh! Wow."

I grab Ben's face and kiss him hard. He wraps his arms around me.

When I stop kissing him, he says, "Let's go for a walk on the beach. Unless you're dead set on Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan."

"No. I don't think I can sit still right now. Let's go for a walk."

I stand up. Ben stands and takes the plates into the kitchen. I follow behind him.

I look down at myself. “Should I change?”

“Not ever. Not one thing.”

I smack Ben in the chest. “I mean, should I change out of these depressing sweats and run a brush through my hair?”

“If you need to do that for you, do it. To me, you are perfect. And besides, there’s no use in getting cleaned up just to have your hair mussed by the ocean breeze and your feet coated in sand.”

Ben reaches out and tugs me into his embrace. He kisses my forehead, runs little peppered kisses along my hairline, softly and carefully, like the gentle landing of a hundred butterflies.

He leans back, still holding me. “You earned this, Monroe. This is all you.”

“It’s a little Riggs too. I mean, for some weird reason he asked for this audition with me. He never even met me. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, I say you go with it. When life gives you a break, take it.”



THE NEXT DAY, Ben takes the morning off. He brings me juice, a protein bar and a banana, promising he’ll bring me a pastry when I get the part.

“This is movie star food, Monroe. I think most of those women don’t even eat. And they work out like five or six hours a day with a trainer. Please don’t turn into that. A part of me will die a small death if you stop eating meals with me like the feast we had last night. Anyway, for now, here’s something healthier than what I would have brought you if you didn’t have the most important audition of your life this afternoon.”

I take his offering, eat the banana, throw the protein bar into my backpack, and put the juice in the fridge. I’m jittery

enough without the added help of a shot of fructose to spike my bloodstream.

Ben walks me to the ferry, kisses me, and watches as I board. I wave to him before I duck into the first level seating area. I prefer the top deck, but I'm not trying to arrive at my first Hollywood audition looking windblown and possibly homeless.

I make my way to the studio offices, ducking into one of the bathrooms at a Starbucks a few blocks away first to restyle my hair, reapply lipstick and gloss, and change into a clean shirt I packed in my backpack. I show the pass I printed out to the guard in the lobby and am escorted to a bank of elevators that open when he waves his badge. The location is different than I imagined. I thought everything would be on the lot where filming takes place, but these offices are a few blocks over.

On the fifth floor, I exit the elevators and introduce myself to the receptionist. She tells me to wait and then she sends me back, down a long hall with offices on either side. The last door leads into a conference room. I peer in the doorway. The tables are set up longways at the back of the room, and a huge retractable screen and a white board hang on the front wall. The floor is wide open with no furniture in the front half of the room. Two middle-aged men sit at the tables and a younger man I recognize is standing, leaning back against the wall, talking to them.

“Hello?”

“Summer?” one of the men says.

“Yes. I'm Summer. Hi.”

“Hey, come in. I'm Steve. I'm the casting director for *Untethered*. This is Jonas, my assistant. And ... well, I'm pretty sure you recognize this guy.”

“Hi. I'm Riggs.”

I know I'm supposed to be all chill and comfortable in my own skin. If I plan to work in film, I can't be fangirling over every star I meet. It's unprofessional and it makes me look like

I don't belong here. Tell that to my heart that is attempting to beat its way up through my throat. My mouth feels like I swallowed a dryer sheet. I breathe in and out slowly and tell myself I belong here. These are just three guys. This is me showing up to work.

"Hey, nice to meet you."

If I could high-five myself, I'd totally do it. That was a rock solid way to actually say a cohesive sentence. I picture high-fiving Ben. A small smile inches onto my face. Can they tell I'm in love? It feels like I'm wearing a sandwich board announcing the fact.

"She's even more beautiful in person," Riggs says to the other guy, Jonah? Jonas? Gah. What's his name?

"I agree," Jonah-Jonas says, like he's appraising a tomato and determining it's actually an heirloom. Poor tomato.

"Uh. Thanks?" I say.

"Sorry," Riggs says. "I saw your audition tape and your folio. I didn't mean to talk about you as if you aren't here."

"So, Summer," Steve says. "This is not the way these things usually go. It's a good thing you and Alana are so connected."

"Alana?"

"Alana Graves. Your connection. The woman who called in a favor to get you this time with us?"

"Oh. Yeah. Alana. Right." *Whaaaat?* "I'm sorry, I thought Riggs had requested this audition."

"Yeah. I did. But Alana called our agent, Felix. We both have the same agent. Felix texted me. I followed through. Alana set that ball in motion."

"Oh. Gotcha. Right." *Wrong! What? I don't even know Alana Graves.*

"Well, enough small talk. Let's get to it. Here's your script, Summer. You and Riggs can stand up front and just start on the top of page seventy-six. Did you read the script yet?"

“I read through it again on the ferry ride over. I only found out about this audition last night.”

“Great. Great. So you know the premise?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Good. We’ll start where you first run into one another at the youth hostel.”

Riggs and I move to the front of the room, and over the course of the next hour or so, we run lines, take feedback, adjust, run more lines, sometimes laugh, mostly focus. We finish when Steve says he’s seen enough. I don’t have a clue what that means. Did he love it? Hate it? No one tells me anything except, *We’ll be in touch*. I feel good. I’ll either get the part, or I won’t, but it will be based on how I did, not based on my dad and his convoluted insertion into my life.

I say goodbye to Riggs, Steve, and Jonas and take the elevator back down to the ground level, uber to the bus station, take the bus to the ferry in Ventura, and ride back to Marbella just as the sun is dropping off past the horizon.

One thought keeps circling through my mind: *What did Alana Graves have to do with me getting the audition?*

Riley’s home when I finally come through the door. I feel like I could sleep for days. I have tomorrow off, but then we have Friday, Saturday and Sunday shows. And I work each of those mornings.

I tell Riley about the auditions, and then I say, “They said it was Alana Graves who paved the way for me to get this second chance at auditioning?”

“Really? Do you know her?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Oh. Well, rumor has it she lives in a house on the north shore. She’s reclusive for a reason, I guess.”

“Yeah. Phyllis mentioned that she lived there. She used to come to Marbella as a child.”

I pause, look at Riley, and then I shout, “Phyllis!”

“You think she’s behind this?”

“I almost know so. Excuse me while I go make a call.”

I step into the kitchen, pull out my phone and dial Phyllis.

“Hello?”

“Phyllis. This is Summer. I just got back from an audition at Turner Brothers Studios offices.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, dear. How did it go?”

“It’s hard to tell.”

“It always is. They love keeping us on tenterhooks, those power-hungry directors. But in due season they’ll be begging you to be in films. Then you can repay the favor.”

I smile. But then I get back to the reason I called. “A funny thing happened when I was in the audition.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. They mentioned that it was a good thing I knew Alana. Apparently, she had pulled some strings for me.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet. She’s a treasure, isn’t she?”

“Phyllis.”

“Yes, dear?”

“Alana doesn’t know me from Adam. Why would she do that?”

“Well, I imagine she has a heart for up and coming actresses who show promise. That’s what I’d think, anyway. She saw you in the play on opening night.”

“And how would you know she saw me?”

“Is this twenty questions? Do I get to buy a vowel? You sound very suspicious for a woman who just got the dream audition of a lifetime. Are you looking a gift horse in the mouth? Trying to make mountains out of molehills? Who cares why Alana pulled a string? It resulted in you getting a chance you deserved.”

My head is spinning from the metaphor salad Phyllis just served me. “I care. I want to thank her.”

“Oh. I’ll just pass along your gratitude. She’s private. But we’re friends.”

“When’s the last time you saw her?”

“A few days ago.”

“Do you see her often?”

“Summer. You are acting like you’re auditioning for the role of a Central Intelligence agent. Relax. I see my friends occasionally. As you do. Now, call or text me when you have the answer as to whether you got the part.”

“You’re not going to tell me about Alana are you?”

“I most certainly will not. That’s between me and her and my lemon bars.”

“Your ...” My mind flashes to a certain irresistible man carrying a plate of some of the most delicious lemon bars I’ve ever eaten into my apartment. He set them on the counter across from the one where he kissed me senseless. We ate them after our walk on the beach. If Phyllis brought Alana lemon bars, and Ben came home with a few of them ...

“Well, I’ll let you go. Thanks for your hand in this. Whatever part you played. And thank Alana.”

“I will pass along your gratitude. Sweet dreams, Summer.”

“Sweet dreams, Phyllis. I’m grateful for you.”

“Right back at ya, dear.”

Riley’s standing right outside the kitchen. It’s not like our house is large. I’m sure she heard everything. Not that I want to keep anything from her.

“Ben was behind me getting the audition.”

“What? How? What makes you think that?”

“I’m not sure what he did, but it seems like he went to Alana Graves through Phyllis. He did that for me. And he

didn't say a thing. He let me think this was all some fluke turn of fate. But it was him. He did this—for me.”

“Ben's head over heels for you, Summer. I'd imagine he'd do anything to make you happy, even if it means going out of his way to make sure you have an audition you earned.”

“How can I ever thank him? I didn't even trust him at first. I spent way too long resisting him. But now ... now I know him. He's got the biggest heart.”

“Ben wants to see you pursue your dreams—no matter what that costs him.”

“Why would it cost him anything?”

“Summer. I know Cam said it in a way that was a bit too ... direct. He can be that way. But honestly, if you make it big, how will this relationship with Ben fit into your life? I'm sure he's thought of you outgrowing him, leaving him behind when you get big. There's a big chance that could happen. And he's still rooting for you—still doing anything he can to make sure you get your shot at what you want. That's always how he's been: a bit goofy, the life of the party, but underneath all that, more loyal than anyone I know. When Ben loves someone, he loves big. He's an all-in type of man.”

“Love.” I barely breathe out the word.

Ben loves me.

More importantly, I love Ben.

Riley may think I'd leave Ben in the dust. She doesn't know my heart like I do.

Ben is my heart. I can't leave him. It's impossible to live without your heart.

BEN

*If you want to improve your self-worth,
stop giving other people the calculator.*

~ Tim Fargo

I'm just walking into the shack from an educational cruise with Stevens, our resident marine biologist. I rode along as an extra deck hand while he took a group out into the deeper waters beyond the kelp beds and dragged a net to pull up a variety of smaller sea life for the passengers to interact with. Of course, he returns everything to the ocean after the two-hour cruise.

I'm still smiling to myself, picturing him trying to convince all of us to hold the sea cucumber. I consider myself adventurous, but I'm not touching one of those things. It reminded me of Memaw's jello salad back home, only slimier.

Summer's back from her audition. She got home yesterday and we texted, but we haven't talked at all yet. I'm going to race to her house when my shift is over.

I'm sitting at the register when an older, distinguished man walks into the shack; he's tall, with broad shoulders. He's dressed like that talent scout: expensive slacks, nice shoes, a pressed shirt.

"May I help you?"

A chill runs down my spine when our eyes connect. Those eyes. I'd know them anywhere.

Summer.

She's the only one I know with the identical crystal blue eyes. She's got her father's eyes.

"You can help me. I'm looking for Ben Hayes."

His voice drips with a southern accent. It's not a drawl. It's the kind of melodic inflection that makes you think of sweet tea on the porch and luncheons after church, of debutante balls and deals made on golf courses in the lingering humidity of a summer afternoon.

"I'm Ben. And you are?" We both know I know, but I want to make him say it.

"I'm Clifford Milton."

"Clifford Milton. Should I know you?"

"I'm Caroline's Daddy. Y'all call her Summer. That's not her given name. She's a Milton. And she's had her fun." Congressman Milton's Rs come out soft and soothing, unlike his features and the look he's giving me.

I flatten my hands on my thighs, and settle in on the stool behind the register. If I remained standing, Summer's dad and I would be at eye level to one another. Not that we'd see eye-to-eye.

"Shouldn't you be talking to Summer instead of me? If she's going to be coaxed to come home, you'll need to talk to her directly."

"Oh. She's comin' home. That was never a question. I'm an important man, son. I didn't fly out here to waste my time. I came here to bring Caroline home with me."

"Well, that will be up to her, I imagine."

Kai walks in from out back. Looks at me, eyes Congressman Milton, and raises a brow in my direction. "You good?"

“Yes. Fine. I was just giving our guest instructions as to how to find what he needs while he’s here.”

“Okay. Cool. I’m going on break if that’s alright.”

Kai never asks to go on break. Really, none of us do. The three of us have developed an ease of working together. If one of us wants to go on break, we just announce it. I know what Kai’s really asking. He’s got my back.

“Sounds good. I’ve got everything covered here.”

“K. I’ll be back in less than a half hour.”

“No rush.”

Congressman Milton crosses his arms over his chest. This stray, random thought pops in my head: *How did a man like this end up with a daughter as amazing and special as Summer?*

“Ben.” He says my name like it’s an accusation.

“Yes?”

“You are romantically involved with Caroline?”

“Summer and I are dating, yes. She’s my girlfriend.”

“And you’re ... what are you? A pool boy?”

“I’m a watersports instructor.”

“For Alicante?”

“Yes. I work for the resort. I give lessons. Sometimes I lifeguard. I take people on tours.”

“Are you aware of what Caroline’s actual life entails—her real life, not this little jaunt to California?”

I pause, considering my answer. “I am. She’s from Georgia. She came here to pursue her dream of being an actress.”

“She’s the heir to a family fortune and the daughter of a congressman. She’s from both money and status. What is it your people do?”

“My ... people?”

“Your father and mother.”

“Oh. My dad’s a general contractor. My mom stayed home with me. She sold Tupperware for a while—then she was into those candles and oil diffusers with a company where she hosts parties. Light and Bright. Now she just volunteers her time with local charities and works part-time at the preschool a few days a week to stay busy.”

The more I speak about my family, the more three things happen at once.

One: I feel shame for the first time in my life about where I’m from and what my family is like.

Two: I have a sense that I’m deeply betraying the people I love most by divulging the facts about them to someone who obviously wants nothing more than to eliminate me from Summer’s life.

And three: Summer’s dad is growing more and more impatient and irritated with me, if the reddening of his face and the shifting of his eyes is any indication.

“You come from working class people.”

“My parents work for a living, yes. Doesn’t everyone?”

He huffs. It’s not a laugh so much as it’s a derisive snort.

“Ben, I’m a busy man. I’ll get right down to the reason I’m here. You are not suited for Caroline. I’m sure you can see it as well as I can. She’s been born and bred like American royalty. She’s had etiquette classes, gone through her cotillion. She’s been raised to know her place. It’s a place of privilege and responsibility. And she needed a breather from all that. I understand. We all need to find an escape from time to time. But it’s time Caroline comes back where she belongs.

“You fit here, cleaning pools, making sure the affluent and notable guests of this resort don’t drown, entertaining them by toting them around for a day of play in the ocean’s waves. That’s all fine and good. But I’m quite sure you can see as well as I can that a pool boy doesn’t belong with my daughter. You’re not equally matched. The differences between you two

are bound to cause trouble down the road—and not even too far down the road.”

He pauses, letting his words sink in, but not long enough to give me room to answer. “I’ll tell you what you are, Ben. You’re a curiosity—a novelty. Caroline came here and dabbled in what it would be like to slum it, so to speak. And now she’s had her little time of rebellion. Mark my words. She’ll be leaving this island and coming back where she can pick a suitable partner for life—a young man with aspirations, and the means to achieve them.”

My hands are sweaty. I fight to keep from grinding my teeth, the tightness in my jaw increases nonetheless. I take a steadying breath, determined not to let the congressman see me crumble under his insults and judgment.

“You honestly believe all that? That Summer was just having a vacation fling with me to entertain herself, or sow her wild oats? That what we have isn’t deep or real?”

“I appreciate how passionate you are. It makes sense, doesn’t it? Caroline’s quite a catch. You remind me of a boy who had his first taste of a Grade A steak. Yes sir, I understand that. My Caroline is special, and you’ve gotten yourself a taste of a young woman of her caliber. Now you want to eat steak every day. Problem is, you can only afford the dollar burger. And before you go takin’ offense, tell me this. Do you honestly think you are worthy of ‘Summer,’ as you call her? Are you capable of making her happy? Will you be able to provide the kind of life she wants and deserves—the kind of life she’s grown accustomed to over the years? Or can you be man enough to admit she’s out of your league?”

I don’t answer. In my right mind, I know he’s dead wrong. I can tell he’s playing me. But as if I were rubbing my hand along a cactus, the barbs stick and bury themselves beneath my skin, stinging with a sharpness I can’t avoid.

The congressman gives a curt nod. “I think we’ve come to an agreement. If you see the light, I’m sure you know you’ve got no choice but to cut Caroline loose. She won’t leave you, as you know. She’s far too stubborn, too set on proving her

point. She's upset about a mistake I made. She's trying to make me pay. I respect her need to make a point. But all that will settle down in time and then where would you be?

"If you love my daughter, or even care for her at all, you'll set her free instead of selfishly hanging onto her because you want something you can't afford to keep."

I stare at the congressman—Summer's dad—unable to form words.

He looks me in the eyes with a coldness that almost makes me chill. There's a threat barely veiled in his gaze. "Good day, Ben. I think I'll look back on this little meeting fondly now that we're on the same page. You may even thank me in the years to come."

He turns and walks out the door, leaving my head swimming and my heart full of lead.

I STRAIGHTEN the inventory in the shop, rent a kayak out to a couple and get them set up and launched. The whole time, my mind recycles the words Summer's dad said to me. I'm not merely fascinated with Summer. What we have doesn't boil down to a passing physical attraction. There's something far deeper between us. He has no idea.

I know we matter to one another.

The thought that niggles at me, refusing to relent, is the fact that Summer is too good for me. I'm not enough for her. Those two truths ping through my mind. I want to disprove them, but the longer I run them through my head, the truer they seem.

Kai returns from his break. "Dude, what happened to you?"

"Nothing, just straightening shelves and sending a couple out kayaking."

"Man, remind me not to do inventory. It's apparently brutal. You look like crap."

"Yeah." I don't even try to correct him.

Bodhi comes in, followed by Cam, who's on a lunch break from Guest Services.

"Hey, Ben," Cam says, as he walks in. "Whoa. What's up? You look awful."

"You totally do, bro," Bodhi adds.

"Thanks, guys. Totally helpful. Not only do I feel like crud, I look like it."

"What happened?" Cam's face grows serious.

No one knows me like Cam. He's been my best friend since before I knew what one even was. He's my brother from another mother—my polar opposite: serious, methodical, goal-oriented, so realistic he can seem like a pessimist. But in many other ways we're hidden twins. We both love a good joke—especially a well-executed prank. We love fiercely and loyally. If you belong to us, you're going to need to call a locksmith and a tow truck to drag us away. We both overthink things, though only he knows how badly I fall into this unhelpful habit. Most people see me as completely happy-go-lucky. Cam knows better. And we've seen one another through thick and thin.

"Summer's dad came in."

"That guy that was here before I went on break?" Kai asks.

"Yeah. That was him."

"He looked like a tool. I knew I should've hung around."

"Nah. I needed to handle him alone."

"What did he want?" Bodhi asks.

"He came to warn me off Summer."

"Like that's happening," Bodhi says with a huff of a laugh. "You and Summer. You're like one of those couples who make even the most cynical of people wonder if it's possible to find their own happily ever after. You're total couple goals, bro. There's no way you're leaving her."

When I answer his astute observation with silence, Cam asks, "You're not, right?"

“It’s not because of what Summer’s dad said. I’d like nothing more than to prove him wrong and never bow to his power-hungry narcissism.” I pause, clarity crystalizing as I articulate the thoughts that have been rolling through my head like a biker gang, hell-bent on destruction.

“I realized something when Summer’s dad was talking—something he was actually right about. Summer’s way out of my league. You hit on it, Cam. The other night at dinner, you questioned her, asking if she were going to leave me in the dust. She might not, but the facts are, she’s an heiress, an aspiring actress, about to get her big break. She’s from a powerful political family. I’m just a watersports employee from an unknown town in the midwest.”

“Whoa. She’s an heiress?” Bodhi asks.

“That’s your takeaway?” Kai shoots Bodhi a look.

“Nah. But seriously? Like being as hot as she is isn’t enough, she’s an heiress on top of it?”

I think I growl. I know my fists ball up.

Bodhi raises his hands. “I’m not into your girl, bro. She’s all yours. That’s been obvious long before the two of you finally caved and started spending time together willingly. But she is gorgeous. It’s just facts.”

I relax my hands.

Kai gives Bodhi another look.

Bodhi adds, “She’s a beautiful human. Your human. Not my human.”

“Dude,” Kai says with a note of amusement in his voice. “Stop talking. You’re just digging that hole deeper with each word. It’s painful to watch.”

“What? I said she’s not mine. I don’t want her. She’s Ben’s. Everyone needs to chillax.”

I smile at Bodhi. “It’s fine. I know what you’re trying to say.”

Kai says, “Good thing. When you get a minute, explain him to me.”

Cam speaks up, dragging us back to the subject he obviously can’t drop. He’s using his dad-voice. “Ben. You can’t seriously believe that you and Summer aren’t equals.”

“Are you trying to tell me we are? I don’t even know if my parents have enough saved to retire after sending me to college. Her dad called me a pool boy. He’s not far off. Besides, even if we weren’t separated by the kinds of lives we’re used to, or our status, she’s a rising star, ambitious, stunning ... And I’m just ... me.”

Cam shakes his head like I’m dense. “You’re the best guy I know. Heart of gold. You always see the bright side. Nothing keeps you down. You make others find the joy in life. Besides, Summer loves you. That ought to count for something.”

Love. Cam thinks Summer loves me?

“Are you sure?” I’m so desperate for any crumb of hope, I’m like a dog frantically sniffing under the table long after the plates have been cleared and rinsed.

“She hasn’t told you?” Cam’s voice holds a note of shock.

“No.”

“Well, it’s obvious.”

Kai steps in. “Bottom line, do you love her?”

I really don’t want to talk about how I feel about Summer to three guys in a rental shack. I wanted the first time I admit my deepest feelings for Summer to be to her—preferably at a time when I could hold her and we could soak up the sweetness of the connection we share. There definitely would be kissing involved, and a long talk. And more kissing. And hopefully, if I’m not being too unrealistic, she’d tell me she feels the same way for me.

One look at Cam’s expectant expression has the confession rolling off my tongue like a stool pigeon. “I do. I really love her. I’m completely in love with her. I can’t imagine any other

woman measuring up to Summer. She's it for me. I've been telling you that all along."

It's like two completely separate people are living in my head, standing at podiums like a couple of honors students in the debate finals, each brilliantly and convincingly defending their case. Both have merit. Neither plans on losing.

I love her. We're meant to be together.

She's out of your league. You don't deserve her.

She's happy with you. You make her happy.

She might not always be happy here. What if she tires of you? What if you're not enough?

"But ..." My eyes plead with Cam to settle my internal debate. "What about what her dad said? I am just a glorified pool boy. He's not wrong."

I look at Bodhi and Kai, feeling like I've insulted them. Only, they're different. They've surfed the pro circuit, traveled for competitions, earned names for themselves by committing to ambitious goals and working to make those a reality. Aspiring teen surfers have posters of them on their walls. Bodhi and Kai risked everything, chased after their dreams, gained glory and retired here.

I've wandered aimlessly along, following my best friend while he set a course for his life. I didn't have any concrete goal, not one involving much forethought or a strategy to attain it. I just wanted to be where Cam was. I love surfing and the ocean, and as it turns out, I love this island. But I'm not a dream-chaser. I've never won a medal or competed in anything beyond high school and college baseball. I'm coasting through life—a glorified pool boy, living out an extension of my young adulthood.

Bodhi and Kai are men. In many ways, I'm still a boy.

"Summer's dad couldn't be more wrong," Cam says. "You're a certified watersports instructor with a bachelor's degree in hospitality and tourism. You had to train and pass challenging exams to demonstrate your mastery of the skills you use daily. You teach people to overcome their fears, and

you help people experience adventures they'll remember for the rest of their lives. Because of you, they discover they can do things they didn't know they could do." Cam pauses, obviously hunting for words. "You know what? You are the concierge of the ocean! And you love what you do."

"The concierge of the ocean?" I chuckle, but it's a humorless, choked noise. "Man, I should have said that when he started berating me. Maybe he'd have seen how well-suited I was for his daughter then. I'm practically Neptune."

Cam's eyes travel up toward the top of his eye sockets. It's not a full eye-roll, but it's near enough. "Tell me you really care what he thinks. That man? You want to impress him? Or let him determine your worth?"

"No. It's not that. I don't care what he thinks. He obviously doesn't even know his own daughter. But he's not wrong about the differences between me and Summer."

"Sort of like the differences between me and Riley?"

"Not at all. You two are from the same town. You have everything in common."

"Except she's a ray of sunshine and I'm more of the dirt she shines on. I'm down to earth, feet on the ground. She's got her head in the sky. I want things all planned out. She's spontaneous. I could go on. The fact is, opposites and differences are normal in a relationship. You know this. Summer's dad just came in here and made you question everything. You lost your true north. Understandably.

"What concerns me is how you're berating yourself for choosing a job you seem to love." Cam studies me. "And you're acting like what you do is subpar in the overall scheme of things. Don't you love working here? Have I read this all wrong?"

Kai and Bodhi stand off to my side, silently awaiting my verdict. I look at them when I answer Cam's questions.

"I actually really love it here. It's been awesome working with you two. This life fits me—working here, living here, teaching, leading groups. I might have come here confused

and lacking direction. I didn't want to branch off too far. I wanted to be with you." I look at Cam. "I knew I loved ocean sports. The four years we spent in San Diego at school, I think I only missed a few days in the water except when we went home for breaks. So, yeah. I love it."

"Sounds like you've found your calling," Cam says easily. "That guy may not think it's worthy, but to me, if you find a way to do what you love and get paid doing it, you're one of the smartest and richest men in the world. So, forget him. It's ideal if a woman's dad feels good about the man who loves his daughter, but it's obvious this guy is a jerk. So, I say, just focus on yourself and the woman you love."

"I second that," Bodhi says. "I've been blessed to do what I love my whole adult life. And I picked Marbella. I may not have chosen how I got here, but I'm not looking to move up in the world. We've got everything we could want here. Good friends, fun times, the ocean, the perfect climate, a chill place to live."

Kai nods along. "I could live in a lot of places. But I choose Marbella. I'm not settling. This is me, living the dream."

I nod. "Yeah. Me too. I might have come here without a feel for what I wanted. But I'm happier than I've ever been. I love working here. And I love ..."

Yeah. I've already said enough about my feelings for Summer to these guys, and I've never even told her yet. I'm cutting this short. The next time I say those words will be to her.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Summer: I need to see you.

Ben: Everything okay?

Summer: My dad's on the island.

Ben: I know. He came to see me.

SUMMER

*The couples that are meant to be,
are the ones who go through
everything that is meant to tear them apart,
and come out even stronger.*

~ Unknown

My brain whirs, adrenaline hitting my bloodstream like someone injected it through IVs at ten points in my body. My limbs feel twitchy—ready to run or wage a battle. The very last thing on earth I wanted was my dad, face-to-face with Ben.

Ben—the man who’s been by my side and pursued me with an unparalleled patience and desire. Ben—the man who found me bleeding out and limping, insisting I was fine. Ben—the man who carefully, one laugh, one flirty exchange of banter, one kiss at a time, stitched up my wounds and healed my battered heart.

Because of him, I trust again. Because of my father, I thought I never would.

Ben doesn’t deserve to be dragged into the middle of the quagmire of my father’s messes. I’d call Ben, but he’s at work and I don’t want it to look like he’s on a call if guests walk into the shack. So, I answer our text thread instead.

Summer: He came to see you? When?

Ben: Just about an hour ago. You might say we had a standoff.

Ouch.

Summer: I'm so sorry, Ben. Who won?

Ben: I'm still not sure.

Summer: Can I come see you? Is it busy?

Ben: No need. Bodhi and Kai already said they've got me covered. I'm coming to you.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. Whatever my father said to Ben, whatever devious rhetoric he used to try to undermine our relationship, Ben is coming to me. There's still hope we could rise above the machinations of the man whom I used to call Daddy.

I haven't even set my phone down when there's a knock at the door. Ben usually walks right in these days. And, this is quick, considering we just finished texting. A small voice, like a distant warning bell chimes just before I turn the handle. I'm so eager to see Ben, I carelessly forget the alternative.

All breath leaves my lungs at the sight of my father standing on my porch. His presence fills the space. My blood turns to ice, the previous adrenaline chilling into frozen pinpricks. It's no wonder my father went far in politics. He commands attention. He's the type of person it's impossible to ignore or evade. Even now, his conviction that he's right and will win emanates from him like mist off the grass in the morning sun.

This is war. His gaze confirms it. And he's already claiming victory before the battlefield has filled with soldiers. He's come to claim his spoils.

“Caroline.”

“Father.”

Swords drawn, we face one another.

I don't invite him in, ask if he's thirsty, or offer him a place to sit. These are the vestiges of my upbringing—a hospitality

so natural it feels like breathing. Not one drop of it will be extended to the man who lied to me, betrayed our family, denies culpability, and now is willfully undermining my career aspirations, my financial stability, and my intimate relationships.

“May I come in?”

After a prolonged moment where we stare into one another’s eyes—those eyes that feel like a mirror, only one in an alternate dimension—I relent, only because I can’t fathom what he might pull out here if I don’t bring him inside.

Choose your battles, Summer. Only certain hills are worth dying on.

I wave my arm and this corrupt congressman who shares my DNA walks over the threshold, passing me as if he owns the property and everything in it.

I turn, not leaving my spot next to the door, and cross my arms over my chest.

“Now, Caroline, there’s no need to be belligerent. I appreciate why you came out here. I know things looked bad. You don’t have the whole story. If I saw things the way you did, I might’a left for a spell too. But now you’ve had your fun. It’s time to come home.”

I consider never speaking to him again. What if I went mute? I could live the life of a mime. He can’t make me speak. What will he do? Reach down my throat and maneuver my vocal cords?

He can’t make me speak.

He can’t make me do anything.

That thought spurs me forward. “I’m not coming home—to Georgia.”

“Now, now. Sugah, you know you don’t really mean that. You’re so much like me. I truly see myself in you. Headstrong. Independent. Restless. I understand. You got your feelings hurt. You thought I wronged you. The heat was high from all

that nonsense with Lizbeth. Trust me, baby girl, it's not what it seems."

I stare at this man. He was my sun and moon—my daddy. A montage of images scrolls across my memory. He wasn't always present, but when he showed up in the evening after a weekend away, or unexpectedly some mid-afternoons, he made me feel like I was his reason for living. He'd scoop me up and twirl me. Laying a soft kiss on my forehead, telling me how he missed his baby girl.

I picture the times he'd push me on the big swing in the back yard, the one tied by ropes to the giant magnolia tree. He wasn't involved in the routines of my daily life, but when he made an appearance, he showered me with attention—at least in my early years. As I aged, he treated me with a different kind of affection. I felt singled out, treasured for my beauty and what I brought to his life. I was the daughter of a congressman. I was his favorite. I was someone he could count on to represent the family with dignity and grace.

And then it all came crashing down. It wasn't an incremental implosion. My hero fell in one massive detonation with the magnitude and toxicity of Hiroshima, leveling everything in an unthinkable radius. I will never trust or believe him again. And I will not be returning to the place he calls home. I might forgive him, given time. But I will not forget.

"I'm not leaving with you," I say, more resolutely than my first declaration.

"Don't make this ugly, Sugah."

"I'm not. Nothing has to get ugly. My decision is final. I'm staying on Marbella."

"With that pool boy?"

"I don't know any pool boys."

We both know who he's indicating. I'm not stooping to anything that resembles agreement with my father's assessment of Ben.

“That young man, Ben.” Ben’s name sounds like a curse coming from my father’s mouth.

“Ben. Yes. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Caroline. He’s a resort employee. He’s hired help. He’s not the caliber and stature of the young men who are interested in you back home. Have you considered the life you’d have here—what you’d be giving up?”

The thinly-veiled threat hangs between us. I’d be giving up money—more money than most people can fathom. All my inheritance hangs in the balance. My father will either welcome me home and reinstate me into the life I had, including the privileges of our family’s wealth, or I will be cut off.

“I understand,” I say. “And my decision is final.”

“I know you don’t mean that. I’ll give you time to reconsider. I’m sure you’ll see the light.”

An ominous feeling of dread creeps over me. Does he know I had a second chance at the audition? What else could he try to pull? Or has he played out his hand, and now he’s bluffing about an invisible ace up his sleeve, when he’s really about to fold. With this man, there’s no telling.

“I have to catch the afternoon ferry.” The announcement surprises me. I expected him to stay until I agreed to leave.

“Don’t let me keep you.” My answer is cordial, distant, detached.

“I’ll be staying here.” He lays a teal business card on the counter. The font is simple with the word *Hotel* in refined, white block print and the words *Bel-Air* scrolled in an elegant script. The address and phone are in fine print beneath. Nothing else. Simply the name of a place that probably costs a month’s rent for one night.

As my father approaches my front door, he turns. “I have two tickets home. I’m holding one for you, Caroline. Don’t be foolish. Think about what you really know is right. Your mother is heartbroken. She needs you there while she is navigating this difficult time. I know you miss her. You may

still be angry with me. That doesn't mean you should turn your back on her—or on Suzette. She's the older of the two of you, but we both know she leans on you as if you came before her. Don't let your family down, Sugah. I don't mind if you give me the cold shoulder. But think of the others. They need you."

It's a low blow. One he saved for this moment. Nothing he does is uncalculated. Every move like a card shark, unscrupulous when needed, strategic at each point.

"Thank you for stoppin' by." My accent betrays me.

"There's my girl. You'll see. You know where you belong. I'll leave you to figure out your own mind. Our flight leaves the day after tomorrow."

Our flight. I don't answer. As much as I try to fight it, my father's words seep past my defenses. I picture my mama and Suzette. They are facing this debacle without me. Is it even fair for me to go on with my life while they remain at home having to weed through the aftermath of my father's indiscretions?

He leaves without another word, and I collapse onto the couch, exhausted, confused, and battle-weary. I nearly forget that Ben is on his way. When the door pops open, and his eyes meet mine, I'm up and flying at him. He opens his arms and draws me in, holding me and shushing me while he gently rocks me from side to side like a mother consoling her bereft child.

"Come 'mere," he says in a voice husky with emotion.

He turns me toward the couch. His hands never leave me, touching my lower back as we walk, like I'm so fragile I could break. I am. And he knows it.

When we get to the sofa, Ben pulls me in, settling me across his lap. I nestle my head under his chin and cry. The tears fall in sheets, sobs wrenching free, cleansing me, clarifying my jumbled thoughts like a spring rain.

"I ... he ..."

“Shhh,” Ben says softly. “Don’t talk. I’m here. Nothing’s changed. Your dad came and pulled his best punches. I told you we had a standoff. You want to know who won?”

My head bobs against his chest. His heartbeat steadily thrums beneath my ear, soothing me, beating a reliable rhythm, reminding me of my chosen future.

“We won, Summer. *We* won.”

I cling to Ben and he rubs gentle patterns on my back, sweeping my hair over my shoulder so he can comfort me. I settle in, not rushing to explain or discuss. We’re back in our cocoon, the one I resisted building. The one place on earth I’ve learned is completely safe. Nothing can reach me here. Ben won’t allow anyone or anything to harm me.

We sit like that, wordlessly connected for maybe ten or twenty minutes. I release a final shuddering breath and then I look up at him. He smiles down at me.

“We won, Summer. Your father doesn’t have the power to define me. He doesn’t get to tell me if I’m enough for you. Only you get to say that. And he doesn’t get to keep ripping rugs out from under you in an attempt to force your hand. You’re a free agent. Free to choose me, or leave me. Free to determine your path, to pursue your dreams, to choose the place you call home.”

“You,” I say, cupping his jaw and looking into the brown of his eyes, the soft, vulnerable, kind windows into his soul. “You are my home.”

Ben leans in and kisses me. His approach is tender, gentle, full of emotion. I arch upward, wanting more of him, needing to confirm we’re still real. Our mouths relax into the familiar dance. We hold one another, hands moving into hair and over backs and arms, roving, exploring, keeping.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Yours. Yours. Yours.

My phone rattles on the counter. I reluctantly break our connection. Ben keeps me pinned to him, hands braced on my hips, eyes soft and glassy with emotion and passion.

“I should get that. Maybe. Maybe I shouldn’t.”

“It won’t bite. Go see who’s calling or texting.”

Ben releases me. I stand, running my fingers down his arm. Our hands squeeze before I turn to walk over to the kitchen counter to check my phone. Ben reclines back into the couch, propping his feet on the coffee table, like he’s planning to stay.

With me.

He’s staying.

I’m staying.

He’s my heart. I’m going to stay where my heart is.

I pick up my phone, half fearful it’s my father, though he’s had his say, and he doesn’t text. I’m wondering if it’s Riley, or Suzette—I need to call her to fill her in—but then I look down. It’s Elaine.

Elaine: YOU GOT THE PART! We need to talk stat! You did it! This is huge! I’d call, but I’m in a meeting with Franco Lombardi. It’s droning on. I’ll text when I’m out.

I STAND STILL, reading the text over and over ... my brain finally clicks, allowing the reality of what Elaine is saying to filter past my disbelief and shock.

“I got the part.” My voice is quiet, nearly a whisper. “I got the part! Ben! I got the part!”

Then I’m jumping and squealing and Ben’s up off the couch, lifting me, kissing me, whooping, spinning me in the cramped space of this cottage, which suddenly feels just right-sized.

“I got it.”

“Of course you did.” He sets me down and kisses my forehead. “I knew you would. You’re the real deal, Summer Monroe. Hollywood has no idea what a gift they just received.”

“You better be careful. You might give me a big ego.”

A flash of something crosses Ben’s face.

“I can’t believe it,” I say again.

“I can.” Ben smiles warmly down at me.

“Ben,” I reach up and put my hands on his jaw, holding his face near so he sees the intensity and truth in what I’m about to say.

“I have something big to tell you.”

“About the part?”

“About us.”

“Okay.” His face is open, expectant, but there’s something lingering there, a note of doubt or fear. I’m determined to obliterate that shred of questioning.

“I ... Ben ...” I clear my throat. “I just wanted to tell you ...” I shake my head briefly, and let out a puff of air. “Why is this so hard?” I look into his eyes, pleading with him to feel the same way I do, hoping he knows these words are not a flippant cliché like people shout to one another as they run out the front door to face the day.

These words of mine are like rare gems. I excavated them from beneath unthinkable rubble and guarded them for just the right moment. I’ve only said these words to my family and once to Marissa before this minute of my life.

I stare into Ben’s eyes. “I just wanted to say, I love you.”

His face morphs. A massive, unhindered smile consumes Ben’s mouth, his cheeks, his eyes. He’s beaming. “You love me?”

I nod softly. “I do. So much. You’re the kindest, most genuine, funniest, bravest man. You’re the best man I know.”

He shimmies his shoulders and puffs out his chest. “Tell me more, Monroe.”

I lightly smack his chest. “No. You might get a bigger ego than I’m in danger of acquiring.”

Ben's face grows serious. He gently grasps my chin between his thumb and pointer finger and tilts my head upward.

"I love you too. Whew. Do I ever love you." He leans in and kisses my face softly, trailing kisses across my forehead, dropping one onto each eyelid, placing one on the tip of my nose. He pulls back, still keeping his hands on me, holding me in place while he bears his heart. "It almost hurts how much I love you, but it's a good kind of hurt. You know? Like when you burn your mouth on a marshmallow for just a minute the instant it comes out of the bonfire. It's not a burn, really, and it's sweet, and gooey. Yeah. Loving you feels like that."

He looks so proud of himself. Like his explanation was the epitome of a deep romantic disclosure.

"Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you just compare me to a burnt marshmallow?"

He chuckles. "I guess I did. But in a totally good way."

I lean in and hold him, wrapping my arms around his waist. "You are such a goof."

"I am." He gives me a squeeze. "What you see is what you get."

I tilt my head up and look into his eyes. "I want it—what I see."

"Me too. I want you, Monroe. I want a life with you. Not just a season."

Ben leans in and kisses me. Then he pulls back and says, "We need to celebrate your big news. I'll do something big later—soon. But right now, while it's still fresh, let's do something. Anything. What do you want to do?"

"Honestly?"

He nods.

"I want to go tell Phyllis, and I want to leave a thank you note for her to give to Alana. And I need to call Suzette ... and

Riley. And we'll have to tell James ... and Marissa! I have to call Marissa!"

"Slow down. Slow down. Let's head over to Phyllis' house first. I'll get you an ice cream while we're over on that side of the island. Or whatever you want. Your call."

Ben and I walk, holding hands all the way to Alicante. We grab a golf cart to drive over to Phyllis' on the north shore.

I'm on the bench seat next to Ben while he drives, our thighs touching, my hand on his knee.

"I need to tell you something, Summer."

"Okay. Tell me. Anything."

"I don't want to ever get in the way of your dreams."

"You don't. You won't. I actually know you were the one who got me the second audition."

"Huh. You figured that out?" He looks a little stunned.

"Yes. You left me a clue."

"What clue?"

"Phyllis' lemon bars."

"Ahhh." Ben laughs. "You got me there. Leave it to the lemon bars to give me away." He shakes his head and laughs a little. "I might have nudged the situation along, but Phyllis and Alana really did the footwork. I went to them for you. But you got the role. That was all you." He smiles over at me. "I need to tell you my thoughts. Let me get this all out."

He pulls the cart over at the side of the road. The ocean rolls in and out a short distance away on our right, the beach spreads out for miles just beyond the row of houses and open road leading toward the north shore.

"If I can be a part of you reaching for the stars, I'll build you a ladder. But if I'm in the way, I'll back off. I won't ever want to leave your side, but I will if it means giving you room to pursue your dreams. I never want to be a stumbling block or a barrier in your life. I only want to help you shine."

“Ben. You do. No one has ever believed in me like you do. All you do is help me shine.”

He nods, a rare serious look passing over his face. “When your dad came to see me today, he tried to convince me I wasn’t good enough for you. And maybe he’s partly right, but not for the reasons he thinks. You and I work. I know that. You’re it for me. I love you.” He winks over at me. “Like a burnt marshmallow.”

The corner of his mouth quirks up playfully, but then he’s serious again.

“Cam stopped in after your dad left. I bounced my thoughts off him and Bodhi and Kai. The one thing I figured out, partly thanks to your dad of all people, is that I love what I do. Marbella’s not a stepping-stone to something more for me like it is for you. I like it here. I love teaching people to stretch themselves. I love watching them conquer their fears and knowing I had something to do with that. And I love taking people on adventures.

“You are worth fighting for, Monroe. But if you wanted me to give you space, I would. If you ever need me to step away so you can be everything you want to be, I will. But only if you’re the one telling me to back off. I’m not taking marching orders from your dad. But if you decided you needed to let me go, I’d stay here on Marbella and smile every time I thought of the blue-eyed girl who stole my heart.”

I study him, my eyes roving across his face. “Ben, you will never be an obstacle to my biggest goals. My dreams are important. But they aren’t more important than you. I believe I can have both. Maybe I’m being naive, but I don’t think I am. It’s going to take some creativity. We’re probably each going to have to make sacrifices along the way.”

I reach my hand out, gently running it through his hair and resting it at the back of his neck. “I can’t imagine life without you.”

He smiles a soft, vulnerable smile. “If I have anything to say about it, you’ll never have to.”

“I’m yours, Ben. ... No more Caroline. Caroline is my past. I’m Summer. Summer Monroe.”

“Have I ever told you that Summer’s my favorite season?”
He gives me a mischievous, flirty look.

“I think you mentioned it once or twice.”

And if Ben were a season, he’d be my favorite too.

When he leans in to kiss me, I know.

These are the lips I’ll be kissing forever.

I’ll never live without my heart again.

EPILOGUE

BEN: EIGHT MONTHS LATER

*There's an ocean inside of me.
Put your ear against my chest and listen,
it rages for you.
~ Johnny Nguyen*

“**T**his place is just how you described it.” Summer grabs my free hand that’s resting on the console of our rental car.

“Corn for days?” I joke.

“Quaint. Rural. Like a postcard depicting a glimpse of bygone times.”

“Oh, man. I’m definitely hooking you up with the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce. They can use you to help promote the town. Not that they do promote the town. We’re pretty much this unknown spot in southwest Ohio.”

“With a French name, that is pronounced like a disinterested bovine.”

“Now you’re catching on.” I smile over at her.

“Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m nervous.”

“What? Why?”

“Meeting your parents. I should have met them months ago. I wish I hadn’t been on location in Europe when they visited Marbella.”

“It’s such a common complaint of actresses. Being forced to go to Europe with Riggs Mahone to film a major motion picture. I’m feeling your pain, Monroe.”

“Shut it, Ben. I’m not complaining about Europe. I’m just sad I haven’t met your mom with the exception of the FaceTime calls.”

“Which are so entertaining.”

“Very. She’s a hoot. Your dad’s more—hard to read.”

“He’s going to love you too. He’s just more reserved. Like me.” I wink. She laughs. “I hope you’re ready for people to go a little gaga over you.”

“You’ve prepared me.”

“By going gaga over you in my own way?” I lift our enjoined hands and kiss her knuckles.

“Yes. You spoil me. Isn’t this supposed to simmer down ... or, you know, get normal?”

“Normal? What is this normalcy you speak of? You are Hollywood’s latest sensation, and I’m ... you know ... ah-maze-ing. So, no. I don’t see normal as being any part of our future.”

“Ben. I’m serious. Aren’t we supposed to stop feeling this way? Shouldn’t the boiling water start to simmer and cool down at some point?”

“How I feel about you? Is that what you mean?”

I turn off the rural highway onto the road heading past the ranches and farms on the outskirts of my hometown.

“Yeah. Won’t you start to feel like I’m the same old, same old after a while?”

“I’m not seeing that happening. From where I’m sitting, the pot’s boiling over. My feelings for you have only gotten stronger over the past nine months.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Summer smiles over at me, seeming satisfied with my answer. She looks out the windshield. “My gracious, this is somethin’.”

Her accent slips out more often these days. She’s not trying to cover it up. We’ve stopped hiding. Her dad has had to accept the fact that she’s not leaving California. Not when she has another movie slated to start production next month. They began filming *Untethered* a few months after Summer got the role. That gave her time to wrap up our performances of *In So Deep* and give notice at Alicante.

Summer’s dad flew home alone two days after he came out to Marbella to try to persuade her to leave. He called her with a less than friendly warning. She held her ground while I held her hand. Suzette came out to visit a month later. She had turned the evidence she had against her dad over to authorities. It’s a long process, and we don’t know which way things will land. Summer’s dad has a lot of strings he can pull—strings the size of ropes. But he’s out of our lives, and that’s what matters.

Summer filmed *Untethered* for five months straight, including two trips to Europe for location-based shoots. Now that filming’s over, she’s been free for about six weeks. But she’s busy reading scripts that are pouring in. She finally signed on to her next project a few weeks ago. *Untethered* won’t release for another eight months or so. They have post-production work to do. It’s fascinating learning all the behind-the-scenes details of the movie industry.

It hasn’t been as difficult of an adjustment as we had anticipated getting used to her working in Hollywood. Sometimes she has to travel or stay in LA. She sleeps over at Marissa’s when she’s in the city for a few days in a row. But we make it work. I’m able to adjust my work schedule to fit with hers. Kai and Bodhi have been great about that.

We’ve held onto one another through all the changes. Summer still lives with Riley. I still share an apartment with Cam. I’m hoping all that changes—soon. I want every part of Summer. I want her in my space. I want to wake up to her in bed next to me, to bring her the first cup of coffee she drinks

in the morning. I want to cuddle with her on the couch at night, and to walk to bed together, and fall into one another. I want to be there when she gets the calls telling her she landed another dream role. And I want to be there to hold her when she receives those rarer calls telling her they went with a different actress for the part. I want to kayak, hike, and cook together. Okay. I'll cook. She can just sit at the table and eat what I prepared. And then, when the time is right, I want to raise a family together with a bunch of little Summers and Bens running around on the beach with us—the adorable future members of team Bummer.

And I plan to make that dream a reality. If she'll let me.

We turn off the country road into a smaller neighborhood, streets lined with houses built in the 1920s to 1940s, some homes renovated, most of them preserved. It's late July in Ohio. Why my best friends decided to get married here during the most muggy, heated month of the year is beyond me. Only, I get it. Once you find the woman you love like Cam loves Riley, you put a ring on it and plan a wedding. You'd marry her in the heart of a volcano.

When I park the car and step out onto the street, I realize Cam is actually marrying Riley in the heart of a volcano. I've gotten too used to the temperate climate of Marbella. It's official. I've become a west coast wimp.

Summer sits in the passenger seat, frozen. I walk around and open her door.

“Come on, they won't bite, I promise.”

“I remember when you first said that to me.”

I look at her with a question on my face. I don't remember what I said—especially about my parents biting someone.

“You said, ‘I won't bite, Monroe. But I definitely might nibble.’”

I chuckle.

“Man, I've got some moves, don't I? Cheesy lines for days. And, for the record, the offer still stands,” I tell her,

flashing my teeth and wagging my eyebrows. “I’ll nibble you anytime.”

“Stop it. Your parents are going to be walking out the door any minute.”

“They’re used to me. Don’t worry.”

Summer shakes her head. She takes my hand and steps out of the car. The front door to my childhood home bursts open and my mom comes flying out like the kitchen’s on fire.

“Oh! There you are! There you are! Look at you!”

I put my arms out and she runs right past me and pulls Summer into an embrace. Then she holds her out at arm’s length, examining her and saying, “Oh, goodness. Just look at you. You’re actually here.” Then she pulls Summer in and hugs her again.

“Mom.”

“Oh, yes. Hi, Ben.” She turns and gives me an obligatory hug.

Let’s pause right here. I’m an only child. That means, by default, my parents’ laser focus, hopes, dreams, and undivided love fell on me for eighteen years. And when I left home, they’d send care packages and make weekly phone calls. When I came back over college breaks, they would stop everything to make sure I felt welcomed home. For the first time in my life, where my parents are concerned, I’m an obvious afterthought.

Mom turns back to Summer. “Let’s get you two settled inside. Now we’re old-fashioned around here, Summer. We put you in a separate room. We don’t believe in all that shacking up before marriage stuff that’s gotten so popular these days. I hope you don’t mind.”

I think my face is nearly the color of a ripe tomato. Summer seems to be taking it all in stride.

“Mom,” I chide.

The two women I love most in the world completely ignore me.

“And, I’ve made a casserole. Tuna noodle. It’s one of Ben’s favorites. Do you eat seafood, Summer? I should’ve checked, now, shouldn’t I? Welp. I can always whip you up a grilled cheese.”

Mom’s rambling. Her arm looped through Summer’s as they walk toward the house.

“I like tuna just fine,” Summer tells my mom.

She glances over her shoulder to smile at me. I pop the trunk and pull out our luggage.

“So tell me all about this movie you just filmed. Oh! And Ben’s father says to tell you he’s sorry he couldn’t be here. He’s on a job. He’ll be home for supper.”

Their voices trail off as they enter the house. I pause, glancing up and down the street, remembering my years here as a child, when Cam would come over and we’d ride bikes. I practiced learning to drive on this street. I recall the hot summer days I spent mowing this lawn, the times I’d come running in from baseball practice to the smell of whatever Mom was cooking for dinner.

I drag our suitcases up to the porch and carry them into the house, bringing Summer’s to the guest bedroom, and taking mine down the hall to the room where I slept growing up. It’s basically the same, all these years later. Trophies line the shelves. A few pictures of me and Cam sit on the low bookcase. My collection of ball caps hangs on a pegboard over the window.

I pull the box out of my care kit and stick it in my pocket. I’m not doing anything with it today, but I want it near me. I’ve got this nagging fear that it could grow legs and walk off, so I keep it with me all the time, burning a hole in my shorts pocket, or under my pillow at night. When I go to work on the island, I stick it in the same spot at the back of my sock drawer for safe keeping.

Summer appears in the doorway. “May I come in?”

“Into the shrine?”

“Oooh. Yes. Of course. I need to explore all things Ben.”

I widen my arms out to my sides. “Explore me, babe.”

Summer giggles, but she obliges me by stepping into my room, walking over to me and kissing me, long and soft. She runs her hands down my pecs and over my abs. Then she pulls away and spends the next hour rummaging through the tangible remnants of my memories, quizzing me about my past while I sit back, leaning against the headboard of my bed, my hands laced behind my neck, watching her.

Dinner with my parents goes as you might expect. Mom dotes on Summer, Dad sits quietly, smiling contentedly at Summer, glancing between the two of us, sizing things up like he always does. I’d say my dad’s a watcher. He takes in twice what he lets out. So, when he speaks, you ought to listen because he’s assessed all the variables and nuances of a circumstance before he’s decided he needs to weigh in with his input.

After dinner, Summer and I meet up with Riley and Cam and Madeline for a little pre-wedding trip to the local reservoir. The water level is low, and the air is starting to cool. We build a bonfire, even though it’s been hot as a firepit all day. A few of our old friends from high school make their way out to join us as the night wears on.

At around ten, we all turn in, a reminder that I’m aging. I’m smart enough to know I’m still ridiculously young, but being back here confirms the fact that I’m officially an adult, no longer the high-school boy who left for college five years ago.

“I love this place,” Summer says in a drowsy voice.

It’s been a long day. We spent last night in LA, got to the airport mid-morning, flew to Columbus, rented a car and spent the afternoon and evening with my family.

“I’m glad you love this place. I’m kind of partial to it.”

“I could see settling in a town like this.”

“You could?”

“Yeah. It has everything you need and nothing you don’t.”

“Hmmm.” Not what I expected her to say.

“And we’d be close to your parents.”

“Are you suggesting we move to rural Ohio?”

“Not now. Of course not. But one day, maybe. I’ll always need a place in LA, probably, if things go the way I hope they will. But I’ll need another home somewhere.”

“Marbella,” I say softly.

“I love that place too.” She’s quiet.

The farmland passing by looks like a shadow box of silhouetted houses, barns, silos and windmills.

“Maybe we’ll just need to come here regularly.” She smiles over at me, her expression as soft as her voice.

We. Us together.

She may not comprehend the depth of what she’s saying, but I hear all the unspoken promises, the shared dreams we haven’t dared utter out loud because they feel fragile as glass and precious as heirlooms.

“I’d like that,” I tell her. “My mom would love it.”

“And your dad?”

“He’d love it too. He likes you for me—likes us together.”

I see her smile light up the cab, and I nearly pull over and drop to one knee right here, in the dark, on an old, well-traveled farm road outside the neighborhood that houses eighty percent of my memories. But I don’t. Instead, I grab her hand and pull it up to my mouth, kissing her wrist softly, dragging my day’s-end scruff across the tender skin, down toward her palm where I place her cupped hand on my jaw.

“What was that for?” she asks.

“For no reason.”

“No reason is my favorite.”

“You’re my favorite.”



I WAKE to the sound of an obnoxiously loud alarm playing *Kung Fu Fighting* by CeeLo Green and Jack Black. I laugh out loud. I don't know when or how, but Cam definitely got a hold of my phone and messed with the alarm settings.

I send off a text before my feet even hit the floor.

Ben: Ready for your big day? For some reason the song *Kung Fu Fighting* is on repeat in my brain. Hoping it doesn't keep me from focusing on my best-man duties.

Cam: Ha! Glad you're awake. I'm ready to marry the love of my life (with or without you focusing on any duties).

Ben: Believe me, I'm going to be focused.

Cam: On your girlfriend.

Ben: Definitely on her. Everything else is up for grabs.

Cam: See you this afternoon.

Summer and I spend the morning eating breakfast together, then I tour her around Bordeaux, showing her significant landmarks of my childhood like the elementary school and high school, the ball field, our coffee shop, Bean There Done That, and the town square. By mid-afternoon, we return to my parents' house to get ready in separate bathrooms. It's early evening when we drive over to the farm where the ceremony is being held. Yes. Riley and Cam are getting married on a farm.

Aiden MacIntyre's farm has been the site of many weddings in this town, including his own. He hosts monthly bonfires with potluck suppers out here in the summer months. People sometimes get married in the churches or at out of town venues, but I'd say a good fifty percent of the married couples in Bordeaux got married surrounded by goats and a notoriously crazy llama.

The evening air still feels muggy when we pull in past the tree with a dent in it onto the long dirt driveway flanked by

pasture on one side and the farmhouse on the other. At the end of the drive, cars are parked on a large patch of gravel.

I hop out of the car, walk around and open Summer's door, extending her my hand.

"You look stunning."

"So you said—twice."

"Welp. Third time's the charm."

She smiles up at me.

"Let me take you inside where the women are getting ready."

"I can't believe I'm actually a bridesmaid."

Riley and Summer's friendship has deepened over the past year while they've been rooming together, even though Summer's occasionally been away for extended periods of time for filming. I didn't want to assume she'd be in the wedding, but Cam said Riley wanted it that way.

I escort Summer into the house and leave her with Em, Aiden's wife, and the other bridesmaids. Riley's somewhere getting ready, and I know it's not bad luck for me to see her before she walks down the aisle, but I still don't want to chance it, so I kiss Summer on the forehead and head out to the barn.

Aiden's standing around with Cam and a local pastor and a few guys we grew up with, along with one guy we went to school with at UCSD.

"He made it!" Cam shouts.

"Was there any doubt?" I throw my arms out to my sides.

Cam's beaming, his usual buttoned-up expression nowhere in sight.

"You ready?" I ask.

"So ready."

"I'm here for you. Let me know if you need anything."

"Can you speed up time?"

“Can’t help you there. Are you nervous?”

“No. I’m eager. I’ve waited for Riley. I almost missed her entirely. If it weren’t for your nudge ... Well, maybe I would have woken up eventually, but I’m grateful. She’s ... everything.”

“I know.”

I do. I know what it’s like when a woman becomes your everything. I inconspicuously pat my pocket, hoping Summer will say yes to officially becoming my everything later tonight.

The sound of cars arriving, doors slamming shut, and people chattering starts to fill the air. People mill around, finding seats. The atmosphere is casual, but celebratory.

Em comes out to the barn, “Okay, guys. We’re about to get started. Line up.”

She watches us as we fall in, and when she’s satisfied, she turns and walks back to the farmhouse.

A woman on piano at the front corner of the barn, accompanied by a fiddle player, begins playing songs while the guests fill seats. And then, the music changes and the bridesmaids make their way up the aisle. My eyes snag on Summer’s. She smiles a private smile in my direction. I send her a wink.

“I love you,” I silently mouth to her.

She repeats, “I love you, too.”

We never break our gaze, not until the song changes and Riley appears in the opening of the barn doors, a white lace dress hugging her curves, her smile wide, her father at her side, escorting her to Cam.

I look over at my best friend and watch his expression. He’s in awe, captivated by his bride. A tear tracks down his cheek. A myriad of memories flood me—us hanging out as kids. Madeline and Riley running around underfoot. Camping trips our families took together. Holidays, school events, baseball games. Then I picture our trip to California down

Route 66, and Cam's proposal to Riley. All that history has led to this moment—the day my best friend marries his soulmate.

Riley and her dad make it to us at the back of the barn, where Cam stands in front of a squared archway, fashioned from three solid wood beams and covered in honeysuckle, Riley's favorite flower. We used to pull those off the vine as kids and suck the sweet nectar out like we were eating candy.

Riley's dad kisses her cheek and hands her over to Cam, who pulls her in and holds both her hands, leaning close to whisper something in her ear. My eyes meet Summer's as she glances away from Cam and Riley, their love so purely on display for all of us gathered here. I hold her gaze, the tug between us still powerful, even from this distance. I'm restraining myself from running across the back of the barn and throwing myself onto my knee in front of her.

See, Dad. Sometimes I actually do think before I leap. Rarely. But sometimes.

I smile. She smiles back—a sweet smile that says everything. We're under the influence of the wedding, but also of this love we share—a love that hasn't dimmed over nearly a year together.

The ceremony continues, vows and rings exchanged, and then the kiss. Cam, my usually very reserved friend, throws caution to the wind and dips his bride in a kiss that would make Hollywood come knocking.

When they stand, the barn erupts in cheers, the piano-fiddle duet starts playing a song and we file out the center of the barn, each groomsman linking arms with a bridesmaid as we go. I'm supposed to walk out with Madeline, but in a smooth shuffle, I pass her off to our friend, Dan, and then I wait for Summer to take my elbow. I look down at her and she's laughing at my antics.

“Ben, you can't just swap places in someone's wedding.”

“It sort of looks like I just did.”

She giggles and I lead her down the aisle, the box in my pocket burning like the brightest star.

We take photos in front of the barn, inside near the makeshift altar, and at scenic spots around the farm. All the while, our community transforms the barn to be reception-ready—a dance floor and portable bar rolling in from outside. Chairs moved from neat rows to their spots around tables.

I want to wait for the first dance, wait for the time we join Cam and Riley in the wedding party dance. I want to wait for the dinner to be served, for the cake to be cut and passed around. Then I plan to grab the mic from the DJ, calling for everyone's attention so I can drop to one knee and ask Summer for her hand—for her yes to our forever.

But I can't. I just can't.

So, right here, in front of the goat pen, while we're waiting for the barn to be made ready, I fall. I've been falling since I met her, but this time I'm showing her how far I've fallen. I bend my knee and look up at her, into her crystal blue eyes.

"Ben, what on earth are you ...?"

Her voice dies when I reach into my pocket and pull out the black box.

The noise around us dims, and I'm vaguely aware of people turning to stare.

My vision narrows. It's only her I see—and that tear tracking down her cheek, and the smile cresting on her face.

"Summer. Monroe. My heart. I love you."

"I ... love you ... too, Ben." She gasps the words out, emotion choking them along the way.

"I want you to marry me. And that's cutting to the chase. I've wanted you since I first saw you on that dock. You gave me a run for my money—made me work for it. And I'd do it all again. But somewhere along the line, you stole every single piece of my heart. You make me a better man. And you are it for me. I will spend every day of my life loving you, if you let me. So ... will you?"

Summer drops down, kneeling in front of me. I want to pick her up, to make her stand, but this is Summer we're

talking about. No one makes her do anything.

“Ben.” Her voice is soft, almost reverent. “You’re asking me to marry you? Here? Now?”

“Yeah. Sorta looks that way.”

She breaks into laughter. Giddy and full of emotion. “Yes! Yes! I will.”

I pull her in, lifting her so she’s seated on my knee.

She cups my cheek. “I love you, Ben.”

“I love you too, Monroe.”

With one arm wrapped around her waist, I hand her the box. She lifts the ring and slips it onto her finger. The diamond glitters in the fading sunlight. She holds it out so we both can admire it.

I stand, lifting her with me, and we wobble a little as we rise, nearly falling into a heap together. Summer wraps her arms around my neck. I smile down at her.

I look around at the crowd of wedding guests. Every eye is on us—including Cam and Riley.

“She said yes!” I shout. And then I whoop and pick her up, spinning her in a circle. When we stop turning, I plant a kiss on her lips and pull back.

“You said yes.” My voice is raspy with emotion. She reaches out and swipes my cheek where tears I didn’t know I was shedding slide down my face.

“You asked me. Ben, you proposed.”

“I’ve been carrying that ring around for a month.”

“You’ve been carrying it around—every day?”

“I didn’t want anything to happen to it. I nearly proposed every single day since I bought it, but wanted it to be here. Not exactly here.” I look behind us at the goat pen. “But, yeah. Here, on this farm. During Cam and Riley’s wedding. In my hometown.”

She tugs on my neck, pulling my head toward hers. I lean in and kiss her softly.

People whistle and shout. I pull back, resting my forehead on hers. “I love you, Summer.”

“I love you too, Ben.”

I look around at everyone again and shout, “She said yes!”

Cam steps over to congratulate us. “Way to pop the question, Ben.”

“I hope you don’t mind me hijacking your wedding day.”

Riley loops her arm around Cam’s waist. “Nothing could ruin this day for us. You just made it a hundred times more special.”

That night we watch Cam and Riley dance under twinkle lights strung in the barn rafters, and then I hold my fiancée in my arms as we sway to a song I requested from the DJ—*I Knew I Loved You* by Savage Garden.

And we feast on steak and potatoes and all manner of casseroles brought by the seniors in town, and we dance, and laugh, and eat cake.

When the night is fading and Cam and Riley have driven off for their first night together as a married couple, I walk Summer out behind the barn. The moon is high over the fields, shedding a glossy white glow across everything. I turn her in my arms and hold her to me.

“I promise to love you with all that I am for as long as I’m able. You’ve made me the happiest man I know tonight.”

“Ben.” Summer smiles up at me. “I love you. You make me so happy.”

“I love you so much, Monroe—like the best burnt marshmallow.”

She lightly smacks me on my chest, but I tug her in and kiss her, pulling her close. Our lips meet and she melts into me. And we stand there, holding one another and kissing

under an Ohio moon, with fireflies flitting around the fields,
and my future in my arms.

The End

... BUT ONLY THE BEGINNING



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And check out another story—a fan-favorite—with the meet-cute set on Marbella Island: *[A Not So Fictional Fall](#)*, the modern marriage of convenience story that is part of the best-selling Sweater Weather multi-author series.

A little backstory ...

I moved to California when I was 20 years old—to come to graduate school. I drove an old Honda that could have given someone tetanus with all its rust. My sweet dog, Bear, rode in the back. And I pulled a U-Haul trailer behind me with all the possessions that meant anything to me packed tightly inside.

This was in the days before cell phones (when dinosaurs roamed ... or at least kids ran wild, playing outdoors until the streetlights came on). So, I had a CB radio tuned to Channel 4 where I could communicate with truckers as I drove from Springfield, Ohio to Burbank, California.

I drove historic Route 66 through two blizzards, a couple other storms, and a holdup due to an escapee from prison who held a couple hostage in their barn.

I didn't have Riley to pick tunes, or Cameron to keep me on schedule. I didn't have Ben to make me laugh, or Madeline to keep me company.

And I didn't stop all the places these four did, but I had my own adventures and made many memories.

And the trip changed me, as trips will.

When I got to California, I settled in, and within a little over a year, I met my future husband—a surfer from LA.

That's my story. I'd love to hear yours. Connect with me at SavannahScottBooks@gmail.com or follow me on Instagram at @SavannahScott_author

ALL THE THANKS

All the Thanks ...

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And to the readers who faithfully read Savannah Scott romcom books — that's **YOU**. Thank you for believing in me and loving the stories I weave.

You are the best!