



**A
REAL
GOOD
BAD
THING**

LAUREN

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

BLAKELY

A REAL GOOD BAD THING

LAUREN BLAKELY



CONTENTS

A Real Good Bad Thing

For You

Author's Note

1. The Ten-Million-Dollar Question
2. Fair Play
3. Bar Games
4. Weak In the Knees
5. My First Clue
6. Lucky Kiss
7. Connect the Dots
8. A Very Good Drink
9. The Diamond Temperature
10. Ice Gift
11. A Liar's Kiss
12. The Secret Ingredient
13. Mango Cake Standoff
14. DIY Detective
15. No More Late Nights on a Lounge Chair
16. The VIP Treatment
17. Improper Kissing
18. A Hot and Reasonable Doubt
19. A Cover-up Kiss
20. Parking Escape
21. Even
22. Unexpected
23. Safe Cracker
24. Diamond Goodies
25. Sweet Things
26. Other Uses for Lifeguard Stands
27. What Happens in Flamingo Key
28. Show Off
29. Skills and Stories
30. Honey

31. In Fish I Trust
32. A Bird's Eye View
33. Messy Details
34. Is That a Diamond in Your Pocket...?
35. Reverse Con
36. Mr. Smith and My Confession
37. Checkout Time
38. A Type of Guy
39. Partners Again
40. Happy Place
41. Butterfly Resistance
42. The Art of Misdirection
43. Other Uses for Blindfolds
44. Do Better
45. Showtime
46. Doubles Match
47. Safe Combos
48. Piña Colada Therapy
49. Towel Thrown
50. The Real Prize
51. Sand and Stones
52. Slipped through My Fingers
53. Hit Cat
54. My Lone Wolf Thing
55. Midnight Waves
56. Buried Treasure
57. Sweet Dirty Things
58. The Prep
59. Trojan Mermaid
60. Getaway Woman
61. A Really Expensive Chocolate Bar
62. Black Lace and Payback
63. The Circus Came to My Room

Epilogue

[Be A Lovely](#)

[More Books by Lauren](#)

[Contact](#)

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A REAL GOOD BAD THING

I live my life by three simple rules. *Don't mix business with pleasure. Always work solo. And family comes first.*

But when I head to the tropics for a quick job and meet a fiery woman who makes my pulse roar, I can't resist bending the first rule for her.

Trouble is, after we spend a scorching night together on the beach, I discover she's my new enemy. The quick-witted and clever beauty is on a treasure hunt for the same damn prize – beating me in a race to find millions in stolen diamonds.

See you later, sexy stranger.

Too bad I keep bumping into my gorgeous rival all over this tropical paradise as we chase clues.

Maybe it's better to partner up. But the more time we spend together sneaking into nightclubs and art galleries the harder it is to keep my hands off her. And soon, I'm not just sleeping with my very irresistible enemy.

I'm starting to give her my heart.

That breaks my biggest rule of all. Don't ever fall in love. Because it always screws you over.

FOR YOU

By Lauren Blakely

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A Real Good Bad Thing takes place in Flamingo Key. This is a fictionalized version of a Florida Key, quite bigger than Key West, farther west, and accessible by plane.

Note: A Real Good Bad Thing is a complete rewrite of the 2016 two-book duet The Jewel Series. The two-book storyline has been rewritten from 3rd person to 1st person, presented now in a complete standalone, and with entirely new characterizations, motivations and dialogue for the MCs, as well as a new location. In short, it's a new story, inspired by one that is now off sale completely.

THE TEN-MILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION

Jake

Always knock first.

It was a simple rule, but it could save a ton of time and trouble. If someone was inside, you could feign being a delivery guy who got the wrong address. If someone wasn't inside, well, that was often good news.

Standing flush against the wall by the entrance to the flat, I had a view of the hallway, the stairs, and the door. No sign of anyone watching me.

I knocked then pressed my ear to the door, listening for a cough, a bit of chitchat, any hint of activity. My intel said the flat should have been empty, but I didn't take chances. If the guys were inside, I'd have to improvise, but it sounded like I was in luck. Nothing but silence.

Another scan of the cramped hallway—all was quiet. I took my lockpicks from the back pocket of my jeans, quickly worked open the old French lock, and then slipped inside the thimble-size studio apartment.

The place reeked of rotten fruit, moldy bread, and unwashed laundry, even though one of the windows was open, letting in a ghost of a Parisian twilight breeze.

Trying to breathe only through my mouth, I rifled through a few cupboards and drawers, then crouched to spy under the couch.

Nothing there but papers, dust bunnies, and bottle caps.

Where could it be? I turned in a tight circle, hunting for nooks, crannies, and hiding places, and noticed a small bureau in the corner, piled high with clothes. Something about the bureau called to me in a whisper to see what was inside. My fingertips tingled. Kneeling between mountains of dirty clothes, I eased open the bureau doors and held in a whoop of victory when I spotted the prize.

A gorgeous, glorious Stradivarius.

With a new, long, and unsightly scratch down the body.

I ground my teeth, cursing the bastard who'd treated such a precious thing with so little care.

Come to Daddy. Those bastards don't deserve you.

I reached in and gently grasped the instrument by the neck. With the other hand, I unzipped my backpack and took out the violin case I'd brought. Because a goddamn Strad needed a goddamn padded ride. Once I'd tucked the rare instrument in the case and the case in the large backpack, you could just make out the distinctive shape under the nylon of the pack. So be it. No one would likely get close enough to see it, and if they did, well, I'd handle it.

I'd just slipped the strap over my shoulder when voices floated through the window from the courtyard below. Bits of French conversation. Yup. You couldn't trust easy. Someone was always lurking around a corner.

Adrenaline surged, my heart pumping with the thrill of getting the hell out of Dodge with the prize. I closed the bureau—the only thing I'd disturbed—crossed the apartment in two strides and slipped out, shutting the door behind me. Adjusting the pack to hang low on my back, I headed to the stairs at a steady pace, sliding on a pair of sunglasses before I reached the foyer.

Nope. Nothing to see here. Just an average guy, visiting friends in this building.

I strolled past the mailboxes, even holding the door for the two men entering, which just happened to put my back to the

wall until they went past. They didn't thank me—just headed to the stairs without sparing me a glance.

I ducked out the door into the warm early summer evening. Lucky break? Yeah, I'd take that. But now it was time to move.

I hoofed it across the courtyard, keeping my gaze fixed on the street ahead, a few cars surging past and the footpath lined with locals and tourists alike. I was careful not to look like I was in a hurry. I'd been tracking the Strad for nearly a month, the last week of that here in Paris. I just had to get to the street, where I could blend in with the crowd, hail a taxi, and head for the airport.

Bon fucking voyage.

When I was almost to the courtyard gate and home free, luck turned her back on me. A cry of alarm came from the second-story window.

Seriously? Those guys had picked *now* to get conscientious?

Don't look back, Jake. Don't run. Running attracted attention. Running made you look guilty.

Someone burst out of the door behind me, shouting in French, which, even if I hadn't understood the language, didn't require translation to get the gist of.

Too late to stay inconspicuous. As the great Kenny Rogers said, you've got to know when to walk away.

And when to motherfucking run.

I took off, hightailing it out of the courtyard and onto the sidewalk. I skirted around two men in suits, both talking loudly on their phones, and nearly trampled a gray-haired French woman wearing a tweed skirt and knit hat and pushing a shopping bag.

"Excusez-moi," I told the startled woman.

I glanced behind me. The two Stradivarius abusers rushed out of the courtyard, spotted me right away, and pushed their way toward me. I gently ushered the French lady—and her

shopping—safely to the side, and said “*Bonjour, madame,*” before I took off again.

Six years of Army PT came in handy. I lengthened my stride, barreling past a café with its scarf-and-coat-wearing and espresso-sipping crowd, and past the red awning of a butcher shop, keeping an eye out for cops, who might not take “No, officer, I’m not stealing this priceless musical instrument. I’m stealing it back,” as a justifiable excuse for my behavior.

Ahead was my goal—a busy boulevard full of traffic, where I spotted a green taxi, passenger-less and idling at a red light.

I sprinted to the door, grabbed the handle, and slid inside. The cabbie turned his head and arched a bushy eyebrow. “*Oui?*”

I gave the address of my hotel in the Seventh arrondissement, adding in French, “*Quickly, please.*”

“How fast?” the cabbie asked without moving.

“As fast as you can.”

The two thieves stepped out onto the boulevard. The driver shrugged laconically. “It’ll cost you extra.”

“Yes. I know,” I rushed out.

The light changed, and the cab peeled away, leaving two Stradivarius thieves behind me on the outskirts of Montmartre. I caught my breath as I settled into the backseat, slinging the backpack around so it was safely beside me.

“You running away from something?” the cab driver asked as he tore through side streets toward the Seine.

“No. I don’t run away,” I said. “I’m returning something to its rightful owner.”

Some called me a private detective, others called me a bounty hunter, and sure, technically, now and then, my clients needed to find other people. But mostly I hunted down items—usually precious objects—that had disappeared for some reason or other. So I preferred the title *retrieval expert*.

That was what I did—found things and brought them back.

And once I'd delivered the Strad into the loving arms of my client, I was looking forward to bringing *myself* back home to Key Largo where I could recharge with a run on the sand, a bike ride on the boardwalk with my nephew, and a spot of fishing with my brother. Paris had a lot of nice things, but it didn't have a beach, and it was an ocean away from my family.

* * *

Nothing ever went according to plan—one of many things I learned in the Army.

My plane had barely touched down back home when my sister called. I stretched and ran my hand through my hair before tapping the screen.

“Where are you?” Kate asked as soon as I answered.

“I just exited the aircraft,” I said as I walked along the jetway. “Your timing is scary.”

“Well, don't get too comfy. We have another job.”

I groaned. I'd been traveling for a week. Goodbye recharge plans.

Kate quickly assured me. “This is easy. All you have to do is find a guy who's barely trying to hide.”

But I don't trust easy. “If he's barely trying to hide, sounds like they don't really need me,” I said dryly.

“Come on, Jake. You'll like this one. It involves art and chocolate and one of your favorite things.”

“A day on the boat? Season tickets to the Miami Aces? A cold beer and a barbecue?”

“Try gorgeous tropical beaches and new places to scuba dive.”

I started paying attention with more than half my jet-lagged brain. “Tell me more about this job.”

* * *

The client, Andrew, was looking for a man who turned chocolate into art, but not like they did in *The Great British Bake Off*—in a stolen-money kind of way.

I took off my shades and looked Andrew in the eye as the sun cast golden rays on the Key Largo boardwalk. He'd come down from Miami, where his business was based, and hadn't balked when I'd moved the meeting from the office to the boardwalk midday. The gray-haired man wore slacks and a button-down. I was dressed for a dip in the water with my nephew when we were done.

“Let me get this straight. You think your business partner embezzled money from chocolate investments, put the money into art, and took that art to Flamingo Key?”

My client nodded as we stood to the water side of the boardwalk, looking like two friends just catching up for a chat—not a bounty hunter and a customer. “It's easier to move art than money.”

I had one eye on my nephew, Mason, making sure he didn't get too far away as he pedaled his bike down the boardwalk, but I was listening. “So you're saying Eli Thompson—Eli ‘launched a hedge-style fund of sorts for ordinary guy investors with seed money from his wife's craft-fair jewelry sales’ Thompson—has been skimming pennies off his clients' accounts for two decades?”

“She's his ex-wife now.”

“How much money are we talking?”

“Over twenty years? About ten million.”

“Damn.” Swearing reminded me to check on my nephew, and I spotted my sister's kid speeding off in the distance. “Mason! Don't go past the ice-cream shop. Circle back this way, buddy.”

He turned around and pedaled toward me and my potential client.

“Did you see how far I rode?” Mason shouted from yards away, grinning.

“I did. And good job turning around when I called you.” I circled my finger, indicating the area around us. “Just stick closer, okay? We’ll get the chocolate peanut-butter-cup scoop when I’m done here.”

“My favorite!” Mason said as he pedaled off in the other direction.

I joined Andrew in leaning against the boardwalk fence, getting back to business. “I gotta ask—how did nobody notice? You said you and your brother were Thompson’s right-hand men.”

Andrew sighed. “We all manage investments in our own area of expertise. There’s a lot of movement. A discrepancy of pennies goes under the radar. Even a big loss isn’t rare—that’s the nature of this type of fund. Then this cocoa bean farm went belly-up, taking a lot of investments down with it, and at the same time, Eli suddenly retired and opened a nightclub. With his new wife. Well, fiancée.”

I almost laughed but ten million wasn’t funny. “So, big red flag.”

“Yeah.” He sounded embarrassed—even apologetic. “Only then did we look back over his accounts and realize there was a pattern. Believe me. I feel like a fool for not catching on sooner.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” I said, trying to reassure the guy. “Just give me the details. You believe he embezzled all this money over the years from these little hidden investments,” I recapped. “Now here’s the ten-million-dollar question: got any proof?” I felt for the guy, but I didn’t move without hard evidence.

Andrew nodded and opened a file on his phone. “Besides the financial audit, we did a data search. Twenty years of data, memos, and documents. I can send it over.”

I wanted Kate to verify it all. She had the expertise and the analytical mind. I had the bullshit detector, but it wasn’t

pinging with this guy. He seemed legit.

“So, why not go to the cops?” I asked. “The SEC?”

“I’d rather resolve this as quickly and quietly as possible. We want to recover our clients’ money and get it back to them. Headlines won’t help us do that.”

I nodded, liking that answer. “Send me the paperwork today. We’ll get back to you with a final decision.”

We parted ways, and I made good on my promise of chocolate peanut-butter-cup cones. Wasn’t going to risk my status as the cool uncle by not coming through.

* * *

Two hours later, this cool uncle was carrying a conked-out Mason into the office. I settled him on the corner couch without disturbing his snooze then went to ask my sister what she’d learned so far.

“All the docs from Andrew checked out,” she said. “Looked into Thompson and his fiancée. Willow runs a classy art gallery, and she’s made some impressive deals over the years.” Kate clicked through a few pages of her research. She was fierce while digging into a case. We shared the same drive, the same motivation. No surprise there. She’d practically raised our much younger siblings after our parents were killed in a car crash several years ago. “Here’s where the gallery is. Convenient for tourists.”

I leaned over her shoulder. “Show me the bars and cafés near the gallery and nightclub.”

A few clicks on the map where she’d zoomed in covered the street with pins. “Never say never. You’re planning to—gasp!—socialize while you’re there?”

“Not a chance, matchmaker.” I straightened and took out my phone to book a flight. “Always start in the bar when you’re looking for information.”

I did not *socialize* on the job. Work and women didn't mix. A stunning brunette named Rosalinda had taught me that while I was on the trail of a stolen Medici artifact in Venice. Damn good lesson I never wanted to repeat.

No woman was worth risking my livelihood and my family's well-being for.

Especially a backstabbing thief of a woman.

My focus was work and only work. That was exactly how it would be in Flamingo Key. I'd be there to do a job, perhaps squeeze in a spot of snorkeling, and head home—and nothing, and no one, would get in my way.

FAIR PLAY

Ruby

A school of fish shimmered like bright blue jewels as they swam past me, making dainty ripples in the crystal-clear water. One darted close enough to brush my leg, making me laugh—silently, since I had the regulator in my mouth.

I waved at my brother and pointed to the underwater camera he held, motioning for him to capture all this. Cole gave a thumbs-up. The Miami sun filtered through the water like a faint spotlight on the sunset-pink reef. I swam alongside glittering blue tang fish and plants that danced in the current, tranquil and silent. As I skimmed the sandy bottom of the shallow ledge, a dazzling pair of purple parrotfish shot past, racing into an underground cavern too narrow for humans. I signaled Cole, moving my hand in a circle. *It's a wrap*. The parrotfish would be hard to top.

We kicked toward the surface, reemerging into a world of air and sun and sound after the dark, silent serenity of thirty minutes underwater. Cole tugged off his mask. “Great footage, Ruby,” he said. “The parrotfish rocked it.”

“Thanks. I rehearsed with them earlier.”

He laughed. “Always said you were a fish-whisperer, Ariel.”

I grinned at the childhood nickname, and we swam for the dive boat where my friend Lance waited. “You’ll be swamped

with bookings after we upload this promo,” Cole said over the lapping of the waves.

“I hope so!”

I needed them.

Lance reached over the side and I grabbed his hand to hoist myself up. He was a longtime friend who ran day fishing tours, and he’d been doing us a favor, manning the boat while we filmed underwater videos to advertise Ariel’s Island Eco-Adventure Tours. Cole was a professional photographer, and I was grateful to have their help.

“Get what you wanted?” Lance asked while we removed our dive gear and stowed it away. “Wait. That was a silly question.” He held up a hand and flashed his catnip-to-women grin. “You always get what you want.”

“Not always.” I’d worked my butt off most of my life, but that wasn’t the same thing. “But from now on, yes. New Ruby”—I tapped my chest and adopted a tough glower—“takes no prisoners. The new me is merciless.”

Lance chuckled as he started the engine. We sped toward the skyline of South Beach, my wet hair whipping behind me. After I’d almost lost my business a year ago, I didn’t take the bliss of working outdoors for granted. Thanks to my mother’s help, and favors from people like Cole and Lance, I’d started anew.

We reached the marina, and Lance slowed the motor, navigating around other vessels returning to the beach.

Cole ran a hand through his hair, golden from years in the sun, like mine. “When do you leave for your next adventure tour?”

I rubbed my hands together. “About a week and a half. I’m so excited for this one. I’m running a rock climbing and diving gig in Flamingo Key.”

“Nice. First job there in a while, right?”

Crossing my fingers, I nodded. “Took me *months* to get this one.” Business in Flamingo Key had been hit hardest by

my ex-boyfriend Duke's slash-and-burn departure from my life. But I'd been steadily rebuilding my tour company's presence.

I turned to include both guys when I said, "I can't thank either of you enough for your help. Not just today, but over the last year."

Cole raised a closed fist and knocked it against mine. "Here's to success and saying *fuck you* to the asshole who tried to tank you."

"I second that," Lance said as he steered Sally into her slip.

I jumped to the dock as soon as it was close enough and helped tie the boat to the cleat.

"See you in a few hours, Captain," I told Lance with a salute before I headed for my car. I had a sunset snorkel tour off Key Biscayne and had hired Lance's boat for the trip. More work tonight meant no cocktails now, but no complaints.

"Roger that," he said.

"Say hi to Mom for me!" Cole called, and I waved him off with a smile before I took off for South Beach and parked in a nearby lot, then found our mother at her favorite fish taco joint on the main drag.

"You're too tan, sweetheart," Mom said when I reached her. "You need to wear sunscreen. Or a hat." Her own wide-brimmed headgear was large enough to provide a landing pad for creatures from outer space.

"The tan is kind of an occupational hazard." I sat in the empty stool next to her, then gestured to my getup—a green bikini covered by blue swim shorts and a loose tank. "I can slather myself with the stuff, but even then, the sun leaves its mark."

"Slather yourself more," she instructed, as if telling me to do my chores. But I was thirty-two, not twelve, and didn't have to be told to clean my room. I kept it, and my condo, quite neat, thank you very much—even before I'd kicked out my ex.

“The mojito and virgin piña colada?” a waiter asked, two tempting drinks on his tray.

“I took the liberty of ordering in advance.” Mom touched my arm, then waved her hand in the air. “And the mojito’s for me, please.”

Once our drinks were placed on the table, Mom leaned closer then paused. “Hello,” she said, lowering her sunglasses and peering from under her floppy hat. “Incoming hotness at two o’clock,” she whispered out of the corner of her mouth as a muscular man in board shorts and flip-flops strolled by.

“Mom,” I admonished.

“Not for me. For you. You deserve a little fun,” she urged. “Go say hello.”

Thanks but no thanks. “I don’t have time for romance. It’s distracting.”

She dropped a hand to my arm, squeezing gently. “But it can also be wonderful,” she said, ever the romantic, in spite of the screwing she got in her recent divorce and her ex’s cheating during their marriage. “Romance can be worth the trouble. And it’s been a year for you.”

One year, three months, and nine days.

“And it’s taken that long to rebuild my business and my life.” I was finally close to where I was before Duke slammed my professional reputation online after the breakup with negative review after negative review. My voice softened. “Which I couldn’t have done without your support, Mom.”

Mom waved away my gratitude. “I’d do anything for you, Ruby.”

My heart squeezed. She would. I knew that about her in a soul-deep way. Even though we saw each other a few days ago, we easily chatted about her chakras, and cute guys at her yoga class, and who was dating who until we were near the end of our drinks, but it seemed Mom wasn’t out of gossip.

“So, I heard from Andrew.” She stirred the mint at the bottom of her mojito glass. “One of Eli’s former business

partners.”

The name was familiar. “Wasn’t he your old college friend? I did a dive tour for him some time back.”

Mom fiddled with the silvery necklace she’d made and looked away, embarrassed. “Right. I’d worried he’d hold it against me, that I’d introduced him to Eli. At the time, I knew Eli was looking for someone with Andrew’s skills and...”

And the rest was painful history, as it often goes with exes. And Eli was the worst of them. Shame that he’d been such a good stepdad for nearly two decades. He’d helped raise Cole and me after our father died when we were young, and had been like a father to us until he’d screwed Mom over in their divorce, after screwing someone else while they were married.

“Anyway,” Mom continued as if shaking off thoughts of her second husband, “Andrew has been trying to reach him, but *apparently*, he’s too busy to answer the phone, living it up in Flamingo Key with his new fiancée and his new club, *Sapphire*.” She breathed the name like it cost her something.

“Flamingo Key?” I asked because life was funny sometimes. “Where I’m headed for the tour?”

She nodded. “Yes. Where we used to go on vacation when you were little. And when you were a teenager too,” she said with a laugh. We’d spent a lot of time there, and I knew a lot of people there, still counted many friends on the island. She paused, perhaps for dramatic impact. “And there’s more. Andrew thinks Eli might have started the club with money he stole from the business. He’s hired a PI to look into it.”

I stared at her, hoping this was a bad joke. Because that was next level. “Are you kidding me? He stole from the company?”

“That’s what he said.” She stabbed the straw into the soggy mint at the bottom of her glass. “Something about shares in a mysterious cocoa bean farm. Did the investment tank or did the money go elsewhere?” she mused.

“Like into his nightclub?” I asked.

Mom lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper and beckoned me closer. “You should drop in on the club and then steal his Rolex while you’re there.”

That surprised a laugh out of me. “He does love that stupid Rolex.”

She reached over and patted my hand. “On second thought, concentrate on your tour, sweetie. You can’t take people rock climbing from jail. And talking too much about my ex is bad for my chakra.”

* * *

The conversation nagged at me until my sunset snorkel when I put it aside. After I said goodbye to Lance and my satisfied clients, my mind turned to Eli once more as I drove through the familiar Miami streets toward my condo.

My mom had given everything for love—her heart, her time, and her money. She’d given Eli the start-up funds for his investment firm many years ago. It hadn’t been a loan, but a gift. She’d wanted to help make his dreams come true.

For him to turn around and battle so coldly to keep everything when they split had left me empty inside.

And pissed off too. I wanted what was right. That was how Mom had raised me. Hell, that was how Eli had raised me.

To play fair.

When I reached my home, I headed straight for my laptop and impulsively—or maybe it wasn’t so impulsive since it felt goddamn necessary—changed my flight. I needed some extra days on the front end, and I’d use that time to do some digging.

To find out what Eli was up to because he was obviously up to something.

Then I’d make him do right by Mom.

Play fair. Just like he’d taught me when I was a kid.

BAR GAMES

Jake

The Pink Pelican was everything I loved about dive bars. The wood walls were lined with seashells. Jack Johnson played from a stereo system. A dartboard hung on the far side of the joint, and the whole place smelled of beer.

Heaven.

It was an investigator's paradise too. The bartender, Maris, with her long brown hair braided tightly, was friendly and chatty. A few well-worded questions gave me key details about the nightclub at the end of the block—info I'd never find online.

I wanted to get a bead on Eli and his art investment. He might have the art hidden at the club, or he could have turned it into cash already and used it to buy the place. I'd visit the club later, when the moon was high and the place was busy and I could blend in.

But at five p.m., The Pink Pelican was just the right amount of crowded. I could prop my elbows on the bar and chat with the friendly and informative staff and be just a man on vacation. Plus, the easiest cover was one that could be true. I was thirty-eight-year-old Jake Hawkins, former soldier, now in the "recovery" business, and here on a fishing trip with his buddies. Maris was born and raised in the Florida Panhandle and considered herself an avid fisherwoman—the tattoos of

waves coasting down her brown skin were her homage to the sea so we'd exchanged tales of the ones we'd caught and the ones that had gotten away.

"Tomorrow should be a great day on the water," Maris said as she wiped the counter. "I bet you'll have a fantastic haul. Marlins and groupers galore."

"Excellent. That's what I want to hear."

"What else will you do while in town? Snorkel trip? Dive? Stingray kiss? I love all things water, so you'd better say yes," she said, playfully bossy.

"I'll probably do all of those things you mentioned," I said, since that felt true enough, and it also might endear me to a water lover. But I needed to get to the heart of my *land* mission. "But the other thing I want is island art. It's a thing of mine when I go on a trip. Instead of vacay snaps on my phone, I have a painting on my wall. Like a fish jumping out of the water or something. I passed a place on this street," I said, gesturing in the direction of the gallery I'd passed earlier—the one run by Eli's new woman. I'd scouted it out but I wanted a local's opinion of the place. "Can I get something like that there?"

She shook her head. "No way. That gallery is more for fancier things."

Like *ten-million-dollars fancy*? "Like my Renoir?" I asked dryly.

Maris took my droll question at face value. "The gallery sells some high-end stuff, but nothing on that level. If you decide you want to turn that Renoir into diamonds instead, we've got plenty of shops for that," she said as she wiped down some glasses. "Down on Wayboard Street—those guys have the best deals."

"So Wayboard Street is where I should go after I sell my Renoir to the lady next door?" I asked with a grin.

"Absolutely." She pointed as if to show me the street. "You pass this swank restaurant, Tristan's, then take a right, take the

next right, and”—she paused for drama, fluttering her fingers like she was onstage—“prepare to be dazzled.”

I laughed and filed that info.

Maris tapped the bar in parting and went to take care of some customers who had just walked in. I finished my beer while I made notes on my phone, then tossed some bills on the bar, including some extra for Maris, who’d been a gold mine.

As I stood to leave, that dartboard on the far wall tempted me. Satisfied with today’s work so far, I headed over and picked up a few darts, then backed up to the throwing line. Zeroing in on a target, I mimed tossing the dart once, twice, then a third time.

“You’re shooting too high.”

As I let the dart fly, my brain registered adjectives.

Sexy. Pretty. American.

I turned in the direction of the voice and...holy smokes. My assessment needed revising.

She was...beautiful.

Golden-blond hair. Killer body. Legs a mile long and sculpted to toned perfection. She stood at the bar, knocking back a glass of whiskey, totally at ease.

I glanced at the dartboard. Not only had I missed high, as she’d predicted, but I’d missed by a long shot. The effect of a gorgeous woman.

“Seems I’m in need of a dart coach,” I said to her with a slight grin.

Setting her glass on the corner of the bar, she strolled past me and reached up.

Don’t stare down her shirt. Stop gawking at that ass. Look away from the most perfect pair of legs you’ve ever seen.

As she plucked the dart from the board, I tried to follow my own orders. I swear I tried. But then her short little tank rode up revealing, pale skin and a sexy-as-sin belly button piercing.

Ah hell. That was just too tempting.

As she stood, she flashed me a bright smile, her blue eyes twinkling. She handed me the dart. “I’ll see if I have any openings in my schedule, Tommy,” she said, a nod to the shirt I’d worn to look like a tourist. Her cute little tank said Happy Turtle. She lifted her chin in a challenge. “And, if you hit a bull’s-eye, I’ll give you your first dart lesson free.”

“Can’t turn down that kind of offer.”

She leaned against the bar and took a drink as she eyed the board. Like she was saying *go ahead—impress me*.

I was no dart pro, but I’d killed enough time in bars that I could play decently. I’d only missed the first shot because of her.

I took aim and let the dart fly. Straight down the middle. Bull’s-eye.

She cheered. “Admit it,” she said. “You’re a dart shark.”

“You’ve figured me out. But I’m still waiting to see how good my dart coach is,” I said, with an inviting sweep of my arm.

She parked a hand on her hip. “You doubt my skills?” she said, as if I’d offended her.

I shrugged. “Well, I’m waiting.”

She stared at me with a challenging expression. “You think I marched in here, gave you advice, and can’t back it up?”

“Time to show me,” I said, egging her on, and damn, it had been a long time since I’d flirted with a stranger.

She took the dart from me slowly, making sure to brush her finger along mine. That felt damn good. She never broke eye contact as she stepped away, like she was inviting me to stare. I drank her in, adding up details both practical and physical. The deep tan said local was more likely, and the bikini top, covered up by the tank and surf shorts, suggested she was a beach bum or simply part of the tourist industry. The toned legs and firm arms said she wasn’t afraid to break a sweat.

I could think of plenty of ways to get sweaty with her.

When she looked away, she raised her arm, steadied her stance, and tossed. Right down the center.

“Holy shit,” I said in appreciation.

She shrugged playfully and blew on her nails. “My stepdad taught me.” Something dark passed over her blue eyes when she said that, but it disappeared just as quickly as it came.

“He taught you well. But can you do it again?”

“I’m a dart coach, remember,” she said, then she proceeded to demonstrate, landing shot after shot until I was thoroughly demolished.

When the game ended, I extended a hand. “Congratulations. You are officially a goddess of darts, and I am humbly destroyed.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a destructive goddess.”

“By the way, real name’s Jake.”

“Mine’s Ariel,” she said.

“Works, even without the red hair or seashell bra.” It might have been her real name, but more likely it was a nickname or simply a bar alias. With two sisters, I understood about fake bar names. Worked for me, whatever it was.

She leaned in closer, and I caught a faint whiff of her shampoo. Coconut. Perfect scent for an island woman. “Maybe I even have a seashell bra,” she whispered.

Ah hell. That was an opening and I was taking it. “Let me buy you a drink and maybe you can tell me why you have a starfish on your belly button,” I said, and her eyes sparked in curiosity. I held her intrigued gaze for a beat.

Maybe work and women didn’t mix, but one night at a bar after a long-term hiatus? What harm could come from that?

I glanced at her stomach again, her hips, her waist, then looked back up to meet her gaze. “Since it’s ridiculously sexy.”

WEAK IN THE KNEES

Ruby

I'd had the piercing for so long I hardly ever thought about the sky-blue starfish belly ring. I ran my thumb across the sparkly surface. "I practically forgot I had this. Got it when I was sixteen."

"Please tell me that was more than a few years ago," he said playfully.

I rolled my eyes. "A lot more than a few years ago," I said. More like sixteen years ago. But I didn't want to give away too many personal details to a stranger. No matter how handsome he was, no matter how much I liked the crinkles at the corners of his green eyes, the stubble along his jawline, and the golden streaks in his brown hair. And his tattoos. His right arm sported a sleeve of ink in bold shades of orange, green, and blue, like tropical leaves, standing out against his fair but sun-kissed coloring.

"Well, you might have forgotten about it, but I could barely take my eyes off it," he said, his deep voice low and sexy. Then he feigned seriousness. "I meant, while I was trying damn hard to be a perfect gentleman when you reached up to get the dart—I might have noticed the starfish."

"Because it's ridiculously sexy?" I asked, fishing for another compliment. They were unexpectedly...delicious.

"The starfish and its owner," he answered.

I tingled all over from the remark. And maybe, too, from how it made me want to run a thumb along his sandpaper stubble, feel it brush against my chin, and mouth, and lips.

I gulped, then blinked, like a computer rebooting, as I tried to chase away the dirty thoughts racing through my head. I was here on this island for work—and a little recon. I'd stopped in The Pink Pelican to find my friend Kalila, who had tended bar last time I was here. But Kalila's sister Maris manned the taps now, and I hadn't even had a chance to ask her any questions—perhaps because Jake had distracted me from the moment I'd spotted him. He was still damned distracting. And I liked the way his compliments made me feel. Warm and a little fizzy. “Well, thank you for saying that.”

“My pleasure. And it is also a pleasure to meet you, Ariel,” he said, extending a hand to shake. I took it, liking the way it felt.

Don't think about pulling him against you. Stop imagining what his body would feel like above you. No more staring at those full lips and wondering how they taste, and feel, and...

Fuck it.

“Jake's a good name...” I didn't let go of his hand. “For a hot guy a woman meets in a bar.”

He smiled, a little crooked, a bit cocky. All sexy. “Thank you. Ariel suits you too. For...similar reasons.”

That fizzy feeling intensified. “Seems we have a mutual admiration society at work here,” I said.

“It's very, very mutual.”

When I finally let go of his grip, my gaze drifted to a white, raised mark on his forearm. “Cool scar. Is it new?”

He tapped his forearm. “A very recent acquisition. Unfortunately.”

“But does it have a cool story to go with it?”

He shot me a sly grin. “What do you think, Ariel?”

“Let me guess. You got in a knife fight in an alley, fending off enemy spies. No. That’s not it. You’ve gone rogue, and the CIA is after you. Or better yet, the knife slipped while gutting a fish after one too many beers, since I’m guessing you’re here on a fishing trip.”

He pointed at me approvingly after my last words. “I am.”

I mimed tossing a basketball. “She shoots, she scores! But is that how you cut your forearm though?” Then I shook my head. I was prying about something potentially personal. Scars were personal. “Never mind. Tell me more about your fishing trip. But remember, mermaids love all sea creatures.”

“Then, I should probably tell you about the non-fishing parts of my vacation,” he said, nodding to my glass, nearly empty. “But first things first. Can I get you another whiskey?”

“It’s iced tea, actually, and I’m trying to cut back, so I’m all good.”

He didn’t get another drink, either, but we moved to one end of the bar where it was deliciously dark and a little bit private. We chatted more about the islands, though he never told me the cool story about his scar, and I never told him why I had the starfish on my belly—because the water truly felt like a friend, because the water felt like where I belonged. But that was fine. There were more interesting topics to discuss.

“I swear, I’ve never seen a more beautiful sunset than here,” I said.

“The tropics do have a lock on beautiful ways to end the day,” he said.

“The sunrise isn’t so bad either,” I added.

“I’m getting the sense you like spending time by the beach.”

“What gave it away? The tan? Or my super-chill vibe,” I teased.

“Both. But also,” he began, then leaned in closer, “you smell like coconuts.”

He said it with a rumble that shot down my spine.

It made me want to hear that sound again.

Standing in the corner of the bar, enjoying the kind of privacy that comes with knowing next to no one in a room full of friends, I threw caution to the breeze. “Better make sure though,” I said, in an invitation.

And oh hell, he took it. He stepped closer, curled a big hand around my shoulder, and leaned in to indulge in a long inhale that made my stomach flip. He pulled back, paused, staring hotly at me. My breath caught. I was in his arms, poised for this moment to unspool into something else. A ribbon of heat raced through me as his gaze held me hostage. His green eyes blazed as he stared at me like he wanted to eat me up. That fierce look made me shudder. I breathed him in, and his skin smelled like sunshine and showers. He was hard everywhere. Arms, abs, legs.

His fingers curled around my shoulder, gripping me as Jack Johnson sang about banana pancakes and pretending it was the weekend.

“I have three things to tell you,” he whispered, his voice rough. “One, I want to kiss you. Two, I’m going to kiss you. Three, if you don’t want me to, say no—”

“Yes.”

I closed my eyes and waited. In that second before his lips met mine, my mind raced with hope and worry. The hope that kissing a stranger in a bar would be worth it. I hadn’t been kissed well in a long while.

I wanted the kind of kiss that made your knees weak. That sent your heart fluttering. That spread warmth on a sweet, shivery path through your chest.

His lips met mine, and...*oh*.

Oh yes.

His were so damn soft, and full, and delicious. He took his time, exploring my mouth, brushing his lips over mine, tasting me. That tingly sensation sped up, shooting through my body like an injection of pure, unadulterated pleasure.

He was snug against me and I savored the delicious press of his body as he swept his mouth across mine. The kiss deepened as he ran his fingertips down my bare arm. He dropped his hand to my lower back, angling me closer. Pulling me tighter. I roped my arms around his neck, curled my fingers into the ends of his hair, and pressed my own desperation against his lips.

With a groan, he yanked me even closer as he held my face in his hand, kissing so hard his stubble left a whiskery burn.

My mind spun wild with images. Pictures of this night turning into something else. Kisses under the stars. Hips, legs, lips moving together. Him wrapping me tighter in his caress, whispering all the sweet, dirty things he wanted to do to me. In the heat of his kiss, in the urgency of his touch, I had the raw materials to feed my imagination.

My heart raced. My blood pumped. I craved this stranger fiercely. We had no history. We had no past. We only had the same agenda.

To spend the night together.

He backed me up against the wall next to the dartboard, my spine hitting the wood with a thump. The sound of it was like a door shutting. Like the moment when a kiss turns from *we're trying this on for size* to *this kiss won't stop at kissing*. He cupped the back of my neck, and his other hand clasped my hip, yanking me against him, so I could feel *him*.

All of him.

Lust skyrocketed and I was ready to go somewhere, anywhere, and—

His phone rang.

A Taylor Swift song.

Instantly, he broke the kiss and sighed deeply as he grabbed his phone from his pocket. The name Kylie flashed on the screen.

Shit.

Was Kylie his girlfriend?

He swiped his thumb across the phone. “Kylie, give me five seconds,” he said into the phone, then covered the screen.

Jake quickly scanned the bar, on the hunt for something, it seemed. I wasn’t sure what he wanted, and I was still punch-drunk on that kiss, but also on guard at the same time. He shot out his arm, grabbed a napkin from the bar next to us, and handed it to me.

“Give me your number. So I can call you later,” he said.

But did I want to give him my number? Maybe this was best left at kissing.

A sob sounded from the phone. I didn’t know whether to believe him or not.

I pointed toward the bar. “I’ll leave it with Maris. I have somewhere I need to be now anyway. But you can reach me later, I guess.” The words tumbled out, like a car sputtering to turn on.

“I’ll be back,” he said, then he walked out in a rush.

I stared at the empty space where he’d been and replayed the last few minutes.

On the one hand, he’d asked for my number.

But on the other hand, he was... gone.

Was that an innocent phone call from a friend? Family? Perhaps a date Mayday call? Or a lie from someone who was cheating? Absently, I raised my fingers to my lips. They still tingled. I ran the pad of a finger over my bottom lip. I hoped his excuse was legit because...that kiss. *Wow.*

“Ruby!”

I swiveled around, spotting Maris behind the bar. “I thought you said you wanted to chat when I was free,” Maris said, then flashed me a naughty look. “Seems instead you’ve been getting to know Jake the Fisherman.”

At least Maris knew him. But pressing her for details on who he was felt...desperate. I’d have to ask him who Kylie was if I heard from him again. Because, dammit, I wanted

another kiss like that. I wanted more. But I needed to get to the bottom of his situation first.

“Do me a favor, Maris?” I snagged a pen from the register and wrote a few words on a napkin. No number for him just yet. If Jake wanted to see me, he was going to have to follow my trail. And answer some questions.

“Of course.”

“Actually, two favors. Tell Kalila I can’t wait to see her.”

Maris nodded. “She’s camping. Should be back in a few days.”

“She’d better call me while I’m here. Then give this to the hot fisherman if he comes back in here. But don’t tell him my real name, okay?”

Maris rubbed her hands together and winked. “Ooh, lover games. And I get to be the messenger. Count me in.”

I handed Maris the note, then took off for my first stop on my self-appointed job—to visit an old friend.

MY FIRST CLUE

Jake

Pacing the street with my phone pressed to my ear, I used my most soothing big-brother voice to try to calm Kylie. “Everything is going to be fine. We’ll figure it out, I promise.”

Kylie gulped between hyperventilating sobs. “I don’t know what to do. I barely understand a word the physics professor says. It’s like he’s speaking a foreign language. I don’t know how on earth I’m going to finish school without this science requirement. I suck at science. I can’t do this, Jake. I can’t do this at all.”

“You’re going to be fine. If you don’t understand the subject matter, we’ll get you a tutor,” I said as I walked past a surf shop.

“But what if it doesn’t help?” My little sister’s voice shot sky-high with panic. Kylie was a world-class worrier. She was the youngest of my siblings, a teenager when our parents were killed, and her anxiety had affected her schoolwork all through high school and now in college. Talking her through her fears required lots of time and patience, which was why I’d extracted myself from the bar.

The aftereffects of Ariel still lingered though. “You’re catastrophizing, Kylie. You can’t get worked up over what hasn’t happened. Got it?”

“I know, I know. I’m such a screwup,” she said, another sob catching her voice. “You probably never struggled in school.”

“You’re not a screwup,” I said, gentle but brooking no argument. “Stop beating yourself up over this. You just need some help.”

“But tutors are so expensive.”

“Kylie.” I stopped walking. Time for some tough love. “Stop it right now. No more talk of being a screwup, or about money. I’ve got that handled. Your job is to focus on school.” I listened to her take a few calming breaths. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you, Jake,” she said sincerely. “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything important, like enjoying a beautiful beach.”

I laughed. “Just talking to someone I met playing darts.”

“A girl?”

“None of your business,” I said.

“Definitely a girl, then,” she teased. I let her rib me, then told her I loved her and said goodbye. By then, the sun had started to dip toward the horizon, pulling streaks of orange and pink across the sky like a tail. My watch said fifteen minutes had passed.

Maybe Ariel was still at the bar. It was a big maybe, but I picked up the pace just in case. On the way back, I passed shops selling jewelry and sundresses, and then the surf shop advertising local tours in their front window. I did a double take at a familiar name on a poster and filed the info in my mental storage banks.

When I reached The Pink Pelican, I scanned the whole place, but the woman I’d pictured taking home was nowhere in sight. I sighed, cursing myself for not grabbing her number.

But the world’s most helpful bartender was calling me over with a mischievous smile.

Maris held out a napkin to me. “A pretty lady gave me this for you.”

I unfolded it, then chuckled when I saw what she'd written. No number. Just a clue.

Hell yes. I loved clues, and this one was especially good. It basically spelled out another chance with her—tomorrow.

LUCKY KISS

Ruby

KISS A RAY AND GET SEVEN YEARS OF GOOD LUCK.

The words stenciled in blue on the surf shop wall taunted me, along with the trio of framed photos hanging below them.

The pictures told the story of the luckiest man I'd ever known. In the first, a young Eli Thompson pressed his lips to the smooth, silvery skin of a stingray. I'd been seven at the time, and kissing any sort of creature, under or above water, was certifiably gross. In the background, seven-year-old me laughed. My stepdad and I shared that sense of adventure. Back then, he'd been my hero—the man who'd made my mom happy again.

She'd been devastated when my dad had died so unexpectedly. But a few years later, she met Eli, who'd brought laughter and happiness back into her life. Now it made my chest burn to think of him covering up his straying ways with his sunshine smile.

In the next stingray lip-lock photo, Eli's hair was a touch thinner and a bit darker, but his light blue eyes had that same confident spark. I'd inched close enough to blow a kiss to the stingray on that occasion. "You'll kiss him next time," Eli had told me.

The final picture was taken when I'd joined Eli and my mom here after my junior year of college. I'd gone all in and

puckered up to the stingray for the first time. But just when my lips would have landed, the ray had slipped away, taking my luck with it.

Maybe if I'd kissed the stingray sooner or held on longer, I might have had Eli's luck—breezing through life with a grin, taking what he wanted because he could. He had charm.

Duke had that too. I'd fallen for the easy way he had about him. But the moment things didn't go his way, he'd turned into a complete asshole.

I hoped Eli wasn't all bad. But I wasn't holding my breath.

I drummed my fingers against the counter, waiting for Devon to finish up with the last of his early-evening customers at Stingray Town Hire and Tours.

“But don't they, you know, sting you?” a woman with big sunglasses and gold hoop earrings asked him in a Jersey accent.

He moved his hand like he was petting a dog. “Nah. They're like little puppies. They know you have food, so they get all excited and cuddle up next to you.”

“I do like puppies,” the woman said more confidently.

“Course you do. Now, go enjoy the puppies of the water,” he said in his cheery voice—one that no doubt helped him get that steady stream of traffic in his store. He'd made a damn good living renting gear and operating tours for visitors to mingle in the crystal-blue waters with the world's friendliest stingrays.

The customer thanked him, then headed out to join the rest of the tour group.

Finished with business, Devon turned to me and held his arms out wide. He wore a teal blue tank top and board shorts, revealing brown skin and muscles. “Give me a hug. It has been far too long,” he said as I embraced the man I'd been friends with since I was a tow-headed kid in that first stingray picture. Then, he stepped away enough to look me over fondly, as if taking in how much I'd grown.

“I know. I miss you,” I said softly. Losing traction here had hurt my heart the most.

“Then get your butt down here more often,” he said, pointing wildly to the floor, the ceiling, and the window that offered the most gorgeous view of endless blue water and a sky currently dotted in diamond-like stars.

“I’m doing my best. I’ve got a tour next week. I’ll be bringing them here to your shop.” I smiled, grateful to chat about work for a moment before I got to the heart of my visit. That would be tougher—intel about Eli.

He scratched his chin. “Actually, I have a small group on Saturday—a short private tour visit to the stingrays, and my second-in-command has a family thing to go to. Want to do a man a favor and help out?”

I nodded enthusiastically. Anything for a friend. “I would love to. Text me the details?”

“Absolutely,” he agreed. “So you came to town early?” Then he fixed me with an expectant stare. “Any special reason?”

Recon.

But I couldn’t say that, of course.

Instead, I gestured to his picture-perfect window and the moonlit indigo sea beyond. “Do I need more of a reason than that?”

“No.” He laughed, shaking his head. “Hell no.”

“So, Devon,” I said, clearing my throat and changing the subject. “I need your honest opinion on something.”

“Uh-oh.”

“It’s not bad. I promise,” I said with a laugh, mostly to keep the mood light as I, well, pried. “Now that business is picking up for me again, I want to run a tight ship and make sure customers are happy. So when someone on a tour asks me about the nightlife, should I mention...?”

Devon smiled in understanding. “You want to know how Sapphire is doing.”

“Exactly.”

“That place is red hot. Packed crowds every night. It’s like a goddamn mint.”

Mint.

I bit back my immediate questions. *Is Eli making a mint with someone else’s money? Did his old company fund that damn club?* Instead, I leaned across the counter and planted a soft kiss on Devon’s leathery cheek. He pretended to catch the kiss in his hand. “Now I’ve got my next seven years,” I teased. “Thank you.”

“If only a kiss from me had such powers,” he said, then turned a shade serious. “Hey, I get that you’re not on the greatest terms with your stepdad. But I’m all for family getting along and putting the past behind them, and I hope you’re able to do that. Even though he’s not your flesh and blood, he’s the man I saw taking care of you when you were a kid.”

I sighed. It would be so much easier to write Eli off as an asshole if that weren’t true. But I could only put the past behind me if he played fair. “He was good to me,” I admitted with a grumble.

“There you go. Look on the bright side! And Kalila always said good things about him. She liked working with him too.”

Wait. Hold on. “Kalila worked for him?” I asked in surprise. I couldn’t picture pink-haired, tattooed Kalila working for a finance guy.

“Assistant-type stuff when he was setting up the club,” Devon said. “But she’s got some kind of flower shop now. You should check it out!”

Kalila had just moved near the top of the list of people to see.

I thanked Devon, and as I walked away from the snorkel shop by the beach, I called the man of the hour.

“Sweetheart! I’m so glad you’ve called. It’s been ages.” Eli’s carefree voice boomed over the sound of music. The music faded, and the background noise died. He must have moved someplace quieter.

“Hey there, Eli,” I said. “I’m in town. Want to have brunch tomorrow?”

“Name the time and place,” he said.

I did, then I made a pit stop at my cheap little hotel room, tossed on a sundress, and walked to the nightclub since it was nearby.

Well, it was a good idea to get the lay of the land. Even though I had no plans to go in.

CONNECT THE DOTS

Jake

Drum-heavy techno music reverberated in my bones as I weaved through the throng on the dance floor.

Sapphire lived up to its name.

The sleek, silvery nightclub shimmered. Mirrored walls behind the bar were edged with neon blue. Jewel-toned lights flashed from the ceiling, moving and swaying in colored spotlights. Women in barely-there black dresses that skimmed the top of their thighs on one end and plumped up their chests on the other sidled up beside girlfriends or next to men. The crowd was mostly young, but sprinkled with tourists of many ages—the mom and dad on a getaway from the kids, groups of forty-something friends reliving their younger days with a hot night on the town, and lots of single men, from frat boys to sugar-daddies.

I leaned against the bar, soaking it in, taking note of Eli's new world. Everything sparkled. The lights, the bar, and the disco ball. My eyes roamed the dance floor, then I raised my gaze to the second level and spotted him.

The face matched the images I'd scoped out online. Like a middle-aged Robert Redford, he rested his hands on the railing and surveyed the scene, as if he were a prince presiding over his subjects.

What a sneaky fucker—stealing from his company then skipping out with a fortune in art. Maybe even turning that art back into dough here.

If Eli had poured the pilfered dollars into this club, he had picked wisely. But was this club the endgame or another scheme?

Judging from the liquor flowing, the cover charge, and the lack of elbow room, Eli was making money hand over fist. He looked the part, dressed in a crisp button-down and tailored pants. A woman with jet-black hair and a wine-red dress joined him, wrapping an arm around his waist. Eli glanced briefly at her, clasped her hand, then ran a finger across the hollow of her throat.

Something about her throat interested Eli. Which meant it interested me.

Setting my glass of ice water on the bar, I worked my way to the coiled metal staircase at the edge of the dance floor, keeping Eli and the woman in sight. I climbed the steps as quickly as possible with the crowd pushing in both directions. I reached the second level as the woman planted a kiss on Eli's cheek.

Eli cupped her face in his hand and returned the smooch, his fingers drifting to her necklace, and a diamond bright enough to blind me from a distance. He was stroking it, caressing it, fondling the stone—the man was fixated on the rock more than the woman. I managed to sneak a few feet closer to snag a better look at the square-cut jewel with a bluish tint.

Like a sapphire.

Eli was dating an art dealer, all right, but the man sure seemed fonder of jewels. And there was big diamond business here on the Key.

I pivoted and turned to leave before I arose any suspicion. On the way, I played connect-the-dots in my head. Money, art, diamonds, club. I didn't have enough information yet to draw a conclusion, but I didn't want to leave any stones unturned. I

glanced up at the balcony once more—in time to see Eli reach into his pocket and take out his phone to accept a call. His face lit up. Whoever had called him had made the man’s day. Eli spun around and opened a door, extracting himself from the crowds.

Maybe it wasn’t quite time to go. I surveyed the room for a few more minutes just in case the money man returned. No such luck, so I resumed my way out, and reached the exit, where a burly security guard manned the door. His arms were crossed, revealing ink on his forearm—an Army Ranger tattoo.

“How’s it going? Army here too,” I said.

The big man raised his gaze, and the expression in his eyes shifted from standoffish to engaged. “Yeah?”

“Intelligence. Six years.”

“Served for seven, myself. Cal Winters.”

“Jake Hawkins,” I said, shaking his hand. “See you around.”

Once I hit the street, I fingered the napkin in my pocket with the clue Ariel had left for tomorrow. Another chance with her was hard to resist, even though I probably should. I had enough on my plate to take care of—emailing tutors and planning my next step in the investigation.

Tonight’s visit to Sapphire had only reminded me that this was no easy job. I’d just begun, and I had a lot of legwork ahead of me to get to the bottom of the missing ten million dollars. Finding stolen goods wasn’t for the faint of heart.

Hell, the best gigs with the biggest payoffs were the toughest ones with the most twists and turns.

Distractions like beautiful women were ultimately just that—distractions.

As I walked away from the club, heading back to my hotel, I weighed my options, but I stopped weighing them when I spotted a familiar silhouette up ahead of me.

A blonde, with strong legs, and a confident stride. Had she come from the nightclub? How had I missed spotting her?

No idea, but I didn't want to miss her now.

Guess that was the answer to whether I should see her tomorrow or not. I couldn't wait. Distraction or not, I wanted to see her right fucking now.

I didn't want to surprise her, so rather than run to catch up with her, I strode a little faster. As the salty ocean scents breezed by, I upped my speed, lasered in on the target in front of me until I was twenty then ten feet away from her. But she never turned around. She just kept marching forward on the sidewalk, passing the tourist shops, weaving past travelers.

Oh hell.

She probably had earbuds in.

When I was five feet away, I said, "Hey, Ariel."

Nothing.

I caught up to her, gently setting a hand on her bare arm.

She jerked away, her eyes popping. Then she stumbled and I grabbed her arm immediately, steadying her. Her breath came fast.

"What the hell?" She ripped out her earbuds.

Now that she'd gained her footing, I let go of her and held up my hands in surrender. "I come in peace."

"You scared the life out of me!"

I gave a *forgive me* smile. "I know. I'm sorry. I called out to you."

"I was listening to a podcast," she said, a little defensively, her breath still coming quickly.

"Anything good?" I asked, hoping to defuse the moment.

She narrowed her eyes but didn't answer. Instead, she roamed her eyes up and down my frame, like she was assessing my outfit. "What are you doing?"

I quickly weighed the benefits and drawbacks of telling a reasonable lie.

The fewer lies I told, the easier this thing with us would be, but I didn't want to let on why I was there. "I was trying to decide if I wanted to go into the nightclub. But I'm not much of a dancer."

There. That was true enough. And I hadn't admitted that I had been in there, scoping it out for a job.

Her expression softened slightly. "Oh," she said. Then she glanced in the direction of the club too, and down at her clothes. "Same here."

I laughed. "So you decided not to go in either?"

A smile tipped her lips. "Yeah. I'm not sure I have the moves for a club."

I'd bet she did. But that wasn't the point. The point was that I was drawn to her, as much as I'd been drawn to her when she walked into the bar. And I didn't deny the part of me that craved a little more time with her, especially after the way our first meeting had ended. "Can I walk you somewhere, Ariel?"

Her smile disappeared. She crossed her arms. "Actually you can answer a few questions."

Well then. That was an abrupt turn. Someone, it seemed, had an agenda.

A VERY GOOD DRINK

Ruby

It wasn't entirely true what I'd told him. I *could* dance.

I just needed a reason to explain why I hadn't gone into the nightclub. I couldn't very well say I hadn't wanted to be caught scoping out my stepdad. My excuse was a good one, especially after Jake had scared the coconut lotion off me.

Not intentionally. But still.

Now that he was here though, maybe I could get some answers. I lifted my chin. "Was that a Mayday call earlier?"

It came out direct, a little tough. A woman protecting herself. Or trying to get to the bottom of something.

He knitted his brow. "What do you mean?"

"The phone call earlier that you got at the bar," I said as I resumed walking. Standing and looking at his ridiculously handsome face made me feel a little vulnerable. I didn't want to feel that way right then. "Was that your *save me* call? Was it a girlfriend?"

Jake immediately pulled his phone from his pocket. "That was my sister. My little sister, Kylie." He pulled up a shot of a twenty-ish girl who had his green eyes, his warm smile. "She needed my help." A few taps and then he showed me the call list from a couple of hours ago with the name "Kylie" logged in the right timeframe.

Fine. As far as proof went, it wasn't a hundred percent definitive and anyone could make things up, but this was pretty damn good.

Chagrined, I said, "Oh. I'm glad it was your sister."

"She needs a tutor so she turned to me. She's taking physics."

"Well, physics is hard." That was stating the obvious, but it lightened the mood.

"I have no idea how anyone can learn physics," he said.

"Honestly, it's kind of a miracle that anyone even knows what physics is if you think about it," I said, a little playful once again, like we'd been at the bar.

"It is." He swiped on his phone once more and showed me another photo. It was of him and his sister smiling, laughing, and licking ice cream near the water. The sweet photo ate away at my desire to be tough.

"That's a nice shot," I said.

"Thank you," he replied. "It makes me smile whenever I look at it."

I scanned the street ahead of us, the long stretch of this walk along the ocean back to my hotel. It was teeming with people. Women in sundresses and cute little shorts. Guys in board shorts and in Hawaiian shirts too, laughing, chatting, and savoring the warm night and the sea air.

What was the harm in walking with him after all?

I met his gaze again. "If your offer still applies, yes. You can walk me back to my hotel."

"I would love to."

A few paces in, I asked, "So what's she like? Your sister?"

"She's a hard worker. Very determined. She really wants to do well and I'm proud of her. But she's a worrier. I'm just glad she turns to me for help when she does."

"It is sweet," I said.

“What about you?” he asked, his tone decidedly direct.

I arched a brow. “Do I have siblings? Or am I a worrier?”

“Sure. You can tell me if you have a brother or sister, but I was actually asking if you’ve got a man somewhere.”

I scoffed. The notion of a boyfriend was so foreign to me. “No. And no interest, to be frank. My ex was... Well, let’s just say he’s not my favorite person.”

“Makes sense he’s an ex then,” he said.

“I do have a brother though,” I said, picturing Cole shooting videos underwater the other day. “He’s pretty great.”

“Glad to hear that. And what podcast were you listening to?”

This would give more of me away, but I kind of liked getting to know him. “*Badass Babe*.”

“That’s a business podcast,” he said, his eyes sparkling.

I was surprised he knew what it was. “Yes. How did you know that?”

“My sister listens to it. My *other* sister. Not Kylie but Kate. She’s very focused on being the best she can be at business.”

“So am I,” I said. Hell, I desperately needed to improve after the tough past year. But I didn’t want to talk about my struggles. So when we walked by a souvenir shop and my gaze caught on a tie-dyed T-shirt reading *Life is Better in Flamingo Key*, I shifted gears: “Best part of Flamingo Key so far?”

“You know it would be super cheesy if I said you.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are absolutely not allowed to be super cheesy.”

He hummed, taking his time. Then, after a deep exhale, he said, “I guess I would have to say walking along the water at night.”

I smiled but tried to hide it from him. “It sure is a nice walk,” I said, seconding him in my own way.

“Sure is.”

When we neared my hotel, I didn't overanalyze. I went for it, and impulsively said, “You want to grab a drink by the pool?”

I just didn't want the night to end.

* * *

“I know I said you weren't allowed to be cheesy,” I said. “But this drink is definitely that.”

At the tiny bar overlooking the pool at my hotel, I lifted my huge glass. The cocktail was fruity and garish, and it smelled like everything wonderful about the island. “I don't even care if piña coladas are cheesy. They're just good.”

Jake tipped his beer bottle to my glass. “I'll take your word on that.”

He paid for the drinks and set his hand on my back, guiding me through the mostly empty pool area to the lounge chairs by the beach.

When we reached the sand, I raised the glass and took a sip, hoping to tempt him with my groan of delight. “Mmm...” I wagged the glass, teasing, “You know you want it.”

“Now I do,” he said, low and smoky.

I bobbed a shoulder in a coquettish shrug. “See? I knew I could win you over.”

“It's not the drink that's doing that, sweetheart.”

My stomach flipped, and I wanted more of those sensations. It had been so long, and I missed this unadulterated feeling of flirting, of giving in, of just feeling good.

We picked a pair of lounge chairs as far from the pool as we could find. I indulged in another sip, murmuring my praise once again. “How can you resist pineapple and coconut?”

With a smirk, he lifted his beer bottle and took a pull. But he said nothing. So stoic.

I wasn't. I took another sip.

"Fine. I'll try it now," he said.

"Finally!" I handed the glass to him. But instead of drinking, he set it down on a little table between our lounge chairs. He put his beer bottle there too. I lifted an eyebrow in question.

Then he leaned in and kissed me gently.

Yes.

Oh yes.

It was a slow, lingering, delicious kiss that made my head swim. He swept his tongue against my top lip, gently flicking it along the corner of my mouth. I parted for him, letting him taste the drink on me. Then he pulled back with an appreciative groan.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

"I might need another taste to know for sure," he said in a rumble.

I grabbed the drink and took another sip. "Try it again."

He patted a spot on the lounge chair next to him. "Come here."

The thrill of kissing in the dark on the beach all alone whipped through me. I looked around, confirmed that nobody was nearby, then obeyed. I slid next to him on his lounge chair. It wasn't really big enough for two people, but that was the point—being so deliciously close.

He cupped my cheek and kissed me again. Thorough. Deep. Confident. A man who knew what he wanted. And I was a woman who wanted him.

A woman who wanted to be kissed by him, deeply and passionately.

I moved closer, pressing against his chest.

"Yes, your drink is very, very good," he said between kisses, then returned to my mouth.

He spent a good long time kissing me till I was boneless and extremely wet. I pressed against him, seeking contact and...Oh, that was nice. The ridge of his erection against my stomach. He was ridiculously hard, and the evidence of his arousal turned me on even more. I half wanted to invite him into my room and let him just take me all night long. But I wasn't quite ready for that.

I was definitely ready for more than kissing though. I pushed his shoulders down, climbing over him and straddling him.

With a groan, he rumbled, "Use me, sweetheart, however you want."

I didn't know the man. But I didn't need to know him. My body was leading the way tonight as I rubbed shamelessly against his erection through our clothes under the sultry sky, the stars and the inky black blanket above us, the waves harmonizing with my moans.

I pressed and rocked until I was shockingly close. I didn't expect to be so turned on to the point where I was shaking and shuddering. Where I could feel my body wanting to fly over the cliff. But I wasn't quite there. Panting, I breathed his name, "Jake." It came out plaintive and needy.

He cupped the back of my head. "Want me to get you there, sweetheart?"

"I do."

His hand slid under my sundress and into my panties. He growled when his fingers made contact. I groaned so loudly that he covered my mouth. "Be quiet for me, sweetheart."

I nodded desperately.

"You're perfectly wet," he murmured as he stroked, expertly rubbing me exactly where I wanted him. Sparks flew inside me and pleasure crackled as I rocked shamelessly against his hand.

I moved faster and faster still. He stroked me in just the right way, at just the right speed, till I was groaning and panting. Desire coiled in my belly, and I could feel myself

nearing the edge. I was close, so damn close. Soon, I was biting my lip, trying to keep my sounds tamped down when all I wanted was to cry out. My body tightened and my legs shook, and he never missed a beat. He read me completely, sensing my needs every step of the way. He stroked me expertly all while kissing my shoulder, my neck, the corner of my lips until I was shuddering and coming undone with my sexy stranger.

I was still seeing stars a minute later when I asked, “Do you want me to do that to you?” I was dying to touch him.

His eyes darkened with desire. “I do but not here or now. Besides, a man needs to earn it. You need to come again, maybe even a few more times, before I do.”

“You’re going to give me another orgasm tonight?” I wasn’t used to that kind of largesse. But I wanted it. Oh hell, did I want it.

“How about tomorrow?” he asked with a devilish grin.

I couldn’t hide my smile. “Oh, you really *do* want to see me again.”

He pulled me in for another kiss. “I do.”

I climbed off him, and after we straightened up and finished our drinks, I said goodbye. “Be sure to check your note if you haven’t already.”

“You are a mystery, Ariel.”

“And you like it.”

With a sexy nod, he said, “Seems I do.”

THE DIAMOND TEMPERATURE

Jake

Later, at my hotel, I researched tomorrow's plan of attack and tackled Kylie's tutor project, firing off emails to a few of the names she'd sent me already.

As I lay in bed, I unfolded the napkin from The Pink Pelican and reread the details. I knew this was a distraction, but I'd already given in tonight.

Was there room for a little tryst on the side? Mixing business with pleasure was dangerous. Ever since the romance with Rosalinda went belly-up, I'd been a rules man through and through, and the number-one rule was to maintain boundaries. Rosalinda's trickery had endangered the assignment and nearly cost me one of the biggest jobs I'd ever nabbed. I pressed my thumb and forefinger against the bridge of my nose, crumpling the napkin in my other hand.

Best to forget Ariel. But then, as I tossed the napkin in the trash can near the door, I rewound to those moments in The Pink Pelican, then later at her hotel. That time on the lounge chair when she'd desperately sought her pleasure had obliterated my brain cells, and now the rich, ripe memory of it was making it hard to think about anything else.

Too hard.

I couldn't get her out of my mind. I walked over to the trash can, fished out the napkin, and read it one more time.

123. Happy Turtle. Tomorrow.

Fuck it.

I was an adult. I could handle a tropical affair without it spilling over and affecting the job. And that was all this was—an island rendezvous that stayed inside the lines.

* * *

The next morning found me in my rental car parked a safe distance outside Eli's house, keen to learn his habits. Sunglasses on and ball cap pulled low, I watched the silhouette of a tall man wander past a window on the second floor a few times and tried to make out what room he was in. Bedroom maybe. Perhaps an office. Even with my mini binoculars, I couldn't tell. Too many tree branches in the way, and blinds covered most of the windows.

I lowered the binoculars, and for a while, I alternated between watching the house and answering emails from potential tutors for Kylie.

Then, I thumbed through Kate's emails about inquiries from new clients. *Have I mentioned you need to bring someone else on board? Lots of work coming our way.*

I sure did enjoy those words—*lots of work*—because lots of work was the one guaranteed way for me to pay off all the college bills for my brother and younger sister. *Excellent. Try Dan if it's not too wild a job.*

Dan was a buddy from my Army days who picked up occasional work for me.

Movement at the front of the house made me table all thoughts of work. Eli strolled down the stone path of his house, tossing his keys lightly from hand to hand, pausing to literally stop and smell the roses growing around his tropical home. He certainly knew how to enjoy every moment. The nightclub, the island sunshine...other people's money...

He walked to a gleaming black Audi, as if to prove my point.

When he pulled onto the road and drove into town, I followed from a few vehicles behind. Looked like he was headed to the financial district. Banks, banks, and more banks lined the main street, slicing the island into water and money. Sleek black cars dropped off sharp-dressed women and men in crisp suits and ties, their outfits a stark contrast to the island lifestyle.

With my quarry parked outside a large white building, I grabbed a not-too-near spot, about to tail Eli inside, but he popped back out and I had to duck out of the way of the revolving door. He hadn't been inside long enough to do anything but grab a few dollars at the ATM. No chance he'd dropped off any hefty sums of cash or checked on goods in a safe deposit box.

I walked purposefully to the gurgling fountain outside the bank as if that had been my intent all along. To sell it, I tossed in a few coins, making a wish that this job would pay off.

Eli crossed the street, then headed up a set of steps to a chichi restaurant called Tristan's with a terrace one story up from the road. A sign said **OPEN FOR BRUNCH AT TEN**, but Eli rapped on the door, and a tall man answered it, letting him in.

What was Eli doing there so early? It was only nine-thirty. I stayed by the fountain for a bit, looking like I was checking my phone while I watched the place. No sign of Eli coming out. Hardly anyone going in either. But then, hold the hell on.

At a few minutes before ten, I peered more closely. I did a double take. No way. There was no way that was her walking up the steps and into the restaurant.

The woman I planned to meet later today.

I hustled across the street to get a better view. She walked from inside the restaurant out to the terrace, joining...Eli.

What the hell? Why would Ariel be dining with him?

I had no answer and clearly no time to linger.

* * *

Irritated, but curious as all hell, I wove through the financial district, running through scenarios for Ariel and Eli, but none felt right. Finally, I reached Wayboard Street where small storefronts had signs like **DUTY-FREE**, **WHOLESALE**, and **UNCUT**.

I had to shove Ariel out of my mind and focus on my mission. *Intel*.

I tried the first diamond shop I came to. Posing as a curious customer, I said I was looking for a blue-tinted stone. The shop was busy, and the proprietor told me he hadn't seen anything like that and sent me on my way.

The next guy pitched me a twenty percent discount on a fair-trade diamond if I bought it before I left.

This was a crapshoot. But investigations were like that sometimes. I tried a few more shops till I reached the end of the block and went into a place called Uncut. Behind the counter, a man with a thick beard and an eager grin spoke to another customer in rapid-fire Spanish, finishing the transaction quickly. When that customer thanked him and left, he strode up to me, shifting to English. "Greetings and welcome to Uncut, where we specialize in the best duty-free diamonds on the island." His slight Cuban accent told me he was from the nearby island and his style said he was probably an excellent salesman, since he sounded like a TV commercial. "Are you looking for something for that special someone?"

"Potentially."

"Ah, excellent. Someone you want to say *I do* to?"

I laughed and shook my head, sticking with the truth. "I don't see that happening anytime in the near future. But my sister is graduating from college soon, so I thought I might get her a little something?"

He walked behind the counter, unlocked a glass case, and gestured to several diamonds that could be set into jewelry. "Surely, a lovely pair of simple diamond earrings would be a wonderful gift for your sister as she embarks on her first job

after college. They say *classy and elegant*, and what employer wouldn't want that?"

"Mmm. I like those—but these ones here are nice too." I made a show of taking in the sea of sparkling gems that shimmered like brilliant reflections. "Business is good these days?" I asked casually. "I keep hearing all about diamonds."

The man nodded vigorously and gestured to the door. More customers were streaming in. "Better than ever."

"Sweet. Any chance you'd have one of those diamonds with a sort of bluish tint to it?"

The man shook his head. "One of my colleagues at International Diamonds has some from time to time. A few months ago, he handled a small batch of them for a new customer who brought them in. He might even have one or two left over."

"Excellent," I said, reining in a grin and extending a hand to shake. "I appreciate that. And I'll be back to pick something up for my sister soon. What's your name?"

"Montez."

"Nice to meet you, Montez."

With a friendly nod, he headed over to his new customers, and I took off.

* * *

The conversation had sparked a memory. The files that Andrew had sent over included a recovered email, and once I was away from the shop window, I pulled up the deleted thread. The messages referenced an amount and discussed safe transport of "luxury goods." But there was no mention of paintings or art.

The art idea had been Andrew's guess based on Eli's affinity for it and the fiancée's business venture. But how many five-thousand-dollar paintings did you have to move to equal ten million dollars? A fuck ton, that was how many. And

paintings, which required safe transport, took up a helluva lot more space on a plane than gems did.

The details were adding up—the name of Eli’s nightclub, the bling on the woman, the tint of the diamonds, and the timing of the jewel trade.

Was Eli ferrying something else entirely?

As I walked down the street, I called Andrew and asked if his team had managed to recover any more documents. They were still working on it, he said, so I ran my idea past the client.

“I’m looking at the email now,” Andrew said in a focused tone. “This deleted one is from Eli to Constantine Trevino.”

I growled. *That guy*. Needed art moved illegally? You called Constantine. Hankered for some ivory tusks? Constantine was the middleman.

“The luxury-goods trafficker,” I bit out. “I know of him. He can move anything.”

“Like diamonds,” Andrew said. “And if that’s what he took, they’d be the rightful property of the Eli Fund.”

“Let’s get ’em back, then.”

“Let’s do it.”

I hung up then found the shop Montez mentioned. International Diamonds sprawled over a huge street corner. The sign said **OPEN TOMORROW**.

Looked like my afternoon had opened up, leaving time for a rendezvous with a mermaid. And I planned to find out what the hell she was doing with the guy I was investigating. Starting now. I called Andrew back, but it went to voicemail, so I sent him a text asking if he knew about any blondes in Eli’s life who were having breakfast with him this morning.

ICE GIFT

Ruby

On the terrace, my stepfather held his arms out wide, and pulled me close as though I was precious to him. So many times growing up, he'd comforted me with a hug when I'd fallen, gotten hurt, or lost a game, and some kind of nostalgia stirred as he embraced me.

Family.

That was why it hurt me so much to think Eli was a con man, a thief, on top of how he'd treated my mother.

"It's been too long," he declared, breaking the embrace, then gesturing to the table. "I want to hear everything you've been up to," he said as I sat across from him.

The restaurant owner marched over as soon as we were seated. "She's finally arrived, Mr. Thompson," Tristan said, gesturing to me as if I were a prize. The tall, salt-and-pepper-haired man turned to drop a chaste kiss onto my cheek. "Welcome back, Ruby. What a pleasure to see you again too."

"Thank you so much, Tristan. I see you're as busy as ever." I eyed the many tables with reserved signs on them, then flashed a quick smile to the man I'd known for years.

"I can't complain," he told me, handing us menus, then heading off.

Eli snorted as soon as Tristan scuttled away. “Can’t complain my butt,” he muttered.

I arched a questioning eyebrow.

My stepdad leaned in and whispered, “He complains about everything. He did as much this morning.”

“You saw him earlier?” I asked.

Eli flicked open his cloth napkin and spread it across his lap. “I met with him before you arrived. He wants me to back a new venture of his. Then again, doesn’t everyone?” he asked with an *it’s good to be the king* look in his eyes.

“I don’t know. *Does* everyone?” I asked dryly.

“Some days, it seems that way—everyone lining up to ask for a little of this, a little of that,” he said.

“Do you ever say yes?” I asked, spreading my own napkin over my lap.

He lowered his voice. “Rarely. I’m actually trying to retire. To devote my energy to my charitable endeavors.”

I frowned. I’d never known him to be terribly interested in charity, plus, he was obviously still working. “But you run the nightclub. It’s doing well, I hear.”

“You should see it. Dance a little, feel the Sapphire energy. It’s wonderful. Come by tonight. Amelia Stone is in town. I’ll make sure you’re on the VIP list. I won’t be there, but my manager, Nigel, will. If you need anything, he’s the man with the snake tattoo on his left arm.”

“Sounds like he’d be hard to miss, then. And I’m glad the club is doing well.” That wasn’t entirely true, but tomato, to-mah-toe. “It’s a dream nightclub,” Eli said. “Plus, it feeds my charity work. I donate all my profits.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed him on the give-it-all-away front, but I gave a *that’s nice* smile anyway.

After the waiter brought water and a mimosa for Eli, which I presumed was his standard drink every time he came here, we ordered our meals. Once the server left, Eli gestured to me

with pride in his eyes. “Tell me everything. How is your company? What happened to that jerk who tried to sabotage your tour business? I wish you’d have let me help you with that fiasco.”

I gaped at him incredulously. “You didn’t offer,” I pointed out. I wouldn’t let him play revisionist historian. We had only spoken a few times since the divorce.

“You didn’t ask,” he said.

Touché.

“Well, anyway, Mom helped me out, and I’ve been rebuilding.”

“Good. I’m thrilled.” He took a drink of his mimosa, then leaned back in his chair and glanced briefly at the crowds click-clacking by, streaming in and out of banks. We briefly made small talk, then he asked, “But do you need anything now? My bank is right over there.”

I shook my head. “Thank you. I’m good.” It was the perfect opening. This was going to be awkward, but I didn’t let the chance slip by. “So, speaking of my mom...there’s something I wanted to bring up. A request.”

“Of course.” He sounded so genuine. “What is it?”

“It’s about the money Mom invested in your business to get you started. I think you should pay her back.” When he didn’t react, I went on with the argument I’d practiced. “You would never have funded the company without her, and that business made you rich. It’s only fair to return the seed money, especially now that you’ve retired from the business.”

But his response was a dismissive laugh. “That’s silly, dear. She has her jewelry sales.”

Seriously? That was his answer? I shoved aside the curl of annoyance in my gut and tried again. “Eli, when you needed her, she helped you in a big way, and she’s trying to rebuild her business after the divorce. Don’t you think it would be the right thing to do?”

“She doesn’t need *my* money if she’s busy selling jewelry again. She’s always been so talented with her little artsy tinkering.”

“Tinkering is the reason for everything you have today. And you made sure she got *nothing* in the divorce.”

Eli was one hundred percent a rat bastard to me just then, but if I didn’t get a hold of my anger, I’d show my hand and sink my recon mission before it started.

Breathe.

Eli waved a hand, erasing all I said. “That’s crazy. It was a completely fair settlement. But let’s not talk of such unpleasant matters. Look, our brunch is here,” he said, his eyes lighting up as the server set our plates on the table.

We thanked him, and when the man left, Eli gestured to my dish. “I know you must have missed this food.”

He was ready to move to other topics but I wasn’t. As he dug into his eggs Benedict, I tried again. “Eli, why can’t you at least return the money she gave you to start the business?”

“Sweetheart,” he admonished.

“Or maybe that money is someplace else?” I suggested pointedly.

“Ruby. Let’s have a nice meal together.” He pointed to my plate. “Eat your brunch. And let’s talk about your plans for the week. I want you to meet Willow.”

“Your new girlfriend?” I asked as I picked up my fork.

“Fiancée. And she’s amazing,” he said as he finished chewing. He reached into his pocket, fishing for something. “Speaking of...Willow and I wanted to give this to you. She can’t wait to meet you.”

He set a small black box on the table then gently nudged it across the white linen tablecloth. Was he really giving me a fancy gift when he wouldn’t repay my mother? It sure seemed that way. But vitriol wouldn’t help my cause, so I hid my anger and put on a smile. I clicked open the box and gasped.

My god, it was gorgeous. Glittering on a white silk bed was a stunning diamond.

“I didn’t have it set or placed on a chain. I thought if you like it, we can have it added to your treasure chest necklace,” he said, tipping his chin to my regular necklace, the one Mom gave me years ago. It represented my childhood dreams, but also my present—the way the sea was a treasure. I touched it impulsively, perhaps even protectively. The necklace was a special thing.

But this diamond? It was special in its value, to be sure. This diamond had to be worth five figures, and I was going to keep this gem safe and sound—and use it to help my mom. “Thank you,” I said.

“Anything for you,” he said. “And when you wear it, you can feel good about the world. I know that’s important to you. For every diamond that comes from this mine, money goes to help build schools.”

“That’s thoughtful,” I admitted.

Then, I wondered if I was looking at the answer to my questions. Mom said he’d stolen money from his firm. Now, he had jewels.

He had to have hidden that money somehow. Had he ferried the money in gems?

My skin tingled.

He might literally be handing me a clue. “Thank you again,” I said, but a bitter taste settled in my mouth. Had I just accepted a gift purchased with money he’d stolen? How could he do something like that?

“It’s my pleasure. And Willow would love if you could come over for dinner Thursday night.”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to give away my hurt.

“Fantastic. She’s having some friends over too,” he said as he finished his mimosa. Okay, maybe *this* could be a good thing. A gaggle of friends could work to my advantage when it came to snooping around.

“I can’t wait to see your new place,” I said.

And to explore it too.

* * *

A few hours later, I glided along the shallow bottom of Happy Turtle Cove, watching bubbles rise through the crystal-blue water.

A pair of turtles paddled through the shallow reef, coming close enough to brush against my leg. Boy, I’d missed these guys over the past year.

When Duke had lashed out with his online smear campaign after our breakup, he’d hit Flamingo Key first, knowing how much I loved it. So cruel. So vindictive.

But in a few days I’d bring a group of Texans here, showing them the world under the water. Maybe I’d get to introduce them to these two turtles. They were, quite honestly, inspiring—and I wouldn’t let the past with Duke poison my beloved cove.

I checked my dive watch. One-fifteen p.m. After last night, I had more than a suspicion he’d come looking for me. I kicked for the shore and stood when I got to the shallows. By the time I’d stowed my snorkel gear, my sexy fisherman was crossing the beach of Happy Turtle Cove at 1:23 p.m.

A LIAR'S KISS

Jake

No matter what *Ariel* was up to with Eli, it was a crime for her to be that hot.

Because...*that bikini.*

I didn't stand a chance. It showcased all her assets. Those legs. Those curves. Those gorgeous breasts.

Wave the white flag. I surrender.

"You deciphered my code," she said as I crossed the sugary white sand.

"I like a challenge," I told her. I didn't realize until I'd said it how true it was, on multiple levels. "Pretty clever. Though once I knew that Happy Turtle was a place, I figured the numbers were a time." I lifted my wrist as if showing her my watch. "One twenty-three, on the dot."

She glanced at my naked wrist, then her gaze drifted up, lingering on my ink. I'd had it done years ago, and it still brought me some peace.

"Punctuality is super sexy," she said with a smile that wrinkled her nose.

Could a liar have a smile like that?

She'd had brunch with my target. That might just mean that it was a small world. But I didn't trust coincidences, and

the Rosalinda fiasco had made me wary of beautiful women in the vicinity of my goal.

“I thought you might get a kick out of it,” she said.

“So, is there a happy turtle in this cove?” I asked.

“More than one. I was just swimming with them.”

Stop. Just stop.

Swimming with turtles was too adorable. Especially with that constellation of freckles splashed across her nose. I hadn't noticed them yesterday. What other features had I missed that I could discover with a thorough investigation of her fantastic body? Preferably with my tongue, across every inch of her skin.

Focus. First investigate how she knows Eli.

“You were actually swimming with turtles?” I asked.

She tapped the mesh bag on her shoulder. “My snorkel gear is in here. I'm still in my bathing suit. I'll put on a sundress as soon as this is dry.”

“Don't bother on my account.”

She laughed. “I'm glad to know you're pro-bikini, but I should be a little more dressed when you take me to The Coconut Iguana. My friend Tanice runs it. She's from here, and she's a chef extraordinaire. As your reward for cracking the napkin code, I'm going to let you take me to lunch.”

Was this a game to her? From the clue she left me to her meeting this morning, it sure seemed that way. “You do like a little mystery,” I said, and there was more than a hint of irony to my statement. But I hoped she didn't hear it in my tone.

“Bet you do too,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

My mermaid wanted to flirt, but I wanted to find out what the hell she was up to. Lunch was very, *very* necessary. “With you, I do,” I said, doing my best to play her game.

“Good. This place has the best fish tacos on the island, and absolutely amazing coconut drinks. Maybe I'll let you try one again.”

My brain swam with images of last night, the drink, tasting it on her lips. But I needed to say something rather than, well, grunt.

“You’re—” I started, but then swallowed the question—*you’re hungry?*

I needed to shut my fucking mouth.

I’d been so distracted by my attraction that I’d almost asked how she could be hungry when she’d had brunch a few hours ago. But I wasn’t new at this. How did I almost make a rookie mistake?

I quickly corrected with, “I’m hungry too. The Coconut Iguana it is.” I offered her my hand. Lunch was a good idea. Time to ask some questions, find out who she was, and how much she knew about Eli and his investments.

If she was playing me, I could play her better.

She ignored my hand, stepped up, and crushed her lips to mine. Out of the blue, she went for it, sealing her delicious mouth to mine and kissing me like she’d done nothing since she’d last seen me but relive everything we’d done to each other—in the bar, then beside the beach.

She kissed like she was determined to devour all my will, all my reason, every last ounce of my logic.

Maybe she was a liar. But if she was, I wanted this liar’s kiss badly.

The world narrowed to the taste of her lips and the feel of her warm body. I looped my arms around her nearly naked frame and yanked her close, taking the reins and kissing her like a starving man. My hands lingered on her lower back for the briefest of seconds, traveling across skin that was warm from the sun. I trailed my fingertips lower, dropping one hand to her ass and squeezing a round, firm cheek. I groaned, wanting this woman with a fierceness I hadn’t felt in ages.

Or...since last night.

She pressed her lush body to mine, frying my sense of reason, even my sense of public decency. There might be

legions of people watching us as she sighed sexily into my mouth. I didn't care. This was not an innocent kiss. It was somehow hotter and dirtier than our kisses on the lounge chair the night before. She curled her hands into my hair like she wanted to claw at my skull. Like she wanted me to toss her over my shoulder, carry her somewhere, anywhere, then make her see stars again and again. In the ferocity of her grip, my restraint frayed to a thread.

I broke the kiss long enough to growl, "I want to do bad things to you."

Her eyes lit up. "I like bad things. I want bad things."

We kissed again. Harder. Rougher.

I pictured her in bed. I wanted to see her spread out, flushed with desire, sated with the pleasure that I'd given her. But I wanted to know her real goddamn name too.

Somehow, I managed to untangle myself. We were both breathless, and her eyes were glossy with desire. My hair had to be a wild mess from her hands in it, and I liked it.

I exhaled deeply and rubbed a hand across my jaw, trying to reset my mind. "So now that I've nearly ripped off your clothes, and made you come by a beach, maybe you could tell me your real name."

"You don't think it's Ariel?" she asked as she bent down for her dress and tugged it on over her head. Funny thing. I still wanted her just as badly.

But I was done with *this* game. "I don't. But I'd love to know what to call you...*in bed*."

Ha. There. If she wanted to play dirty games, I would too.

"Well, since you put it that way," she said, grinning, "I guess I can finally share it with you since you've passed enough tests now to earn it."

"So you have been testing me?"

Her smile burned off, replaced by a toughness, a strength. One that said she didn't feel bad at all for giving me a fake name. "I'm a thirty-two-year-old woman living in a world

where anyone can be burned online. You're a man with one name only who I just met. So, no, I'm not Ariel, but my business is Ariel's Island Eco-Adventure Tours."

Why did that sound familiar? Ah, of course. That was the name on the poster I'd spied the night before.

"I studied marine biology in college so I could lead dives and snorkel trips," she continued. "I live in Miami, but I've been rebuilding my business here and in other places—in fact, I have a tour here next week. I'm Ruby Ashley, and it is a pleasure to officially meet you."

Somehow, I didn't react to the terribly familiar name. I was stony-faced, but oh hell, did I know who she was. My file on Eli contained the names of all his close associates and his family, including his stepchildren. Ruby—that was who she was to him.

As I processed this, she was looking at me, clearly waiting for me to do the same and spill my bio. "Your turn," she prompted.

"Jake Hawkins. Former Army intelligence. Now I run a recovery business in Key Largo."

Her lips curved up curiously, perhaps a touch intrigued that we were both Floridians. "You're not far away from me."

"No. I'm not at all," I said crisply. I didn't want to get into the implications of hometown proximity. "Let's get you lunch."

"What's a recovery business?" she asked as we crossed the sand to the winding path along the beach. "Like data recovery?"

"Sort of." I always tried to stay as close to the truth as possible.

"Are we talking *IT Crowd* or *Mission: Impossible*?"

I laughed at the question, despite how far we were in the danger zone. "Definitely the first one." That was definitely a lie, but besides being safer, it was more plausible, and she nodded.

“Tell me more about marine biology,” I continued. “Are we talking *Flipper* or—”

“Please don’t say *Jaws*. That movie was so unfair to the great white.”

“You rooted for the shark, didn’t you?”

She held up her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “Maybe a little bit.”

I felt guilty for enjoying her company so much. Because this lunch date wasn’t a date. It was a mission.

If I was going to infiltrate Eli Thompson’s life, his stepdaughter might be the entry I needed.

THE SECRET INGREDIENT

Ruby

A handful of gulls hovered over the patio of The Coconut Iguana, squawking for our leftovers.

They were out of luck at our table. Jake had devoured his tacos. He pointed to the empty plate as I returned from the ladies' room. "Best I've ever had."

"Want to know the secret?"

"I want to know *every* secret," he said.

"The secret ingredient is coconuts."

"I'd have to say coconuts are the answer to a lot of life's questions, it seems," he said, then gazed around the laid-back eatery. "I can see why you like this place."

"Love it. I had a light breakfast especially to save room."

He raised an eyebrow. "You were pretty sure I'd concede to your wishes."

I batted my eyes, propping my chin on my hand. "I knew you couldn't resist me."

He made the slightest grimace before his humor came back and he pretended as if he were thinking aloud. "Hmm, should I admit how true that is?"

"You don't have to admit anything. I know your secret."

He straightened, turned serious, his mouth in a flat, emotionless line. “You think so?”

I leaned over the table and lowered my voice, copying his solemnity. “By day, you may be a mild-mannered IT guy with a Taylor Swift ringtone. But by night, you’re a white-hat hacker for justice,” I said, having fun with his profession in what had become *our way*. We’d traded clues, like getting to know each other was a detective game. Jake’s eyes flashed with humor and he dropped his napkin onto the table in surrender. “I give up. You got me, Ms. Marple.”

I blew on my nails and rubbed them on my sundress.

“What about you?” he challenged. “Are your dive tours just a cover for your secret identity as an underwater treasure hunter?”

I laughed. “If I had gotten my wish as a kid, then yes. I used to dream of discovering Spanish doubloons at the bottom of the sea. My mom and stepdad used to bring us here a lot when my brother and I were growing up.”

“Oh?” he asked as he took a sip of his beer. “Do you still spend time on the island together?”

“Mom stays pretty close to home,” I replied, saving talk of my stepfather for another day. “But my brother visits out here sometimes. Now, though, we look for the real treasure—coral and marine life and tranquility,” I said, and he studied me with a look I couldn’t decipher. Maybe I sounded cheesy to him. “That probably sounds so hokey,” I said, a little embarrassed.

“No. It sounds really...nice,” he said, sounding genuine.

Still, nice was probably another word for “hokey.” Time to change the tone of the convo. “There are actually some great shipwrecks offshore here on the islands. Do you dive?”

He nodded. “I have.”

“Maybe you’d like to go with me to check out some sites?” I asked, hopeful. I liked his company. I wouldn’t mind spending more time with him.

“Maybe,” he said in an *I doubt it* voice.

Well, that was disappointing. Had I read him wrong after all? After today's kiss—not to mention last night by the beach—a date to go diving didn't seem that boundary-challenging to me. I wasn't suggesting we go look at china patterns.

But maybe he didn't like diving. "I'll take it off the list," I said, trying to sound cheery, like his comment hadn't thrown me.

"Do you lead a lot of dive tours here?" he asked.

"Some snorkeling, some diving. I've been a certified dive instructor since I was twenty-one," I said, and maybe that would reassure him. I fiddled with my napkin as I shared more. "I love the islands. When my family came here, we'd go kiss stingrays. Someone told me it was good luck."

"Your stepdad?"

The guess surprised me. I tilted my head, trying to figure him out. "What makes you say that?"

"You mentioned he and your mother brought you here," he said, nonchalant. But almost *too* nonchalant. "So I figured it would be something you—your family—would do together."

That was one explanation for his quick reply—and it was a logical answer but somehow sketchy at the same time. The vibe between us had shifted in the last few minutes, and I wasn't sure why. But I didn't think the issue was his like or dislike of diving anymore. Something was *off*. I wanted to move on and return to our easy banter, so I answered simply, "It's fine. And you're right. It was him. My stepfather."

"Is your family still close?" he asked, then filled in the conversational blanks. "Since you traveled together when you were younger."

"Mom and Cole live in the Miami area too," I said with an affectionate smile. "They're super supportive."

Jake picked up his glass and drank the rest of his beer, nonchalant once again. "And your stepdad? Is he in the picture?"

And there we were again.

We weren't talking about my mom and brother. He was back on the topic of Eli.

If Eli's move to the island wasn't suspicious, I might not have minded him being part of a getting-to-know-you chat. But since I was questioning if I'd ever really known my stepfather at all, Jake's queries didn't sit right. Especially after the strange shift between Jake and me. So I seesawed my hand in the international sign for kinda-sorta-and-I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it.

"What about you?" I asked, eager to change the subject. "You don't look like an IT guy."

Jake leaned back a bit, tilting his head warily. "What do I look like?"

Like a guy who's suddenly...skeptical.

But I tried once again to return to the easy way we'd had yesterday, and all throughout lunch too. "Hmm..." I tapped my cheek thoughtfully. "I could see you as an adventurer, like Indiana Jones. Or like Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. So, when you say *recovery expert*..."

He groaned, an exaggerated protest, as if he wished he'd never told me his occupation. "It's really so dull compared to snorkeling with sea turtles. Or with literally any other animal." Then he reached across the table and covered my hand with his, tracing his thumb over my suddenly racing pulse. That sure felt nice. And warm. "Or compared to other things we could be saying or doing."

Okay, so now he'd returned to familiar flirting terrain. Maybe my first guess was the right one after all—he didn't like diving, and, typical man, didn't want to own up to it.

Fine, I wouldn't push him. And if he wanted to play more flirting games, I was up for that.

Propping my chin on my hand, I invited him with a "Tell me more..."

His phone vibrated on the table. He grimaced, and without letting go of my hand, flipped the phone over and tapped to send the call to voicemail.

“Do you need to take that?” I offered. After I’d given him grief about a supposed SOS call last night, I very carefully didn’t peek at the name on the screen.

“Not this time.”

“Really, it’s fine.”

See, I trust you. I am taking this flirtation at face value.

Jake shook his head though. Only, it seemed like he *also* was carefully not looking at the device. “If it’s urgent, my sisters always follow up with a text.”

On cue, the device buzzed against the tabletop in a short burst and the screen lit up with a text preview.

I didn’t want to look. But he’d just said “if it’s urgent” and those words repeated like a warning.

My gaze strayed for a second, catching a familiar image on Jake’s screen.

I recognized my old logo before I recognized myself. I tilted my head to make sure, to look at it from another angle, but I didn’t have time before Jake snagged the phone from the table.

I blinked in confusion, but then I connected all the dots. My stomach dropped and my blood chilled.

“Who is sending you my picture, Jake?”

His face said, “*Oh, fuck.*”

MANGO CAKE STANDOFF

Jake

Ruby leaned back in her chair as far as she could, clearly putting distance between us. Her face was bloodless and stricken, which shouldn't bother me more than getting caught, but it did.

Before I could answer that question—*who's sending the pic*—she asked another. “Did Duke send you? Are you here to get him ammo to use against me?”

“Who is Duke?” I asked in confusion. Was that another player in the game? Andrew hadn't mentioned anyone with John Wayne's nickname.

Ruby's gaze flicked from me to the handful of other diners nibbling on fish tacos, drinking tropical drinks, passing the warm afternoon hours on the deck of the bar and grill, and finally to the door, as if debating whether or not she should leave.

Then we both stared at each other for a beat, neither one bending or giving an inch, when the waitress appeared, clapping her hands like she was announcing a prize. “How about some dessert? Tanice says it's on the house if you want it.”

Way to read the room, lady.

Or maybe she had and was doing me a favor. Ruby looked blankly at the server, and I took advantage of the interruption.

Glancing at the chalkboard menu with the day's specials, I said as smoothly as I could, "How about a slice of mango cake with a scoop of coconut ice cream?" I flashed a smile. "I can't resist anything with coconut."

The woman looked at Ruby expectantly. "Anything for you?"

Ruby blinked again and then seemed to shake herself out of a fog. "We'll share it," she told the waitress.

"One mango cake coming right up!" the server chirped, then headed for the kitchen.

A few beats of silence passed, then Ruby folded her arms. "Seriously, who are you?"

"Who is Duke?" I countered. I didn't want to give up information before she did—though I'd rather avoid giving any.

"If you have anything whatsoever to do with that asshole trolling my business and ruining my professional life..." With a tight jaw, Ruby pointed to the phone still in my hand. "Is that who sent that picture of me?"

I shook my head, grateful I had no clue who this jackass was who'd hurt her. "I don't know who that is. Whoever he is, he didn't send me your picture. It's from my sister." That was actually the truth, which helped me sound convincing while I searched for the rest of the excuse. "She's always poking her nose into my business, and last night I mentioned I met a woman and was going to see her again today."

Ruby gave me a dubious look. "Really." It was hardly a question. It was a statement and it said she thought I was bullshitting her.

Running a hand through my hair, I called up my fond exasperation over Kate's matchmaking. "She's been texting and pestering me for details, so while you were in the ladies', I told her your name, now that I know it."

That was also true, though convincing Ruby wasn't going to be easy. But in addition to asking Andrew for details, I'd

also texted my sister Ruby's name so she could check her background.

"Yeah?" Ruby's arched eyebrow was slowly descending, along with her tension level.

"Yeah." I wagged the phone, careful nothing showed but the lock screen. "So she googled you."

"And found that pic on my website?"

"Must have." I really hoped so. "She didn't specify. Maybe Instagram?"

"Hmm..."

I scratched my nose, letting my chagrin come through. "Once I said you were smoking hot, Kate was like a terrier on the scent." I reached across the table to again touch her hand. "I'm sorry it upset you. I blame my nosy, matchmaking sister."

Ruby took a deep breath, looking away. When she exhaled, she seemed to have come to a decision, then her eyes found mine.

"I'll level with you. Duke is my ex," she said with a sigh. "My very, very ex. When we broke up, he tried to ruin my business. He enlisted a bunch of his friends to help him. They trolled me on every review site and blasted social media with bad press and outright lies."

And I felt like even more of a dick. "So you thought I might be a friend of his here to set you up?" I asked, hating that she'd thought that for even a second.

She blushed, pursed her lips, then admitted, "It doesn't hold up to logic, but my first reaction..." She shrugged and looked forlorn, and I just wanted to comfort her with my words, my arms, my lips.

Yet she could have a scumbag of an ex who treated her like shit, *and* she could still be in cahoots with Eli somehow. Schemes and heartbreak were not mutually exclusive.

"But here's the thing," Ruby went on in almost the same tone. "That picture isn't anywhere public. It's on my friends-only social profile. So it didn't come from your sister."

Oh, hell.

This was a disaster. I'd made a stupid, rookie mistake. This was what I got for getting involved romantically during a job. I'd botched a cover-up that should have been a slam dunk.

Ruby held up her hand to stop me from digging myself deeper. "But that also tells me who probably did send it. This was from a private tour I did for a friend of my mom's. So I know exactly who you are."

"You do?" I asked evenly. Didn't need to give myself away.

"You're the guy Andrew hired to find the money he thinks my stepdad stole."

Damn, she was good.

"Your mango cake," the waitress said, swanning over to our table and placing a plate of cake and ice cream between us.

We both stared at the dessert. Detente still? Unlikely.

When Ruby spoke her tone had shifted again, this time to curiosity. "Jake Hawkins, 'fess up. Are you the guy Eli's business partner hired to find out what happened to the money? Because if you are, you and I want the same thing. The truth," she said, passionately, her eyes flickering with both vulnerability and intensity at the same time. This mattered to her deeply, the mission she was on. "I know something bad happened, and it somehow involved Eli, and I'm pretty sure it also involves—"

We both spoke at the same time. "Diamonds."

DIY DETECTIVE

Ruby

I'd knocked Jake for a loop. He'd been showing me his poker face since I'd called him on the website photo bluff. But now he was appraising me and the situation, putting puzzle pieces together, deciding what went where.

"Are you working for Andrew?" he asked, his eyes narrowed, a procedural tone in his voice.

I shook my head. "I'm not working for anyone. I have my own reasons for trying to figure out what's going on. But my mom told me Andrew hired someone, and that seems to be you. Right?"

He didn't answer me. Instead, he asked, "You decided to go the DIY detective route?"

"You mean when I detected that the picture of me wasn't from my site but instead from social media? C'mon. That wasn't world-class Sherlocking right there. That was common sense."

He huffed, in obvious irritation, then his mouth tightened. I felt a glow of satisfaction. Pride, even. In a mere day, I'd tracked down useful intel and started putting clues together. Yeah, I could do this. I had brains and drive. Take that, Jake Hawkins.

"Do you even have a tour scheduled? Or was that just a cover?" he asked. Damn, he was persistent. But I couldn't just

write him off. I needed intel from him too.

“I do have a tour. I came down here a few days early to... do some of my own research,” I said, keeping my detective work vague enough. “I want to find out what happened to the money. To help my mother. But let’s rewind.” I didn’t need to focus on my amateur credentials or lack thereof. I was much more interested in our serendipitous conclusion on the jewels. “Why did you just say diamonds?”

“Because I saw one on Eli’s fiancée, and I have some evidence leading to the diamond business here on the island.” He paused a beat, then asked, “What made *you* say diamonds?”

The big, shiny rock in my hotel room safe.

This morning I’d tangoed with the idea that my stepdad had given me a gift bought with stolen money, but now it seemed highly plausible.

And more poisonous.

I didn’t plan to tell Jake I had ice in my hotel room. He’d given me more reason to distrust him than to trust him. But maybe I could use the diamond to get more intel.

“Eli loves jewels...and he gave me a diamond this morning. Maybe it was purchased legitimately.”

“Maybe not,” he remarked dryly, the conviction in his eyes showing he found my stepfather guilty.

“Do you have evidence?” I asked. “About the missing money, I mean. Not specifically the diamonds.”

“I do.”

But what I also wanted to know was this—was last night a ruse? Did he seduce me to butter me up? I leaned in closer, kept my voice low. “But you see how this looks, right? Like you’re trying to get close to me because you think I know something. Is that why you found me at The Pink Pelican last night?”

“If you remember,” he said, tapping his chest smugly, “I was at The Pink Pelican already. *You* walked in.”

Damn him. That was a good point. He hadn't been following me. Plus, I'd invited him to track me down today. Hell, I'd left clues for him to find me.

"You have me there," I said.

"And when I had you in my arms," he said in a harsh whisper, "that was all real. Don't doubt that for a second."

I tried to hide the little shiver that ran through me too.

"Both at the bar and at your hotel," he added, like I could have forgotten when and where he touched me. He kept his gaze locked on me, his eyes intense. "You need to know this, Ruby. So let me make myself very clear. I don't use women. I don't seduce them for info or intel. From the second I saw you, you knocked the breath straight from my chest. I didn't know your name or a damn thing about you. I knew one thing—you were stunning. And after we flirted at the bar, and the drink at your hotel and the way you said my name when you fell apart, I knew another thing. I wanted to see you again, plain and simple. It had nothing to do with the job. And it had everything to do with you."

I shivered. Dear god, this man and his recap of our steamy night. I was getting hotter. This was dangerous. I had to stay focused. "But the picture today, Jake?" I gave a shrug that said *explain yourself*.

He sighed heavily, then ran a hand through his hair. "When I spotted you with your stepdad at Tristan's this morning—"

I held up a hand. "You were following me?"

"No. I was tailing Eli," he said, making a firm distinction. Eli was the job; I wasn't. "And I saw you. I asked Andrew who you were. As you know, he literally just told me. Now it turns out we're both looking out for the people who got screwed—me for Andrew and you for your mom." His voice never wavered in its certainty, its intensity as he kept his eyes on me. "The *only* thing made up was that the photo was from your website. Everything else was true. I had an incredible time last night," he said, his tone shifting to something deeper.

“I wanted more. I still *want* more.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a rough and sexy whisper. “*A lot more.*”

Heat raced through me. “Me too,” I said quietly, admitting that at last. It was impossible not to, especially with the way he looked at me like he was picturing me naked. Picturing us together. “I want all the bad things.”

“I’m very good at doing bad things.” His tone was rough, dirty.

I wanted to grab the check and beeline for my hotel right then. But how could I when I didn’t know how much I could trust him? Maintaining my skeptical stare, I shoved the naughty thoughts away. “I’d like those things a lot...with someone I trust.”

He matched my skepticism with certainty and a little deadpan charm. “Yeah, I like trust too.”

So, there we were. Admitting we didn’t quite trust each other. Where that left bedroom matters, I had no idea.

But lust wasn’t the most important factor right now. Diamonds were. Playing fair was. Doing the right thing, rather than a real good bad thing. “So, where do we go from here?” I asked.

Jake sat back, his tone lightening. “Look, things got complicated today when I learned who you were. I’m not going to deny that. But I’m still here. Still talking to you.” He tapped the table with his finger, then gave me a crooked smile. An incredibly charming one. “Because maybe we should work together to find the truth. We’re on the same team.”

Hmm. I was intrigued but not sold. “Why should I work with you?” I asked, a little challenging. Or maybe a lot. “What do I need from you? I’m the one who was invited into Eli’s house later this week. I can just look for clues or diamonds or whatever myself. I don’t have to, you know, *break in.*”

“What if they’re not there?” he suggested casually. “What if they’re, say, in the nightclub?”

“Then I’ll go there and find them,” I said, calling on my best tough girl act. I was looking for a way to get Mom’s

money back. A big bag of diamonds would do that but so would evidence I could use as leverage.

I was more determined than ever, and certain I needed to do it without interference. I fished for some bills and set them on the table. "I'd better go. I have work to do."

As I stood, one of my longtime friends appeared beside the table, exclaiming, "Ruby!" The restaurant owner wrapped me in a hug. "So good to see you. I've missed seeing you around my hometown."

"I've missed you too, Tanice," I said, hugging her back. "Thanks for dessert. You always know how to treat a girl."

"That's what my new girlfriend says too," she said with a wink.

"And she's right. We'll have to get together soon."

Tanice stepped back, smiling. "A bunch of us are having a party on Devon's boat later this week. Want me to text you the details? Kalila is off camping, but she should be back then."

"That sounds great. I'll be there."

"We can catch up and you can see the whole crew. And meet my new girl."

"I'm there," I said, excited for the chance. Tanice squeezed my arm, then scurried off.

When she was gone, Jake met my gaze with a smug look and said, "Why should you work with me?" He tipped his forehead toward my disappearing friend. "That's why."

NO MORE LATE NIGHTS ON A LOUNGE CHAIR

Jake

I had a plan. It was crazy, but we might pull it off together. I vastly preferred to work solo, especially after the Rosalinda fiasco. But I had a hunch that feisty, fiery Ruby wasn't going to step out of the way. If we didn't team up, I'd keep running into her and we'd keep butting heads. And because of who she was, she could be my best weapon in this case. Better to work with her than against her.

I just needed her to see the benefits.

"Teaming up makes sense for us both," I said. She sat back down, and I took the chance to make my pitch. "You need me and I need you. You know everyone on this island, which is great. But it also means that people recognize you. But me? No one knows me. I could be anyone, go places you can't go unnoticed. You have inside access, but I can walk around unseen."

She crossed her arms. She hadn't said yes yet. "Show me this evidence," she said.

That was kind of hot. Her take-no-prisoners attitude. She didn't simply go along with anything. She challenged me every step of the way. Which made me want to throw her onto the bed tonight and make her lose control as I fucked her.

And...that was what I needed to stop thinking about.

I focused on the mission. The goddamn job. I held out my phone and showed her the email, giving her time to read it, then walked her through the details, pointing out how the dates in the email lined up with withdrawals and transfers, letting her take in the full scope of the crime.

Her face tightened as if she'd just eaten something sour, and when she was done reading, she blinked. "Isn't this kind of circumstantial?"

There was a hint of desperate hope in her tone, and it pained me to see her final illusions about her stepfather shattered. But I had to think like a mercenary. I had to think about *her* as a mercenary.

"It is circumstantial, but it's also convincing. It convinced Andrew. It convinced my sister. It convinced me enough to come down here and devote my time and risk my neck to get it back. My job is to get this ten million and return it to the rightful owners. You want to know about the money for your mom's sake," I said, pressing on, since I was close. I sensed it. She was seeing the benefits, I knew it. "We both have our reasons, and we both bring something to the table."

She huffed, her vulnerability gone for a moment, or at least hidden. "Fine. But I'm the one with the invitation to Eli's house on Thursday night, and I'll have free roam of the house."

"Of course," I said, deadpan. "You can just grab a handful of the diamonds he keeps in a bowl on his desk."

She shot me a side-eye. "What I meant was I can scope out likely places to hide diamonds in a house. You know...recon. From a woman on the inside," she said, squaring her shoulders, like she was showing me how tough she was. I thought she was stunning when I met her last night, but I sure liked this side of her a whole helluva lot, full of bravado, her eyes shining with possibilities. "Maybe there's a loose floorboard somewhere. Or a piece of art hiding a safe behind it."

"When you find this floorboard, will you just yank it up with the hammer you keep in your back pocket?" I asked,

teasing. “Or would you like my help?”

Lowering her voice, she said, “Maybe I do keep a hammer in my back pocket. It’s not as if I’m incapable.”

“I don’t think you’re incapable at all. I’m simply offering to assist.”

“Because you keep a hammer in your back pocket?”

“No. But because I know how to do things. This is what I do—track down and retrieve stolen items.”

“In other words, a retrieval expert.”

I hid a smile as she fitted the pieces together. “Six years in intelligence gave me a lot of insight into how people think and how to solve problems. And I’ve been in this line of work long enough to develop some key skills, including, but not limited to, picking locks, opening safes, removing floorboards quietly, climbing through windows silently, and jumping out of windows without a sound. Running across the roof, shimmying down the trellis, then darting through the bushes, and doing it all without being seen.”

“My, my,” she said, arms folded. I couldn’t tell if she was secretly impressed or still annoyed. “Aren’t you a jack-of-all-trades?”

“I sure am,” I said, ignoring her mocking tone.

“So you want me to do the legwork, sniffing out information, so you can be Captain Adventure?”

When she put it like that, hell yes. “I think that’s a perfect partnership. One that maximizes what we both bring to the table. Or think of it like this—you’re the sniper; I’m the gun.”

“But what if I don’t need a gun, Jake? What if all I need are my eyes?” She pointed to her blue eyes. Her gorgeous, pretty-as-a-picture blue eyes that were sweet and sexy, just like the tone she was using now. This woman could work me over if I wasn’t careful. I had to stay on my guard.

“Tell you what, Ruby,” I said, in a let’s-make-a-deal voice. “Go to Eli’s on Thursday night. If he does have the diamonds lying around the house somewhere, stuff those beauties in

your pocket and run back to Miami with them. I'll call Andrew and say I failed at my mission. And you'd win."

She didn't answer right away. She simply watched me, studying me. "Hypothetically, if we're partners and I went to his house to scope out the scene, would you wait quietly in a bush or behind a trellis for me? You know, in case there are dangerous guard dogs you need to rescue me from?"

"I doubt you'd need rescuing from anything. But yes, I could do that. And by the way, I know there aren't trellises on your stepfather's property." I picked up one of the dessert forks, keeping my voice cool and casual.

"How do you know that?"

"It's my job to know that. And to know that his house is on the water. He has palm trees, an orchid tree, a rose bush, an infinity pool, and a boat in a private dock. He lives in a two-story stone house with a stucco roof, purchased a year ago in a condo development called Corey's Landing."

"I haven't actually been yet," she said, chagrined, "but that all tracks with the kind of life Eli likes to lead. You do your homework."

"Maybe I'm not just muscle. Maybe I have the brains too," I said, tapping my temple. "So what do you say? Are you in? If we find the diamonds, we return them to their rightful owners, the Eli Fund."

Then, I zeroed in on her soft spot, which was mine as well—looking out for others. "Look, let's say he didn't do it. Let's pretend someone else did. What if you dig into this and run into that person?" I was convinced Eli was guilty, but I couldn't rule out him having accomplices. "What if you find someone else is involved? Someone who doesn't have your best interests at heart. I'll be your backup."

"Like a bodyguard?"

"I give good backup, Ruby," I said, and she managed a small smile. "And good protection."

"That sounds kind of dirty."

“I know. But I mean it too. What do you say? You won’t rat me out and I won’t rat you out, and we help each other find where the missing money went.” I picked up the other fork and handed it to her, holding my breath as I waited for her yes. This job would be finished a hell of a lot faster with an inside woman.

Ruby took the fork but didn’t dig in. The fork hovered over the cake. “The diamonds might be in his nightclub,” she said, like she was hot on the trail of them already. “Eli invited me to go tonight. He won’t be there.” She paused meaningfully. “But, then, they might be in a bank. In which case, I doubt your hammer or lock-picking tricks would do much good.”

I smiled since she was spot on with that last assessment. “True. Even I have limits.”

She laughed as she shook her head, bemused. Her eyes roamed over my face, my chest, my arms, but her gaze wasn’t sexual. It was... assessing. She was weighing my offer.

I had to be patient, though I wanted her to accept it. The last time I’d worked with a woman, I’d been burned, nearly lost everything. The difference was, this time, I had no plan to let Ruby into my heart. This was strictly business.

“All right,” she finally said, and bam. There it was. That tone of voice that said she was working with me, not against me. “I admit you have traits that would come in handy.”

“I come in very, very handy,” I said dryly.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m agreeing with you, Captain Adventure. You could wander around town, ask questions here and there, act like a tourist, and no one would think anything of it. That could be helpful to me.”

I leaned forward onto my elbows and took a conspiratorial tone. “Does this mean we’re working together, *Ariel*?”

She nodded, then lowered her voice to a whispered warning. “We are,” she said, a smile sneaking onto her face.

I wanted to kiss it off. She’d made me work for this one all right, and hell, if that didn’t make her more attractive. But I

knew kissing would lead to trouble. I didn't need any trouble. Seemed she didn't either, since she said, "But just work. No more late nights on a lounge chair."

I already missed those late nights we wouldn't be having. But I agreed. "Business. Only business," I said.

I didn't fool myself that it would be easy to ignore the desire I felt for her. Still, for this to work, our affair had to end. I set down my fork and offered a hand for her to shake. "Partners."

"Platonic partners," she added.

"Platonic partners," I repeated as we shook across the cake. I could do this. I could absolutely keep my hands off her—no problem.

But as she licked that cake and ice cream off the fork, I couldn't help but be jealous of a utensil.

THE VIP TREATMENT

Ruby

I'd planned for the nightclub contingency.

While I was no clubber, I'd anticipated that I'd need to visit Sapphire at some point during my trip and packed accordingly. The slinky black dress hugged my hips and boosted my breasts, leaving little to the imagination. Ninety-nine percent of my wardrobe was shorts, bikinis, and tank tops, but even I needed a Little Black Dress. I trusted this one to help me blend in at the glittery, sparkling blue club that pulsed with music, liquor, and dark lights.

The beefy security guard lifted the velvet rope, ushering me inside.

"Welcome to Sapphire, Ms. Ashley," the guard said.

"Thank you so much."

I'd accepted Eli's offer of the VIP treatment. Jake had made a valid point that I couldn't slip through town unknown, so I would use my access to my advantage.

Our advantage now.

Last night, he'd been my beachside lover, but tonight we were hands-off partners. A call to Andrew after lunch confirmed that Jake was his man, so that was one less worry I had about teaming up with him. Besides, Jake had made a

good pitch that we could crack this “case” much faster and easier together.

Even though I was entering the club solo, I wasn’t alone. Jake had arrived earlier, texting me to let me know that he was here.

A pretty woman with chestnut hair and a warm smile greeted me at the back door. “I’m Clarissa. I’m the assistant manager. Nigel is tied up, but I’m here to help with any requests you might have.” She flashed me a bright smile and offered her hand, which I shook.

“So great to meet you,” I said. “I’m excited to see the club.”

“Let me give you a quick tour, and then we’ll find you a place out front when Amelia performs.”

Like an efficient and helpful hotel concierge, Clarissa steered me through the club, pointing out the obvious. The long mirrored bar was, indeed, the bar, and the black hardwood floor was, in fact, the dance floor. But the VIP treatment was welcome when Clarissa plowed through the crowds on the winding staircase that led to the second level, where a balcony wrapped entirely around the dance floor, giving a perfect view of the crowds below.

Including Jake.

He leaned casually against the bar, a glass of what looked to be scotch in his hand. No Tommy Bahama shirt tonight. He wore a black T-shirt that showed off his toned, muscular arms and a pair of dark blue jeans. Simple, yet totally hot, even from a distance. I made eye contact, just for a moment, and he walked away from the bar.

On cue.

That was the plan—as I got the tour, he’d follow behind, peeking into corners, checking for secret passageways, assessing possible locations for a safe.

“Eli loves to watch the crowds from here.” Clarissa nodded to the throng of young women in tight dresses and guys in shorts and short-sleeve shirts. “You can just feel the

vibe, can't you?" she asked, inhaling, as if she were drawing in that very energy.

"Absolutely."

"That's the manager, Nigel—he's just in the middle of something now, but I'll introduce you next time you're in," Clarissa said, pointing to a strapping man walking through the crowd. "And," Clarissa continued, pointing a French-manicured nail toward the ceiling, "we have a dozen disco balls. They just light the whole place up, don't they?"

The silvery disco balls swirled above the floor, casting slivers of rich purple, royal blue, and lush red rays of light. They were retro and seventies, but somehow not cheesy.

"Gorgeous," I said honestly.

"Come. Let me show you our VIP rooms." My guide gestured to a hallway lined with three paintings—a square, a rectangle, and an oval in black tubular frames that continued the geometric theme of the art.

"The art is lovely," I remarked. As with the bar and the dance floor, Clarissa didn't need much prompting to tell me the details.

"They're from the gallery around the corner. Willow's gallery."

"Ah, but of course." Naturally, Eli would shower his fiancée's business with greenbacks.

I peered at the artist's signature in the corner of the rectangle: *Lynx*. So Lynx liked to make shapes, and Eli liked to buy them. Jake told me Andrew originally thought the fund's missing money had been channeled into art, but now they were thinking it had gone into gems.

What if the art was still involved?

As we continued down the hallway to the VIP rooms with their blue velvet couches and bottle service, a shadow shifted down the corridor and Clarissa whirled around.

I tried to act casual, but my heart raced. Had Jake been sprung?

“Isn’t Amelia the greatest?” I asked, easy, breezy, trying to distract Clarissa as I continued walking forward.

“She is. I’m really looking forward to seeing her tonight.” Clarissa gave one last look behind her then continued walking.

Phew. Crisis averted.

All I could do was hope Jake had some more intel after this cloak-and-dagger routine.

IMPROPER KISSING

Jake

I slowed as Ruby and her tour guide traversed the hall, passing three paintings that matched the style I'd seen in Willow's gallery yesterday. It was difficult, though, to concentrate when Ruby's dress was clinging to her body in all the right places, stirring up not-so-distant memories of how she'd felt in my hands.

The way she'd rubbed against me last night. The way her breath had caught when I'd roamed my hands over her.

Occupational hazard of having an off-limits partner, but I'd have to handle this desire. Namely, by boxing it up and ignoring the fuck out of it.

I focused on the art until Ruby rounded the bend in the hallway, out of sight. The paintings didn't seem very good, but I knew more about recovering art than critiquing it. What could they be hiding?

Most people were creatures of habit. Con men could devise tricky schemes and clever cover-ups, but the subconscious could trip up even the best of them. A thief's likes and dislikes were often guideposts on the path to cracking a case. Passwords, combinations, and locations were rarely truly cryptic. They usually meant something to the con man. Did the art mean something too? Eli liked art, so I

needed to study the paintings and see what story they might tell.

Strolling down the hall, I ran my hand lightly along the first frame, looking for any clues. I didn't expect Eli to have hidden a safe right there in plain sight, but something about this piece caught my attention. The heavy frame seemed to overbalance such an airy, contemporary piece. Didn't modern art have lighter, simpler frames, or none at all? But this was a sturdy bastard.

Before I could investigate further, a crowd came by, and I had to tuck my hands in the pockets of my jeans and look nonchalant. Just a guy wandering down the hall. No big deal. Seconds later, Ruby and Clarissa emerged from a VIP room, heading away from me but close enough for me to hear.

"And there's Eli's office," Clarissa said, pointing to a door at the end of the hall. "Now, let's get you out to the dance floor. Amelia Stone is about to start."

Once they were out of sight, I wandered past Eli's office. I considered going in and sniffing around, but then someone opened the door from the inside. I glimpsed more artwork on the office wall before a large man filled the doorway, crunching on some kind of snack. Behind him, I spotted another of those distinctive Lynx artworks on the wall.

I adopted my best *how did I wind up down this hallway* look.

The big man swallowed his snack and raised an eyebrow. "Can I help you with something?"

"Just finding my way back to the dance floor. Looks like I need to backtrack."

The man smiled. There were nuts in his teeth. Cashews, maybe. When he popped another handful into his mouth, I noted the snake tattoo curving down his arm. It flexed as the man turned to the office door and locked it.

Looked like I wouldn't be scoping out the office that night.

* * *

I could have left the club then since Ruby's tour was over and I'd poked around as much as I could. The plan was to compare notes the next morning, since she'd told me Eli would be away so there was no point stopping by his place. But the music was lively, the crowd was wild, and the sight of Ruby was magnetic. I was drawn to her and I couldn't look away.

She danced near the small stage, her arms over her head, her hips swaying back and forth. The music shifted from pop to some sort of island tune, and with the floor-to-ceiling glass windows on this side of the club, she looked like she was in her element. Palm tree branches swayed beyond the glass, the ocean lapped the shore farther away, and Ruby seemed to embody the island beat, the lightness, the party of it all. Her blonde, wavy hair spilled down her back, and she danced like I imagined she might move underwater. Graceful, effortless, natural.

Huh. That was interesting.

Just last night when I bumped into her a few blocks away, she'd told me she couldn't dance. Or was it that she didn't dance? I wasn't sure what she'd said exactly, only that it wasn't true. She was hypnotic when she moved. It was impossible to look away, and I wasn't the only one mesmerized.

I stood at the edge of the dance floor, eclipsed by the darkness of the purple lights overhead. I alternated between watching Ruby and keeping an eye on a trio of young guys, moving through the club in a predatory pack. They looked like college boys from the States. I didn't like how they eyed the women on the dance floor, and I especially didn't like the way they watched Ruby.

The blond one made his move, sauntering over to her and saying something way too close to her ear.

Oh, hell no.

I hadn't planned to approach her in the club, but I found myself muscling through the packed dance floor to her and these visitors—Chad or Brad or whatever his name was. Because that shit was not going to fly.

When I reached her side, I not-so-casually dropped a hand onto her hip. She flinched at first and then seemed relieved when she saw it was me. Then she tensed again, probably wondering what had brought me to her side when we'd agreed to keep a distance—a distance that would be our cover. The less we were seen together, the better. But a few minutes by the darker edge of the stage, amid the huge crowd, was safe enough.

“Oh, hi,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at the guy who'd been making a move before looking back to me. “I didn't realize you were here.”

She sounded confused. Understandable. She searched my face for a sign something was amiss.

Something was definitely amiss. Dude-bro hadn't gotten the message. I looked him in the eye and said distinctly, “Yep. Still here.”

The guy raised no-offense hands and wisely walked back to his friends. Mission accomplished.

Ruby turned to face me. “Is everything okay? Did you find something?” She raised her eyes to the second floor, as if I didn't know where she meant.

“Tell you later.”

Her brow knitted then her confusion cleared and her lips parted in an *O* of understanding. “You mean, you came over here just because that guy was hitting on me?”

“I did. A woman like you doesn't need a frat boy,” I said.

She arched an eyebrow. “And what does a woman like me need?”

I was mere millimeters from her, my head full of her coconut scent and the memory of how her skin had tasted and how wet she'd been when I'd touched her, how much she'd

arched her back when she came, how she'd said my name into the night. This woman was scrambling my brain. She was knocking down my walls without even trying. Digging my thumb into her hip, I answered, "You need someone who knows how to savor you."

That earned me a seductive smile. She raised her chin as the music pulsed from the stage. "Savoring is your specialty, I take it?"

I hadn't cut across the floor to flirt, but being this close to her short-circuited my brain. "It's my favorite hobby," I said, letting go of her hip so my fingers could drift across the fabric of her dress. Her breath caught as I flicked her belly button right through the material. "I'd run my tongue across this ring, then properly kiss you all over. Every inch. That's what you need. That's what you deserve."

"Proper kissing? Everywhere?" she asked, her voice breathy and low.

I splayed my palm over her flat belly, so eager to touch her. "Everywhere." My thumb dropped lower, tracing a line along the waistband of her panties, making my meaning clear. "Everywhere along your beautiful body."

She shivered, and her lips parted, but she said nothing. We'd promised to cool it, but the press of the crowd forced us unbearably close, and temptation was impossible to resist. "You deserve someone who craves the taste of your lips. The feel of your body. A woman like you deserves a man who understands the three-to-one ratio."

She arched a brow in question "What's that?"

I brushed strands of her blonde hair away from her ear to whisper, "I would make sure you came three times before I even did once."

She gasped, and her lips fell open. "Can I have my second now?"

I smiled wickedly and said, "My greedy woman."

"Can you blame me? You tortured me with promises of orgasms," she said.

I stared into her blue eyes, all fiery with heat, then at her chest, a sheen across her dewy skin. She was so hard to resist.

And fuck it.

So much for resistance tonight. I'd start tomorrow.

I'd give myself one more moment with her. That was all.

"You can have it now, but only if you're quiet," I said.

"On the dance floor?" she asked, breathless and flushed with excitement.

"Considering I'm going to use my mouth, the answer would be no."

Her eyes gleamed with *yes* and soon with *god yes*.

She held out her hand, and I took it. I led her off the dance floor, down the hall to a small bathroom. No stalls. This was a bathroom for one.

Or really, two.

The second the door snicked shut, I locked it, then pushed her against the wall and took her mouth in a merciless, passionate kiss that promised hard, hot sex that lasted all night. She moaned into my mouth, grabbing at my shirt and radiating so much want.

Good. I wanted her desire badly. Nothing turned me on more than winding her up. And, well, getting her off. I broke the kiss. She was panting with need. "Now," she whispered, begging. "Kiss me properly." Her eyes sparkled with naughty desire.

I crooked my lips into a grin. "Oh, sweetheart. I'm going to be very improper."

"I know," she said, then my desperate woman pushed on my shoulders.

I kneeled down, barely caring about the tiled floor. I had a job to do. One I took very seriously. One I adored. I pushed up her dress, pulled her panties to the side and exposed her slick heat. I groaned at the sight of her wet pussy. Then I wasted no time. I pressed a hot, passionate kiss to her clit.

Her hands flew around my head, curling in my hair. “Oh god.”

“Quiet,” I admonished.

She said nothing as I flicked my tongue over the gorgeous rise of her clit, sucking her, feasting on her.

She rocked her hips shamelessly against my face. I cupped her ass cheeks, pulled her closer, and kissed her silky wetness. She tasted like salt and honey. And her arousal made my cock throb harder. With each flick of my tongue, she grew wetter, thrust faster, gripped my head harder.

Soon, she was feverishly fucking my face with her pussy, and I was devouring her sweetness. I wanted to spread her out on a bed and worship her properly.

Or really improperly.

But tonight, I wanted to taste her climax on my tongue.

And I wanted it now. I gripped her ass harder, my fingers playing with her cheeks as I licked and sucked.

Till she was shaking, then trembling.

And I could taste her release on my mouth.

It only made me hungrier for her. I wasn't sure I'd ever get enough of this woman. But I was sure I'd need to do better tomorrow.

When I rose, I wiped a hand across my mouth, met her gaze, and said sincerely, “Tomorrow I'll try to resist you.”

She shuddered out a yes.

Her promise too.

Then, I tucked a messy strand of hair behind her ear. “By the way, you can dance.”

Her lips quirked up. “Yes, I can.” She studied me for a beat. “Does it bother you I said I couldn't?”

The truth was it didn't. I understood exactly why she'd peddled that half-truth. She didn't know me then. She didn't

know what I was up to. And the fact that she'd fibbed told me she might make a fine partner after all.

Sometimes you had to lie a little to get the job done.

"No. Just don't lie about this," I said, gesturing from her to me.

"I won't," she said, then she pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "By the way, you still owe me one more before your number comes up."

She turned around and left for the dance floor. I followed her there a few minutes later, staying several feet behind her during the show.

Damn, that woman could dance.

A HOT AND REASONABLE DOUBT

Ruby

Shorts and T-shirt, skirt and tank top, or sundress? What on earth did you wear to a...stakeout?

Was this even a stakeout?

No, I decided. It was an intel-gathering mission. My role was getaway driver and diamond babysitter.

That didn't help me decide what to wear though. My hotel bed was littered with clothes. I grabbed the pink bikini with polka dots, tugged it on, pulled a sundress over it, and slid my feet into flip-flops. There. Seemed a suitable choice.

As I grabbed my purse, someone rapped on the door, and I froze. I wanted to be in the lobby to meet Jake at two. Last night, my resolve hadn't wavered—it had collapsed entirely at the club when I'd dragged him into the bathroom and demanded an O. Jake in my room? That would be too tempting.

But I'd have to woman up. Stay strong. Resist that dirty-talking, cocky, I-can-pick-a-lock-and-make-you-come-hard man.

Another knock sounded.

I smoothed my dress. I was steel. I could do this.

But my willpower took a hit as soon as I opened the door. Even in the cheesy palm-tree print button-down shirt and

touristy hat, Jake just did it for me.

Those arms, so firm and powerful. That ink that hinted at his secrets. His hands, so powerful as he'd grabbed my hips and held me still when he devoured me in the club's bathroom.

Then, those eyes. Those see-into-my-soul green eyes that crinkled at the corners.

But most of all, my gaze lingered on his lips. I was intimately acquainted with his talented mouth.

I drew a steadying breath. "Let me just grab the stone," I said.

I started to close the door so I could leave him in the hallway before I spontaneously combusted, but he stuck his foot out, stopping me. "I'll join you."

I waved him off. "That's okay. I'll be super fast."

He flashed me a dirty grin. "I want to test my willpower to resist you."

Well, if it was going to be a *challenge*...I opened the door and beckoned him in. "And mine," I muttered.

"I didn't see much of yours last night," he said, lips crooking up.

"Same for you," I said as he walked inside.

"I showed you other things though," he said with a smirk, reminding me why I'd liked him so very much when we'd met. He had charisma and charm.

"Nice costume," I said, turning to a lighter subject as I shut the door behind him. The more we talked about touching, the more likely I'd shed my willpower all over again.

Jake gestured to his getup. "I know you're a big fan of the way I look in Hawaiian shirts."

"You definitely look one hundred percent tourist." I gestured to the small room. "Home sweet home...for now," I joked. My tour supplies—snorkels, mesh bags full of underwater masks, as well as plenty of climbing gear—were distributed over the beige tile floor. The nightstand held both a

paperback and my Kindle, and the bed was covered in clothes and my assortment of bikinis.

“You could start a bathing suit shop,” he remarked.

“I’m considering buying stock in bikinis.”

“It’s like an explosion.”

“I couldn’t decide what to—” I broke off. Admitting my indecision about my clothes seemed to be admitting my indecision about other things. Yesterday afternoon, we’d agreed hands off was best, but after we were very hands—and lips—on last night at the club, I didn’t know how to act.

“Didn’t know what to wear this afternoon?” Jake’s tone wasn’t jokey or sarcastic. It was soft and vulnerable. He gazed at me as if he wanted my admission. It made me want to say yes to anything he asked.

This was so much tougher than I’d expected.

I nodded, and he stepped closer. His hand hovered barely an inch over my skin, tracing an invisible line from my shoulder along my breasts, down my belly to my hip. My breath rushed out hard as hot shivers followed his movement. Even without touching me, the sensations, the mere possibilities, ignited me.

This was precisely why I didn’t want him in my room. My body asked for one thing. My mind told me to focus on the job.

“What you chose is perfect.” His voice was low and gravelly and so damn sexy. His fingertips brushed against my waist and my resistance started to collapse.

Somehow, I managed to move away from him and over to the safe. I began to key in the code, but suddenly, Jake was behind me, his hand covering mine, his chest pressed to my back, evoking that same sweet ache he’d sparked on the dance floor and stoked to a flame in the bathroom. It pulsed in my belly, demanding I move closer, right there, where I was aligned with the length of his strong, sturdy body.

“What are you doing?” I asked when his fingers wrapped over mine on the keypad.

He brushed his lips over my shoulder. I wanted to turn, grab him, and pull him to the bed. Push the stakeout back an hour to satisfy this sweet ache.

To answer me, Jake whispered a sequence of five numbers. My neck prickled a warning and I tensed, frozen as he punched in those numbers on the safe and the door popped open. Then I unfroze, spinning around within the circle of his arms, astonished and suspicious. “How did you do that?”

He shrugged with a smile that could melt panties. “Told you I could open safes.”

He bent his head and dusted another soft, barely there, almost chaste kiss onto my neck. I pressed my hand to his chest, refusing to focus on that kiss. I was curious to know how he’d pulled that off anyway. The kiss on my neck was a distant memory. “But *how*?”

“Ariel,” he said casually. “Two, seven, four, three, five.”

My nickname, letters translated into their corresponding number on a phone dial-pad. “But you guessed it so fast.”

His laugh was resonant and genuine. “Don’t be embarrassed. How many people have even *seen* a touch-tone phone?”

“I’m not embarrassed,” I lied, and nudged him away from the safe so I could reach in and grab the box with the diamond Eli had given me. “Just because you made me look stupid for thinking my code was clever.”

“As long as it’s not also your debit card,” he teased, his sunshine eyes lighting up.

“No. It’s not,” I said, disgruntled.

“People usually choose familiar words for their combinations,” he explained with a shrug, like figuring me out was nothing to him when it was something to me. I didn’t want to be obvious. “Understanding habits and human nature is part of my job.”

“So you weren’t kissing me to melt my resistance so I’d give up the code?” I asked though it sounded rhetorical even to my ears immediately. He hadn’t needed to get me to give it up. He’d guessed it, kiss or not.

Which meant the kiss was just a kiss. And credit given where credit was due.

Him—mind and mouth.

He shook his head, looking pleased. “I was just kissing your neck because you smelled so damn good and I couldn’t help myself. You looked ridiculously sexy in front of the safe.”

That was a hell of a compliment—one I’d definitely never heard before. One I enjoyed a lot. “It says a lot that a locked safe is a turn-on for you.”

“A beautiful woman in front of a locked safe,” he corrected in a voice like velvet. “Two things that are a pleasure to unlock.”

Heat crept up my neck as if he’d kissed me there again. Why did he have to be so irresistible?

Clutching the box to my chest like a shield against his charm, I brushed past him to where I could breathe without my head filling with his scent. “How about we get to work unlocking this mystery first.”

A deep, throaty chuckle followed me, then we left the hotel room and set the next phase of our plan into motion.

* * *

I drove to the diamond district, all focused. We’d strayed out of the “just business” lane last night—and when he picked me up—but now my nerves were all tied to the task in front of us. That involved trusting Jake in a more material way, so I recapped the plan, calming those nerves as best I could. “So, you’re going to take my diamond into the shop and find out as much as you can about where it came from,” I said as I looked for parking on Wayboard Street, but not too close to

International Diamonds. As Jake had pointed out yesterday, I could be recognized. “You have your cover story?”

“Did I mention that I’ve done this before?” The question came out more wry than usual.

“Only a few dozen times. *And* showed off your skills.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen a fraction of my skills, Ariel.”

I tamped down the flutters that happened every time he used that husky, tantalizing tone. “I’m serious,” I said. With the narrow roads, I could only steal a glance at him, but his lips were quirked in a crooked smile.

“Yes. I have my cover. I’m having the stone evaluated for my sister,” he explained, taking pity on my nerves. “Whose cheating husband gave it to her to win her back. She wants to turn it into a nest egg in case he strays again and she kicks him to the curb.”

That had enough truth to be plausible and uncomfortable—Eli had cheated on my mom and given expensive gifts in place of fidelity. And then demanded them back in the divorce. It would never have occurred to Mom to hide something away in, say, a foreign bank. When *she’d* had money put aside, she’d given it to her husband without strings attached.

I parked the car, but was still lost in thought, hands on the wheel. Jake covered my icy hand with his warm one. “You still with me?” he asked gently.

I nodded a few more times than necessary, then gulped. “This is how we find out if Eli bought diamonds to hide his money and get it out of the mainland US, right?” I knew the answer—*yes*—but I had to ask anyway. I was only an amateur detective after all. But the reminder of the goal calmed my erratic pulse.

He hummed, a note of concern. “Ruby,” he said, carefully.

“Yes?”

“Are you doubting he pilfered funds from the business and its clients?”

The truth?

I was.

And it bothered me that I was stuck on this issue.

Why was it more painful to think of my stepdad as a thief than simply an unfaithful husband, as he'd been? I suppose I was still bothered by the very real possibility that he'd given me a gift bought with stolen money. That was a new level of, well, gross. It was so beyond tacky that I'd almost hoped it would be too tacky for him.

But I was doubting myself more. So I answered truthfully when I said, "I'm doubting my sanity for handing a diamond that could give my mom years of security to someone I've known for two days."

He took my point seriously. "So follow me to International Diamonds and make sure I go inside."

That was a fair offer. I appreciated it, but it posed other issues. "What if someone sees us together? Or saw us dancing at Sapphire last night, and they spot you getting out of the car?"

Jake turned in his seat to face me, all the better to give me that lopsided grin. "We'll tell the truth. We met at the club, where you hit on me."

I folded my arms. "That's not how I remember it."

"You chatted me up non-verbally with your sexy hips and come-hither stare." His hand skimmed my bare thigh.

"I didn't even know you were still in the club," I said, trying to ignore my galloping pulse.

"But as soon as you saw me, you found me irresistible and had to have me." His thumb stroked above my knee. "So you picked me up and took me back to your room."

I smirked. This man. The flirt was strong in him. "By way of the club's restroom?"

"Oh, I think we can be convincing without giving all the details."

If anyone could read my mind, they wouldn't have to imagine any of the specifics. I was reliving them all in my head.

"Yeah," Jake breathed, a low rumble in his throat as he gazed hotly at my face, my neck, everywhere. "That look right there. Utterly convincing."

With that, he pulled his ball cap low and got out of the car while no one was near.

If he could get information half as well as he could get me hot and bothered, he was going to come back with a gold mine of clues.

A COVER-UP KISS

Jake

International Diamonds commanded the corner of the street, impossible to miss. I pushed open the door, immediately blasted by air-conditioning and dazzled by case upon case of glittering gems and row upon row of necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and more.

The place thronged with shoppers, mostly in tourist attire. A pair of men in slacks and button-down shirts seemed to be doing more serious business in a far corner.

Crowded was good. Even if the stone I carried was memorable, my face and clothes would blend in with the steady stream of customers.

I wandered to a counter, casually peering through the glass at the loose gems until someone approached me on the other side. A young woman in a white lab coat, with black glasses and dark hair twisted up in a bun, asked, “May I help you, sir?”

After reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the gem.

The woman’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “This is quite the diamond.”

“To me, it’s just a Band-Aid—and a cheap one at that,” I said. “My sister’s husband gave it to her to win her back after he proved himself to be an unfaithful son of a bitch. Pardon my French. She forgave him once, but a cheat is a cheat.” I

only had to imagine someone treating either of my sisters that way, and it was no trouble generating a mix of brotherly love and righteous anger. “So, we’re trying to figure out how much this pretty little number is worth.”

The woman’s smile was gently sympathetic. I was sure she’d heard weirder and worse. “He must have really wanted her back.”

I made my laugh bitter. “He sure did.”

She picked up the diamond with a pair of jeweler’s tweezers and examined it under a magnifying glass. “This is gorgeous,” she said as she regarded the stone from all angles. “I can check the serial number for a certificate of clarity, as well. That often increases the value.”

“Well, how about that?” I said, as if this was the first I’d ever heard of such a thing.

After the slightest of pauses, she straightened and carefully set the diamond on the cloth. “I’d have to look at it under the microscope to get the full number, but I recognize the watermark.”

“What does that tell you?”

“It means this diamond comes from a particular mine. This is from the Frayer mine in the Northwest Territories in Canada, which specializes in conflict-free, diamonds mined from the subarctic zone.”

I nodded, staying in character. “Well, that’s good. Sis and I’d had a bet that it was one of those lab-grown stones.” I’d known it wasn’t, but I also hadn’t expected Eli, the thief and con man, to make such a politically correct choice.

“Definitely not,” said the woman. “This is one of the best-regarded diamond mines in the entire world. And these diamonds with the blue tint are especially valuable. At this size and carat, I would estimate it to be worth at least ten thousand dollars.”

I almost choked at the number. I tried to play it cool, despite my first reaction. “Is that so?”

“It is indeed,” she said, her dark eyes seeming to study me. So much for not being memorable. “I can handle the transaction for you if you’d like. We have handled a few of these diamonds recently and easily found buyers all over the world. I can give you full value today, sir. Are you ready to get started?”

She sounded eager, and I was surprised how quickly she wanted to move. But then, she’d have a big commission if she turned around and sold the gem.

“Let me talk to my sister. We’ll be back tomorrow,” I said.

“Excellent. I’ll be looking forward to helping you. I’m Monica. You can ask for me.”

I bid her goodbye and pocketed the diamond, trying not to walk as if I had a fortune in my pocket. It was a quick stride to Ruby’s rental Jeep, and I climbed in, exhaled, and handed her the five-figure gem. “Your stepdad is generous. That bad boy is worth ten K. You’re going to change the combination on your safe tonight, Ariel.”

Her eyes widened to the size of moons. “Are you kidding me?”

“I’m not.” The afternoon sun heated the Jeep through the windows while I relayed the details of my conversation.

Ruby stared at the gem in her hand like an unexploded bomb. “What’s your theory, then?”

I’d been working out a theory since I started. That little bit of intel from Monica helped me fine-tune my theory further. “Eli buys the stones with the stolen money—probably not directly from the mine, but maybe from a broker. Then he gets on a plane with a pocket full of diamonds and carries them here.”

Her brow rose in doubt. “That sounds like ‘bowl full of diamonds’ territory, Jake.”

But it wasn’t at all. “He could wear them around his neck if he had the whim. The necklace his fiancée sported at Sapphire the other night could be an example of how he does

it,” I said, since ferrying jewelry was much more plausible than keeping a bowl like candy on a table.

Ruby seemed to consider my ideas without admitting I was right. But she didn’t say I was wrong either. After a few beats, she sighed, then asked, “What then? He has a go-to stash of birthday presents for the women in his life?”

“It’s kind of sexist for you to assume men don’t like to wear diamonds,” I said, teasing.

“Fine, he gives diamond pinkie rings to his guy friends too. Go on.”

I rolled out more of my theory. “Let’s say he keeps them on ice, so to speak, then sells them little by little for cash, turning them liquid. The clerk told me she’s seen a few of these come through recently.”

That added up too. Eli was cunning. He’d realize selling too many diamonds at once would attract undue attention. *A few* fit the man.

“Fine,” she said tightly. “That seems plausible.”

“It sure does,” I said, and later in the day I’d update Andrew on the visit to see if the client had anything more to share from the emails his people were still decoding. I’d be able to tell him what we’d found out too. We had a traceable watermark. Now all we had to do was follow that link back to the stolen funds.

“Hey,” I said, looking at the woman at the wheel, who seemed to be deep in her own thoughts.

“Thanks,” I said genuinely, meaning it.

Her smile was curious. “For?”

“For working with me on this. Your help is invaluable,” I said.

No, it wasn’t just her help I was thanking her for.

It was her trust.

She’d trusted me enough to hand her diamond to me, a relative stranger, and let me out of sight with it. *Gratitude* was

an inadequate word.

“Thank you too,” she said, softly.

She reached forward to turn up the AC in the Jeep, but froze, staring out the front window. Her gaze had strayed to a man with salt-and-pepper hair headed down the block toward us. He looked...familiar, but I couldn't place him. “What's wrong?”

“Tristan,” she said in a strangled whisper. “Shit.”

In a blur, she unbuckled her seat belt, slid from behind the wheel, and climbed on top of me. “Kiss me so he doesn't notice me.”

No time to think. Just follow orders. In the military, I'd done a lot of that, but this was the easiest command ever. I cupped her face and sealed my mouth over hers. When I looped my hands in her hair and swept my tongue across the seam of her mouth, she moaned quietly and parted her lips.

With one hand tangled in her hair, I took off my cap and put it on her, covering her blonde locks. Ruby smiled against my mouth and murmured, “Quick thinking.”

“Thanks.”

I was positive the guy had passed us, but like hell was I going to stop. Not while she straddled me. Not as she started to slowly rock her hips into mine. And not as she kissed back harder and hungrier, her lips greedy and tasting like tropical temptation. I tangoed my tongue with hers, tasting her lips, devouring her.

She picked up speed and started riding me harder. While I was sure she could get off by humping my hard-on in my shorts, and I wanted nothing more than to hear her little moans turn into full-blown cries of pleasure, getting arrested for public indecency would be counter to our objectives.

I opened one eye and scanned the street. Coast was clear.

“I'm driving,” I said, brooking no argument. “And I'm finishing what you just started. If that's a problem, you need to tell me now.”

“It’s not a problem,” she whispered, and the look in her eyes was full of lust.

I slid out and walked around while she situated herself in the passenger seat, then I started the Jeep and drove away from the diamond district. In five minutes, I found a parking garage near a shopping center and parked on the quietest level in a space by the wall. Then I tugged her with me into the backseat.

“I owe you a third,” I said, sliding her sexy body alongside mine.

“Pay up,” she said.

“Oh, I’ll make good on my promise. In no time, you’ll be saying my name,” I said as I tugged her close, my hand traveling along the bare skin of her legs. So damn soft. As she stretched out beside me, we locked eyes. The look in hers was vulnerable and hungry at the same time. She wanted this, and she wanted to give her body to me. What a fucking gift.

“Make me...” she whispered, taking a beat and upping the ante, “scream your name.”

She parted her thighs.

Damn, what a brilliant idea she’d had, kissing me on the street. Maybe she deserved a fourth too. For now, I brushed the inside of her thigh. “Challenge accepted,” I said, and she smiled in that sexy-sweet way she had, then her eyes floated closed as I reached the damp panel of her bikini bottoms. I inhaled sharply as I brushed a finger across that lovely wetness. My dick jumped, eager to please her too. To make her back arch and her toes curl.

But this moment wasn’t about me getting off. I wanted her to writhe in pleasure. That was what turned me on most—to hear her cries. To see her lips form my name as she came undone. I slid a finger across her pussy, gliding over her slick heat. Oh hell, she felt fucking fantastic, and lust crashed into every corner of my body as she shuddered and rubbed against me.

I couldn't resist kissing her. I dropped my mouth onto hers, claiming her lips in a hot kiss as I tugged her bikini lower. She rocked into my hand as I stroked her and kissed her, and whatever resistance she'd had earlier seemed far gone too.

I guessed she liked this ratio too.

PARKING ESCAPE

Ruby

Sure, I was supposed to be resisting him. But screw resistance.

I wanted a break from thinking about good guys and bad guys, cons and crimes. I needed to turn off my mind and let my body take over.

And this man knew what to do to me. Those talented fingers. That wicked mouth. His lips were a dream, and his mouth tasted fantastic. We'd kissed plenty of times. But this kind of kiss? A kiss while he fucked me with his talented fingers? This was its own kind of exquisite, filthy bliss. It was a deliciously dirty kiss. Jake fucked my mouth with his tongue, all while stroking my heat, hitting the right spot.

I arched my hips, meeting his hand, needing his fingers. Craving so much more. Sparks raced through me with every move he made, and soon I couldn't concentrate on kissing anymore. All I could do was *be* touched. I broke the kiss, moaning carnally. He growled, and my world narrowed to his passion and to the agonizingly exquisite ache between my legs. "Feels so good," I murmured.

His throat rumbled, and he thrust his fingers into me again. "And you look so fucking good. So fucking beautiful when you're all turned on," he whispered, his voice low and dirty, the words heating me up even more.

I'd give him more of my own. Since I was learning his brand of dirty talk was my new kink. "I thought about you last night," I admitted, my breathing turning erratic. Hot, quick pulses spread through me with every touch, every stroke. "After the club."

"Yeah?" He growled. "After you fucked my face?"

I gasped. "Yes. I was so turned on when I got to my room."

"Did you get off to me again?" He crooked a finger, and I gasped, crying out loudly in pleasure. Wild sensations pulsed through me in quick waves as he fucked me with his fingers, rubbed my clit, owned my body. Fireworks burst in my brain. Bright colors flashed before my closed eyelids.

I was almost there. Just a little more. Just a few more words.

"I was so turned on from the club," I admitted.

"Should have called. Told me to come over. I'd have fucked you with my tongue again and again," he said in a dirty reprimand.

"I wanted that. I pictured you." I couldn't finish the thought as the sensations whipped through me too fast, too hot.

"Or was I fucking you? Was I taking you deep, bent over the bed, you screaming out in pleasure?"

No one had ever talked to me like this. It was addictive. It was orgasmic. My belly tightened, and my climax crested into view.

I rocked into his hand, crying out. I grabbed his hair and pulled him back to my lips as I rode his hand shamelessly in the backseat of a car in the corner of a parking garage.

Coming undone, I cried out his name. "God, Jake, yes."

I trembled and moaned for days, it seemed. I quivered. Everything in me was loose and wonderful.

I ran a hand through my hair, smiling dopily I was sure. I was just so...blissed out.

Once the orgasm ebbed away, I shook off the fog of my own desire, craving his. *Desperately* craving his. “Let me,” I murmured, running my palm along his hard-on. “Let me take care of you.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to,” he said.

“I want to,” I said, insistent. “Don’t you get it? I want to make you feel as incredible as you do to me.”

He peered out the window. The garage was empty. Still, this was risky, but I didn’t care.

Maybe he did.

He was quiet for a moment, his brow knitted in contemplation, as if he were weighing the risks.

But not for long. “Fuck it,” he said. “Let’s even the score.”

I wasn’t convinced we’d ever be even. The man was too obsessed with my pleasure. But I needed his too. I sneaked a hand into his boxer briefs, thrilling at the feel of his hard, hot cock in my hand. “Oh yes, this is very, very nice,” I said.

His breath stuttered. “Yeah, nice,” he said, sounding lost already to the touch.

I stroked him more, enjoying the weight of him, the heat of him. Sparks flared all through my body just from this—from touching him.

“Push these down a little more,” I said, tugging at his shorts, thrilled to give him orders.

With his big hands, he pushed his shorts to mid-thigh, and I groaned appreciatively as I admired the view. His cock was long, thick, and pulsing for me. A drop of liquid teased me at the tip.

“Squeeze it,” I told him.

His eyes glimmered with desire as he gripped his shaft, squeezing that drop for me. I dipped my head, and licked the salty bead with my tongue.

“Fuck,” he murmured.

I lifted my face, licking my lower lip. “So good.”

“Anything else you need me to do?”

I wrapped a hand tightly around the base. “Yes. Enjoy yourself.”

“I fucking will.”

I dropped my face to his dick and swirled my tongue against the head. *Mmm*. I savored the taste of him but also the chance to give back. I *wanted* to take him deep, to please him, to make him moan and groan and lose his mind.

Finally, I had my chance. I flicked my tongue down his shaft. He drew a sharp breath, then a sharper one as I drew him into my mouth, savoring the noises he made.

“Ah, just like that, and use your hand too,” he murmured as he threaded his fingers into my hair.

I followed his directions, loving that he gave them. I wanted this to be as good for him as he’d been to me.

“Harder, Ruby. Do it harder,” he said, clasping a hand around my head. “Take me deeper,” he said in a throaty rumble, then whispered, all hot and husky, “*Please.*”

I let him fall from my lips for a hot second. “Since you said please...”

Then I took him all the way.

EVEN

Jake

Her mouth was divine. She was an angel of mercy, and the friction from her tongue and her lips was heavenly. This was dirty paradise, right there, right then. My fingers curled through her hair, golden blonde spilling over my hand as I guided her. Flames sparked in my blood as she sucked, her head bobbing up and down. *This*. This was some kind of gorgeous sight. This determined goddess with her head in my lap, sucking me off. Her lips tightened around my shaft, and her tongue worked miracles.

“Your lips look so fucking good on me,” I said with a groan that rattled through my whole damn body.

She looked up, and *fuck*.

That was an even filthier sight. I could see more of her beautiful face. Could see, too, how her cheeks hollowed out, how her lips stretched around my cock.

With one hand, I let go of my grip on her head to sweep her hair to the side. Yes, fucking yes. This was even better. The perfect view. Electricity sparked everywhere as she worked me over. Her hand wrapped tighter, and the tension coiled within me, rising higher and faster.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Almost there,” I said, letting her know I was close. So damn close I could barely take it

anymore. The sight of her sucking me like that, her hand fisting the base, and her hair a wild tumble, drove me wild.

“Want to fuck your mouth, Ruby,” I grunted, my control fraying.

With a quick nod, she gave me the go-ahead, so with barely a thread of control left, I thrust up into her, fucking her mouth.

Words failed me, and I was reduced to moans, desperate for release—until my climax crashed into me, and I groaned her name as I came hard.

I shuddered from the aftershocks. Trembled. Couldn't stop panting. Didn't want to stop feeling so damn good.

But I needed one more thing.

One more taste of her.

When she dropped me from her mouth, I pulled her up and planted a tender kiss on her lips. “You're incredible.”

She gave me a soft smile, then whispered, “You too.”

“I guess we're even,” I said, still in a daze. “You screamed my name. I groaned yours.”

“Oh, you screamed it too, handsome. You definitely screamed it.”

I laughed. No point arguing with her there. “Fair enough,” I said, but then the sound of a car starting somewhere nearby ruined the moment.

Back to reality. Our momentary escape into a quiet parking garage bubble had ended.

“We'd better get back to work,” I said.

She rearranged her features then nodded. “Yes. Work, just work.”

“Just work,” I repeated, because holy hell, did I need the reminder.

* * *

My phone rang before the sun had breached my hotel room window in the morning. I fumbled for it on the nightstand, cracked an eyelid to check who it was, then answered.

“Hey, Andrew.”

I’d called my client last night and given him a report after the International Diamonds visit, but I hadn’t expected to hear from him at the break of dawn.

“I have news.” Andrew sounded excited, and I sat, shaking off sleep.

“I’m listening.”

“My IT team deciphered a few more emails. I told them to look for any references to the Frayer mine, and they turned up something.”

Excellent. I swung my feet to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed as he filled me in.

At 9:22 a.m. I watched Eli shut the front door of his house behind him and walk the stone path toward his circular driveway, tossing his car keys in his right hand, exactly like he’d done yesterday. He even stopped to smell the roses, so to speak. A creature of habit.

There was one thing different though. The day before yesterday, when I’d last tailed him, he’d tossed his keys from hand to hand, not just up and down. Today, he walked with his left hand in his trouser pocket.

Not weird in itself, but his overall body language suggested he wasn’t just jingling his spare change. A look through my binoculars backed up that impression. Eli was clutching something important or valuable and keeping it out of sight.

There were a lot of things it could be. But my intuition added up small and valuable and equaled jewels. Was Eli carrying diamonds from the Frayer mine in his pocket?

Eli got into his car, and I followed him again, determined and intensely focused. Anything else was a distraction.

Specifically, one sexy, feisty, fantastic woman who felt like magic in my hands.

The memory of Ruby coming undone in the backseat of her car threatened to derail me again, the echo of her cries turning me on, no matter how inappropriate the time. I shouldn't have dirty thoughts about her while I was tailing her stepfather.

Her *stepfather*. If that wasn't crossing a line between work and personal life, I didn't know what was.

In another repeat, Eli headed to the financial district and parked outside the Royal Bank. I pulled over too, watching Eli hop out of his car and saunter into the bank. This time, I followed him inside at a reasonable distance.

The lobby was all marble floor, oak partitions and teller windows, and cool, climate-controlled air. Eli ignored all of them, striding directly to the back where a man in a pinstriped suit greeted him with a handshake. Then the banker opened a door, and Eli followed him through while a guard stood watch, staring straight ahead.

I walked in that direction as if I knew where I was going, but patted my pockets as if searching for something. "Ah hell," I muttered.

The guard turned his head to look at me. "Can I help you with something, sir?"

"Not unless you've got the spare key to my safe deposit box back there?" I nodded to the door where Eli had disappeared.

The guard smiled faintly. "No, sir."

"I'll be back, then. Must have left it on the darn counter."

"See you when you return."

I added up circumstantial evidence as I left the bank and picked a spot to wait for Eli to come out. Eli had taken *something* from his home and gone to his safe deposit box in

the bank. He couldn't have had the entire stash of gems in his pocket. Was he transporting them to his safe deposit box a handful at a time to avoid attracting attention? If so, Ruby had been right, guessing the gems were perhaps in Eli's home.

And Ruby had access to that very home. Working with an inside woman was a big advantage.

At least, that was what I was supposed to be doing. *Working*. Not dreaming up new ways to make her cry out in pleasure.

I distracted myself from thoughts of Ruby and the tedium of a stakeout by grabbing a cup of coffee from a street-side vendor. Then I grabbed a spot on a bench, positioned where I could see the bank doors. Fifteen minutes after he'd gone in, Eli emerged from the bank just as a taxi pulled up to the curb and his fiancée, Willow, stepped out. Eli walked over and wrapped her in an embrace that became a kiss. Then he draped an arm possessively around her as they started down the street.

Still sipping my coffee, I followed at a moderate distance, and a few blocks later, the pair darted into a local realtor's office.

My head spun. There was property involved too?

UNEXPECTED

Ruby

I tapped in the new combination to my hotel room safe. H-A-P-P-Y-T-U-R-T-L-E. The door popped open, and there was my diamond, nice and secure. If I accomplished nothing else on this quest, or if Jake and I discovered no further details, at least I could sell the jewel and give the money to my mother. It was a fraction of what she'd invested in Eli, and what Eli owed to his investors, but ten thousand dollars was nothing to scoff at.

Closing the safe, I took my phone out to the tiny balcony, where I could soak in the glorious morning view of the crystal-blue ocean. I inhaled all that blue, from the gentle waves in the water up to the clear, endless sky, and closed my eyes to enjoy the warmth on my skin.

When I opened them, I checked in with things at home. There was an email from Cole telling me the video we'd shot was up and running. And it was working already—I had two new inquiries for scuba tours.

I responded to the messages right away, grateful for my brother's work and my mom's support. The business would never have had a chance to turn around without them.

While family was on my mind, I gave Mom a call.

"How are things?" she asked.

“They’re great. I’ve been prepping for my tour, and I ran into some old friends.” Though, mostly I’d been busy with Jake and snooping on my stepdad. “And I saw Eli,” I said, not sure how much to tell her. Would she want all the details? It was hard to say.

“And his Rolex?” Mom’s tone could have etched glass.

“Ostentatious,” I assured her. “Obnoxious. Overrated.”

Mom sighed. “Thank you for that.”

What could I ask her that would help the cause? About his interest in jewelry? Was he already doing business with the Canadian mine when they were still married? Was he always ten-thousand-dollar generous with gifts?

Something he said at brunch came back to me, and it seemed important enough to run past her. “He mentioned something about focusing on his charitable endeavors these days. I never knew he was a big charity guy.”

Her mother scoffed. “Ha. As if. Getting money out of him was like getting blood from a rock.” But then she made a *pfift* sound, dismissing him. “Enough about Eli. What about you? Are you finding time to relax? Maybe meeting a sexy guy for an island tryst?”

Island tryst.

Sounded fantastic in theory but dangerous in practice. Jake was sexy and clever and wickedly talented, and we were good together when our goals aligned. But in the big picture, we didn’t see eye to eye. We were coming at the diamonds from opposite angles.

I wanted to find out the truth about what had happened to the money. I wanted Eli to return what he’d stolen *and* return my mother’s investment.

Jake wanted justice too, but he also wanted Eli’s head—and since Mom’s money was a gift, if it was returned to the Eli Fund as he’d stipulated, she wouldn’t get a cent of her investment back. Eli would go to jail. He couldn’t exactly repay her from there.

We couldn't both win.

"I'm just trying to stay busy," I said evasively, and after I wrapped up with Mom, I typed the name of the diamond mine into my phone. There were a few articles as well as the operation's website, which touted its commitment to politically correct mining, its adherence to world standards on labor, and the fact that half of its proceeds went to schools.

Could this be one of Eli's new charitable endeavors? I browsed the list of Frayer's biggest supporters for its charitable arm, but Eli's name wasn't there. I wasn't entirely surprised, though I was, admittedly, a little disappointed.

But then I spotted another familiar name.

Willow Evans.

His fiancée.

* * *

I spent the afternoon at Happy Turtle Cove. My tour would be in a few days, and I wanted to visit the spot one more time beforehand to make sure I knew it like the back of my hand. I canvassed the cove, and along the way ran into Tanice and Reid. I knew Reid, a bartender I'd met at The Pink Pelican from time to time.

"Don't forget the boat party tomorrow night," Tanice said. "It's been too long."

"Yeah you better be there," Reid warned playfully. We chatted more, then I said goodbye and as I wandered around the sandy beach, my gaze landed on a napping guy who looked like my stepdad's club manager—big, burly with a snake tattoo on his arm. I'd seen him but not met him, so I didn't interrupt his snoozing on a beach towel behind his shades.

I headed for the edge of the cove at sunset, since I'd arranged for Jake to meet me here, when he'd drive with me to Eli's house for the dinner party.

I fought off a smile as I watched the rugged *recovery specialist* walk toward me. Though swagger was more like it. His eyes locked with mine and seemed to hold me with a certain after-dark intensity. My chest flipped as I checked him out in his blue T-shirt that showed off his gorgeous ink and trim shorts that hugged his strong thighs.

When he reached me he said, “Hey,” with a lopsided grin that made my heart race.

“Hi.” I needed pockets on my sundress so I’d have something to do with my hands when all I wanted was to grab him and make out like we had the last time we’d been in the cove. But after all the passion between us yesterday, we hadn’t discussed where we stood now.

Were we back to off-limits partners? Were we returning to secret lovers? We were so unclear, but now probably wasn’t the time to decipher this island tryst.

“Ready to go?” He gestured the way he’d come, over the dunes.

“I am.” We walked toward my car, not touching. Like, conspicuously not touching. That was odd. I’d been the one who’d initially made the “no making out” rule, but I couldn’t help thinking that this awkwardness was more distracting than giving in to attraction would be.

“How was your day?” I asked once we were driving toward Corey’s Landing in my rented Jeep. I grimaced at how girlfriend-y that sounded. “Any developments?” There. That was what I meant.

“I saw Eli and his fiancée heading into a realtor’s office downtown. That was interesting,” he said in a tone that suggested interesting was an understatement. He told me about his bank visit too. “I’m not sure if it relates to our investigation, but it seems likely. Money, finance, real estate. If you get a chance to suss that out during conversation tonight...”

“I’m on it,” I said, a little excited with my new mission.

I turned into the development where Willow and Eli lived. “I did some digging into Willow today,” I said, driving past manicured lawns and hedge-lined driveways. “She studied art history in college and she’s very passionate about collecting modern art. She’s the connection to the Frayer mine, by the way. A generous supporter of their charitable arm.”

“That’s an unusual combo.”

“Art and diamonds? Maybe she just likes the finer things in life,” I mused. I looked at Jake curiously, then returned my eyes to the road. Did he see me as an equal partner in intel? Did my digging make a difference? It was hard to say, and the man was hard to read tonight. But then, a detail nagged at me—the details of *us* right here, right now. He’d insisted on coming with me and dropping me off. At a party. But why? I hadn’t dissected his motivation till now, but as we neared Eli’s home, a new and uncomfortable possibility nagged at me. “You didn’t have to come with me, you know. I could have filled you in later,” I said, opening up the topic carefully.

He shook his head. “I wanted to be around in case of anything unexpected.”

Maybe that was true. But was that the only reason he was here? “What if they see you?” I asked, feeling him out more.

He flashed a disarming grin. “Don’t worry. I know how to lie low. Despite the inconvenient absence of a proper trellis.”

I wasn’t in the mood to joke. “I’m serious, Jake.”

He sighed. “So am I. I want to be close in case anything unexpected happens, that’s all. Since we’re a team, we should do things as a team.”

That sounded plausible enough. But was it? After all, he’d revealed a key detail a few minutes ago when he told me what he’d done that morning.

I pulled to a stop in the parking lot and turned in my seat to stare at him through narrowed eyes. “You tailed him this morning on your own.” It was a bit of an accusation.

He dragged a hand through his hair. “What are you saying, Ruby?”

“I think you’re babysitting me because you don’t trust me,” I said, laying it out there.

“Are we really going back there again?” he asked, a touch exasperated.

Valid question and yet... “I don’t think we ever got past there.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I did, and you’re the one who said you didn’t trust me,” he said, clearly frustrated.

But I didn’t feel so warm toward him anymore either. “But now it turns out you don’t trust me either.”

He sighed. “I just want to be here for you after the dinner.”

“That hardly seems necessary.” As I opened the door, I tossed him the keys. “You really don’t have to wait for me. I’ll take a taxi and text you when I’m back at my hotel.”

I didn’t want to be his project. I didn’t want to be his after-hours lover either, if he didn’t trust me in the light.

He stretched across the seat and caught my arm, wrapping his fingers lightly around my wrist. It was a little possessive, which I liked too much. “Ruby,” he said softly. My heart thumped, but I stayed strong. “I can’t imagine how hard it is doing what you’re doing. Facing your stepdad, investigating him, keeping your cool when it would be easier to confront him. All to make things right for your mom. So I’ll be here, waiting.”

I softened at his understanding. He’d voiced the nervousness I hadn’t been able to pin down. How well *did* I know Eli now? I was walking into my semi-estranged stepfather’s home to spy on him. To play Nancy Drew. But I didn’t even consider *not* doing it. I had a chance to right a wrong, and I would take it.

Another question nagged at me too—how well did I know Jake?

But I had the answer. I hardly knew him.

I’d have to put him out of my mind, though, because it was showtime.

* * *

“You’re here!”

Willow had a voice like honey and whiskey, the sleek lines of a supermodel, and porcelain skin. In the foyer of my stepfather’s mini mansion, she looped her toned arms around me as if I were her long-lost relative.

Not my favorite way to be hugged by anyone. I wasn’t much of an *extended embrace* person at all.

“Hi,” I said, standing in the circle of her arms and the cloud of her perfume, counting to three when I could reasonably let go. “It’s, um, nice to meet you.”

There. Done. I stepped back, and I didn’t want to judge Eli’s fiancée on her stunning looks. I just wished my stepfather weren’t such a cliché. The house on the water, the jewelry, the string of affairs with gorgeous women. Younger women.

Willow wasn’t done with the long-lost thing though. She placed her hands on my shoulders and beamed. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’m dying for you to meet all my friends.”

“Where’s Eli?”

I darted a glance past her into the empty sitting room, cataloging the plush beige couch, the marble table in the entryway, the chandelier with its brilliant teardrop crystals throwing prisms on the white tiled floor. A silver tabby with freakishly green eyes sat under the chandelier, her tail twitching as she stared at the ceiling. Looking for, well, whatever cats looked for on ceilings.

But there was no crystal bowl full of diamonds to be seen.

The only gem in sight was the brilliant pendant adorning Willow’s throat. Just like the stone in my safe, it had a faint blue tint. It looked the same size and even had the same cut.

It sure looked like *another ten-thousand-dollar* diamond. How many did he have? This newest one pissed me off since it was around the neck of the woman who *hadn’t* given Eli

money to start his business. Who *hadn't* stood by him for decades. Who hadn't had to start completely over after he broke her heart.

But I had to let go of my anger and focus on the job. Sleuthing, like I knew I could do.

Willow linked her arm with mine, tugging me farther into the house as she finally answered me. "He was called away tonight on business, but this is perfect because it gives us a chance to really bond."

Oh. Well, that was disappointing.

I'd hoped he'd be here too. I'd wanted to ask more questions, but mostly I'd wanted to get the lay of the land. To understand him more. I couldn't entirely do that with him absent.

But I didn't have a choice since shrieks of laughter echoed toward us, amplified by all the tile and marble. A woman cried out, "Oh my god, that feels amazing. I can't even. You have to feel this. Give me your arm."

Was she testing out some lotion? Please, please let this be an aromatherapy party.

But the naughty spark in Willow's brown eyes said I wouldn't be so lucky. "This is definitely a ladies-only party."

Save me.

I glanced behind me, wondering if I could make a break for the front door. I came for an awkward family dinner, but a randy girls' night in with my stepdad's fiancée? That was next-level cringe.

Jake was right. Tonight was certainly unexpected.

SAFE CRACKER

Jake

Perfect. She was safe and sound, inside the house.

I had no intention of waiting in the car. I had business to take care of and if Ruby knew what I was up to, she could give it away. Not on purpose. And despite what she'd said, I trusted her. But her face gave away her feelings better than she knew, and I didn't want her to jump at noises or every creaking floorboard. I needed her to provide me cover, and the less she knew, the better the chance I could pull this off.

No need for a convenient trellis to get into Eli's house. A convenient tree would do just as nicely, like this ironwood. Wasting no time, I shimmied up the trunk and out onto a branch until I was close enough to swing down and drop lightly onto the stucco roof.

With my lock kit, I opened a bathroom window in twenty seconds flat. Sliding through the window, I found myself in a palatial bathroom suite that smelled like expensive perfume and fancy, feminine lotions, as well as a woodsy aftershave. A faint light from the makeup mirror fell on fluffy towels, a waterfall shower, and double sinks.

Nice digs.

I stood still for a moment, listening. The room was quiet, but I could make out the faint sound of women's laughter

coming from the floor below. As I'd hoped, the focus was on the dinner guests and not anything happening upstairs.

Padding silently down the hall, I counted doors, passing a guest bedroom before reaching a closed door. There was no light coming from beneath the door—it could have been another guest room, but if I was lucky it would be a home office. Holding my breath, I grasped the doorknob and turned it slowly, noiselessly. Then, easing the door open, I peered through the gap. Moonlight streaked through the window, falling across a desk and onto the floor then climbing up the shelves.

Photos of Eli's fiancée and his family decorated his desk. A picture of Ruby kissing a stingray caught my attention. The sun shone on her face, and the water sparkled behind her. Her smile could launch a thousand ships. Her happiness radiated from the frame.

Focus. Someone could leave the table and come upstairs any time.

I began to search the room—where else could Eli's safe be other than his office?

It didn't take long to find what I was looking for. The safe was small, hidden on a bookshelf behind a series of coffee-table photograph books of remote island locations. The combination took all of two minutes and twelve seconds to crack.

I held my breath and gingerly opened the small metal door. My heart pounded and I let myself hope, just a little, that I could wrap this all up now by finding the money Eli stole in the form of a velvet pouch full of diamonds.

Not wanting to risk a flashlight, I reached into the shadowed safe and felt around, finding a passport. Logical place to put it. Then I reached deep and felt something else, drawing it out into the moonlight to take a look.

Holy smokes. *That* was what Eli chose to keep in his safe?

With no time to contemplate the man's reasoning, I pocketed the item, closed and locked the safe, then arranged

the books in front of it as they'd been before. I slipped out of the office and shut the door, then crept down the hall and left the way I'd come in.

Leave no trace.

That was my mantra, and I'd succeeded tonight...almost.

I'd taken something from the safe. It was ill-advised, but I *had* to show Ruby.

DIAMOND GOODIES

Ruby

“Come see all the goodies,” Willow said, clasp ing my arm and whisking me toward the back of the house, where the party noise originated. “Have you heard of Just For Her?”

I blushed. Of course I’d heard of the premiere sex-toy company. I owned a few of their products too.

“Yes. I’m familiar with them,” I said dryly.

We reached the living room, where a dozen or so women were laughing and drinking and checking out sex toys of every style and color. This was not what I’d imagined when Jake had said coming here could be dangerous. It *was* a risk...to my psyche.

I took a deep breath, remembering that I was behind enemy lines and I needed to make the most of it. This was my chance to learn everything I could. Keep my eyes and ears open.

“Willow, look! This one has ten speeds, and it simulates a tongue,” a bleached blonde shouted to the hostess. Her forehead had been Botoxed so smooth that it appeared to have been ironed on.

“That’s one of the best-selling models,” said an authoritative-sounding brunette with cat-eye glasses. She must have been the sex-toy representative. “It will last up to ten hours before recharging.”

“Oh, that sounds amazing,” Willow purred in that sultry voice. “I should try that with my sweetie.”

Sweetie?

AKA Eli?

Ew.

“Is that champagne?” I pointed to a random bottle on the coffee table, desperate for a change of topic. “I’m parched.”

“Someone get this woman a champagne,” shouted the blonde, pointing at me.

The next second I had a glass of bubbly in my hand, and the one after that, I’d downed the beverage. I hadn’t planned to drink, but my stepfather had inadvertently—I hoped—invited me to a sex-toy party, so down the hatch.

“I’m Bianca,” said the bleached blonde, patting the seat beside her. “You’re Eli’s daughter, right?”

“Stepdaughter,” I corrected as I took the seat.

The server swooped in and deposited a fresh tray of appetizers on the coffee table. Willow went straight for the olives, with fingers like a pelican’s beak, and popped one into her mouth.

“Tell us everything,” Bianca said to me, cooing. “He talks about you all the time.”

A chorus of women agreed, and Willow nodded. “He was so excited to see you earlier this week at Tristan’s.”

So excited that he invited me to dinner then didn’t show? But I didn’t say that. It wouldn’t garner any trust or info from this group, and I needed both. While the rest of the women oohed and aahed as they stroked pearl-filled rabbits and dual-action toys, I played my part. “I was so happy to see him too.” I sounded believably euphoric thanks to the champagne on an empty stomach. I turned to Willow and smiled like we were best of friends. “It sounds like you’re both having the time of your lives here.”

Willow placed her hand on her heart. “Oh, we are.”

I imitated her happy sigh. “I can only imagine. You have the club, and Eli told me about all your charitable work.” Then, I took a leap. Champagne courage and all. “And of course, the property you’re investing in too.”

Eli had said nothing of the sort. But I wanted to prove I was a worthy partner. To dig up some details all on my own.

Willow’s eyes lit up and she crossed her fingers. “I’m praying the deal goes through. When it does, I’ll be able to expand my gallery and showcase even more world-class art.”

“That sounds fantastic!” I declared. Imitating her was easier with some champagne in my system. Jake would be impressed. Sexy, smart, hands-off Jake.

“Yes. I do hope so. I’ve sold several paintings recently from an artist named Lynx. He has such a brilliant concept of what the world can be.”

“How so?” I asked.

“He believes in simplicity. That the world and its challenges can be reduced to geometric shapes. Eli and I *so* agree with him. He’s on a retreat in California to meditate on his newest series.”

Ah, so that explained the art in the club. “Is that where Eli is tonight?” I asked. “At the gallery?”

Willow waved away my leading question. “Oh, he got called away to the club. Had to check on a security issue there. You can never be too careful, you know.”

A security issue, hmm? Willow was a blessed fount of information. Pull the string and she talked. “Of course. Better safe than sorry,” I said.

Willow patted my knee. “He’ll be back soon. He won’t want to stay away long when he knows I’m shopping for new *friends*.” At my blank look, she wiggled her well-groomed eyebrows at the array of vibrators.

No. Just no. I needed air. And maybe a way to rewind my night to a time when I didn’t know about the battery-operated

friends invited to Eli's bedroom. "Excuse me for a minute. I need the ladies' room."

"Just head through there and down the hall." Willow gestured, the ring on her left hand sparkling.

Following her instructions, I passed through the kitchen and turned down a long hallway. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the coast was clear. It was, but that cat was following me. At least, it felt that way. As I walked she, or he, stayed several feet behind, stopping when I stopped. Cats were so weird.

I glanced in a few doorways, noting the layout of the house. If I were a safe, where would I be? "Do you know?" I whispered to the cat.

The pretty animal stretched its front legs, downward dogging it. The collar jingled, then shone in the light. Jade was her name. The jewel theme ran strong in Eli. What a coincidence that he'd found my mother, a woman who'd named her daughter after a jewel too.

"Any idea where it could be, Jade?" I asked again.

She yawned.

Well, then. The cat wasn't going to turn over. Not a surprise.

Opening one of the doors that lined the hall, I leaned in and scanned the shadowed room.

When I straightened and closed the door, footsteps sounded behind me.

I jumped, like a teen camp counselor in a horror movie. My pulse did too, and I put my hand flat over my chest. It was the sex-toy mistress, who'd been coming down the hall from the living room. The cat was gone.

"Hi, Ruby," she said.

"Hi..." I fished in my memory for her name.

"Monica," she supplied with a smile. "I was just getting some more goodies from my car. I didn't expect them to sell

so quickly.”

“I guess you can never have too many pearl-encrusted dildos,” I said, somehow keeping a straight face.

Monica smiled. “If you decide to buy something, I’ll happily give you a discount, as you’re the daughter of the house.”

“Stepdaughter,” I said reflexively. “But thank you. I’m good though.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, each clearly waiting for the other to move.

“Were you looking for the bathroom?” Monica pointed to the door across from where I stood. “It’s that door there.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t have a reason to delay, so I ducked into the half-bath, taking my time, giving the saleswoman an opportunity to get to her car and back to the living room.

But when I opened the bathroom door, Monica was there in the hall, waiting to walk with me back to the party but this time, she was holding a large white box in her hands.

Did she think I couldn’t find it on my own?

“Here,” the woman said, reaching into the box and taking out a black velvet bag. “A party favor for you.”

I shook my head. “Oh, no. I can’t.”

“Please,” she urged, staring at me intently over her glasses. “Willow wants everyone to have a gift.”

Like her fiancé. They were both big gift givers, evidently. And it seemed easier to accept than to protest. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Enjoy,” she said. “Ready to go back to the living room?”

“As ever,” I replied faux cheerily, because what else could I do? Together we returned to the throng of women.

Bianca stood up when Monica came in and asked excitedly, “Did you bring it?”

“I did,” Monica said in a sex-kitten voice. Setting the cardboard box on the table, she took out a smaller one that looked distinctly like the box that had held my diamond when Eli had given it to me. I perked up with interest when she popped open the velvet jeweler’s box.

All the guests gasped. Was Willow giving out diamonds as party favors? What kind of world did Eli inhabit?

“Oh, it’s gorgeous,” one of the women said.

Blinding was another word that worked. The stone glittered in the overhead light. And it was bigger than the jewel around Willow’s neck.

But it looked fake.

Because it *was* fake—rhinestone studded and shaped like...

Willow pulled the item out of the box, squealing happily. “Oh, I’ve had my eye on this one.”

Ugh. Three over-shares and you are out.

Or rather, *I* was out.

I smacked my head as if remembering something. “I forgot I have a late-night dive. Must go.” Not waiting on anyone to tell me goodbye, I rushed out of there like my tail was on fire.

* * *

I marched down the stone path and around the front of the house, and walked smack-bang into a firmly muscled chest.

Jake steadied me before I stumbled backward. “Did you find the jelly beans?” he asked with a teasing smirk.

“No,” I huffed. “Willow hijacked me into a TMI party with a gaggle of women in bandage dresses shopping for dolphins, rabbits, and butt plugs. When I managed to get away, I was stymied by a sex-toy mistress, who followed me to the ladies’ room—”

“She didn’t join you in there, did she?”

“No, but she waited outside to give me the most awkward incentive gift ever.”

Jake raised his eyebrows. “Tell me more.”

I shoved the velvet pouch at him. “Go ahead. Look inside.”

He opened the drawstring, took out the item, and held it up to the light spilling from the house. “That’s what we call sneaking in through the back door.”

Despite my frustration, I laughed. “For a minute there, I thought we’d uncovered where the diamonds were. On...butt plugs. But this gem is fake.”

“I’m fascinated to know that someone is making gold-plated dildos and jewel-encrusted vibrators.”

I headed for the car, running a hand through my hair, like that could erase my frustration over the whole damn night. The party had been a total bust. The dinner invite had amounted to nothing. “And I’m aggravated to think we’ll have to return to search another day. Plus, my champagne buzz is nearly gone, so I could really use a Cherry Popsicle.”

“Is that code for a ruby-encrusted—”

I was not in the mood for innuendo. “No. There’s a bar along the beach that serves frozen cherry margaritas with a block of cherry ice that you can suck like a popsicle when you’re done. I need one to erase the image of my stepfather’s fiancée holding *that thing*.” I gestured at the black pouch.

“Fair enough. Let’s go.” We resumed the walk to the car, and he asked, “What’s a bandage dress?”

“It’s a dress that’s very clingy and tight.”

“Sounds uncomfortable.”

“So does a diamond-encrusted dildo.”

He laughed and opened the car door. When he got in on the other side, he smiled, like a cat who’d caught the tastiest mouse in the universe.

“What’s that grin for?” I asked.

“I have good news.” Mischief lit his eyes and brightened his handsome face. “We don’t have to go back. The diamonds aren’t in the house.”

I gaped at him. “How do you know?”

“Because you did an excellent job on your recon of the first floor.”

What the hell was he talking about? I furrowed my brow. The man could be seriously cagey at times. “What do you mean? Just tell me, Jake,” I said, eager to know.

He shrugged happily, a little smugly too. But damn, he wore smug well. “What I mean is while you were scouting the ground level, I took care of the second floor.”

My jaw dropped. I needed details, stat. “What? When?”

Hooking a thumb toward the moonlit house, he said, “I climbed in through the second-story window and checked out Eli’s office while you kept everyone busy downstairs.”

Damn him. I knew it. He didn’t trust me.

“You were in there the whole time I was downstairs? Did you know you were going to do that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted you to act natural,” he said, all casual and cool.

“You tricked me again!” I protested, my voice pitching higher. I was grateful we were in the car, parked at the end of the block, and no one could hear me. This man riled me up.

“I like to think of it as protecting you,” he said, and his tone was so confident, so in control, and it pissed me off.

He really thought I couldn’t handle this investigation. Folding my arms, I stared him down. “Protecting me from what exactly? From myself?”

“From inadvertently letting on that your partner was sneaking around upstairs and cracking open your stepdad’s safe,” he said.

I huffed. “This was exactly my concern earlier. That you don’t trust me. That you think I can’t do this,” I said, flapping

my hand at the house down the street. “You’re the expert and I’m the amateur, and you don’t even tell me what’s going on.”

He grabbed my wrist, curled his hand around it, and gently squeezed. “Ruby, I didn’t tell you because I do trust you.”

Huh? What? That made no sense. “Do you hear yourself, Jake?”

“Yes. And ask yourself this—do you honestly think I would break into a home, sneak around, and crack a safe if I *didn’t* trust my partner? Trust her implicitly, and with my fucking life? I couldn’t tell you because I needed it to work flawlessly. But I also couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t trusted you to do your part. *To provide cover*. Do you have any idea how hard it is to provide cover?”

He stared at me with such intensity that I was kind of turned on. A shiver ran down my legs. “No. How hard?”

“It’s one of the toughest things. To go about your business, like you did, and protect someone else. You did that for *me*.”

“I didn’t even know I was doing it,” I whispered, suddenly feeling disarmed. Maybe even swayed by his point.

“I know,” he said, his tone softening, like he was imploring me to see his full heart and mind. “Because I knew you would do your thing. You would chat with the ladies. You would scope out the situation. I trusted you’d do everything so I could canvas the top floor. And you did. *Thank you*.”

I was quiet for a beat, absorbing his points. “You’re welcome,” I said, unsure if I meant it at first, then thinking I mostly did. I was also wildly intrigued. “So you broke in? You were sneaking around?”

“I did. I climbed a tree. Then jumped on the roof. Opened the window.”

Why was that sexy? I didn’t even know, but the images were surprisingly hot. Jake sneaking into the home, Jake surveying the upstairs, Jake being all subterfuge-y and daring.

The man was a risk-taker by nature, and I suppose by duty.

I was dying for every detail, even though I was jealous he got to do that while I was trapped with the sex-toy ladies. “What did you find? You’re looking too pleased with yourself not to have found something,” I said, and I couldn’t suppress my smile.

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a chocolate bar with a wrapper from Ecuador. “He has a few dozen of these in his safe, along with his passport. I grabbed one from the top. Didn’t want to take more and risk him noticing their absence.”

I groaned, *are you kidding me* style. “For real? He had chocolate bars in his safe?”

He furrowed his brow, perhaps picking up on my exasperation. “Is that because of the cocoa farm he invested in or does your reaction mean something else?”

I shook my head. I had to hand it to Eli. “It’s a”—I sighed—“a running joke. A family joke. Cole and I used to take his chocolate bars when we were kids. We’d sneak bites from the cupboard and try to wrap them back up, and he busted us.”

Jake chuckled, covering his mouth like he knew he shouldn’t laugh. “You did?”

“Well, yeah. They were good. He has good taste.”

“And you thought he wouldn’t notice?”

I rolled my eyes. “We were kids. And he said he’d need to start hiding chocolate in a safe. And eventually he did. But he would then get other bars for us,” I said, and I both hated and loved this memory. It was sweet, how he’d given us our own chocolate stash, and funny too, how he’d locked up his special ones in a safe. Now it was just tainted.

And it felt a little like a slap in the face.

But what was it he’d said about his chocolates? He’d called them his *special bars*.

I studied the chocolate, tapping the bar. “I think this is the cocoa farm that went belly-up. I bet they were his most special bars.”

I breathed out a long sigh. We didn't go to Eli's tonight to find chocolate, so that was frustrating. But on the bright side, while we hadn't found the diamonds, we'd narrowed down the search. "At least we know where the diamonds aren't," I said, hopeful.

"And that's just part of the job," he said, then squeezed my hand. "Especially if you have a good partner."

I smiled, believing him at last.

He was a pretty damn good partner too.

SWEET THINGS

Jake

Ruby sucked on a Cherry Popsicle, and my life would never be the same. How had I gone thirty-eight years without witnessing something so outrageously sexy? But at least I was lucky enough to see it now, and I never wanted to look away.

As we grabbed a table at the edge of the starlit beach, my eyes were glued to the sight of her tongue swirling along the length of the cherry ice. Maybe it was the talk of sex toys, or the conversation about tight dresses, or maybe it was the moment we'd shared in the car—when I'd implored her to understand all she'd done for me. Whatever it was, I couldn't think about a damn thing but this woman. Especially as she sat across the table from me, licking the frozen treat, rolling her eyes, and moaning in culinary delight.

Really, I should have focused on work and only work. I should have rolled up my proverbial sleeves and devised a plan for what was next. But this strong, fierce, and sexy-as-sin woman had all my attention. Getting involved with someone while on a job was a mistake, but when I was with her, I didn't think. I felt. And my body thought it was a very good idea to take her into my arms.

I tried to keep the mood light though. Focus on the simple things.

“Enjoying yourself?” I asked as I finished my mint chocolate chip ice cream.

She waggled the popsicle my way. “This is heavenly. You really should have one.”

“Yeah, I should. But one of us needs to drive. So by all means, continue fellating the popsicle.”

“I do believe I will.” She drew the popsicle in deep and sucked long and hard.

Groaning, I scrubbed a hand over my jaw. “You’re killing me.”

She cocked her head, affecting a quizzical look. So innocent, so faux innocent. “How am I killing you, Jake? I thought we were sticking to *just work?*”

Like either one of us had been good at that. “And we have an excellent track record at that, don’t we?”

“We are the best at it,” she said, and added a lick for good measure. At least she was having a good time. Some of her earlier tension seemed to have drained away. I was glad to see her in a better mood, a lighter mood. She looked good feisty, but she looked damn good when she was having fun.

A night breeze blew by, and strands of her hair danced lazily around her shoulders. I could have looked away, contemplated the crescent moon pouring its light over the water or the tiki torches that flickered around the bar on the sugary white sand.

But she made it near impossible to think of anything other than...her.

I had to try though. I drew a deep soldiering breath and called on all my focus, casting nighttime desires out to sea. “Let’s talk about what we know and what we need to know. What we’ve learned.”

“We’ve learned my stepdad has some most excellent chocolate bars from Ecuador. At least, I suspect they’re excellent, given his taste.”

She still seemed to be unwinding, and needing to, so I said, “Want to try some, sweetheart?”

Her eyes twinkled. “You bet I do.”

It was like we were doing something naughty, breaking into the special stash.

“He always did have good treats.” She pointed to the bar. “You get to have some too since you were so studly tonight, scaling that roof.”

I laughed. “Yes, I was a big stud, seizing chocolate.”

“And I’ve noticed you like sweet things.”

I couldn’t resist. “Very, *very* sweet things.”

Holding out her hand, she beckoned with her fingers. “Chocolate, please.”

I unwrapped a corner and handed a square over. Setting aside the ice pop, Ruby bit into it, and I did the same with mine. Mmm, wow. It melted on my tongue. “This is incredible.”

“It’s decadent,” she said as she finished it.

“No wonder he keeps a secret stash locked up.” We ate a little more, since tonight was apparently for sweet things. When we finished, I said, “So there are no diamonds in the safe.”

She nodded intensely. “Which means we keep looking for them.”

I saw real determination in her eyes, heard it in her voice. I liked how much she wanted to help her mother. And I liked the fiery spark that lit her up when she thought about it.

“Yup. We’ll keep on it. Now, tell me what you learned at the sex-toy party,” I said before I got distracted by Ruby... again.

She switched to work mode quickly, and recapped what she’d uncovered about the gallery expansion plans, as well as her stepfather’s security concerns at the club.

“My original thought was he kept the diamonds at the house and, bit by bit, batch by batch, he had been converting them into money,” I said. “But he must keep them elsewhere or he moves them in small groups. Where’s the most likely place they might be, besides the house?”

She snapped her fingers. “Kalila! She used to do some admin work for my stepdad. She’ll be at the boat party tomorrow. We can quiz her, see if she knows anything,” she said, with fresh excitement in her voice, like she was more determined than before.

“You’re on fire tonight,” I said. “Is it the Cherry Popsicle?”

“I suppose it was seeing that big diamond on Willow’s throat. Made me mad.” She traced a thoughtful pattern in the wood of the picnic table. “I still don’t want him to go to prison though.”

I held up my empty hands. “Not my job to put people behind bars. I work around the law, not for the law.”

“You’re not going to turn him in to the SEC or something?” she asked, seeming concerned.

“I work for clients—not government agencies. When I find the diamonds, I return them to their rightful owners. Andrew and the Eli Fund. Simple as that.”

She quirked up the corner of her lips, as if considering what I’d said, then nodded. “Fair enough.” Picking up her popsicle, she licked it one last time and set the stick on the table. “Okay, let’s play truth or dare.” She waved her hand to erase her words. “Wait. No. Just truth.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re still pissed that I didn’t tell you what I was planning tonight?”

She shook her head. “I’m not. But can we make a deal?”

I didn’t want to make deals before I knew what they were. “Maybe.”

“Next time, can you tell me your plans?” she asked. She was so earnest in her request, and I knew I’d hurt her by not

telling her. I'd had my reasons, true. But she wanted me to show her we were on the same team. I'd have to do that for her if we were to keep working together.

"I will."

"Good. So," she said, rubbing her palms, her lips curving as if in anticipation. "How was it? Sneaking into his house?"

"Fun," I said, flashing a grin.

"Did you get a thrill out of it?" She sounded wickedly enchanted by the possibility. Maybe hooked on it.

"Honestly, yes," I said. "I love what I do. It's exciting to try to right a wrong."

Her gaze drifted to my arm, and the scar I'd recently acquired. "Speaking of righting a wrong, and truth or dare—truth again. That's not from a fishing accident, is it?"

I held up my hands in surrender and laughed.

"How did it happen? Tell the truth this time. If you even can," she said, but her tone was teasing, like we'd moved beyond her annoyance over feeling tricked. I was glad of that. Grateful to be on *this* side of the evening. Especially when she dropped her hand to my wrist and ran a finger along the scar.

Her touch unlocked me. I no longer wanted to hide who I was from her for self-protection. I wanted her to know me.

I shook my head. "Knife fight in London. Couple of lowlifes who stole a priceless antique."

"Did it hurt?" she asked.

"At the time, yes."

"And now?" she asked, running her finger along the line of raised white flesh.

My breath hitched. "No," I whispered, taking her hand in mine. "Truth or dare?"

She flashed me a grin. "Dare."

"I dare you to go for a walk on the beach with me."

"I thought we were trying to focus on *just* work."

“You mean a walk on the beach isn’t work?” I asked playfully.

“Not with you,” she said.

I couldn’t argue. Truthfully, I wanted to get to know her better. “Let’s talk more.”

I toed off my sneakers and left them on the entrance to the beach next to her flip-flops as we headed along the sand, the ocean waves gently lapping against the shore in a peaceful night rhythm. “You said you appointed yourself as a private detective for your mom. What made you want to do it?”

“Eli screwed around on her for years.”

I burned. “There’s a special place in hell for people who do that.”

“Maybe there is. The hard part is I kind of had a feeling.” She sounded a touch guilty.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“He had so many friends who were women. Maybe they were colleagues. I didn’t want to think he was cheating, that he’d hurt our family like that. I sort of hid from the truth at first myself, but even when it was clear what was going on, I wasn’t sure if I should say something or not. Was it my place to tap my mom’s shoulder and say, ‘*Mom, do you think your husband’s screwing the assistant?*’ But she learned about it on her own, and he groveled, and she tried again. But it didn’t work.”

“She’d had enough of him?”

“Yes. At that point, my brother and I were both out of the house and living on our own, so she no longer felt that obligation that I think was the biggest driving factor for her in staying with him when I was younger. They got divorced, but he’s a very shrewd man and knows how to manipulate. He was able to get away with pretty much everything and leave her with very little.”

I scoffed. Guys like that were the worst. “That’s just shitty.”

“Yup,” she said with a resigned sigh, then she stopped and ran her finger over the pendant of the silver necklace she wore. “My mom is great though. We’re really close. I basically adore her. She’s incredibly supportive of me and my business. She made this for me. That’s what she does—makes jewelry.”

Gently, I brushed my thumb across the miniature treasure chest, grazing the soft skin of her chest. “This is lovely,” I said. I wasn’t just talking about the necklace.

She swallowed and breathed a quiet *thank you*. “And look, it’s not like she’s destitute. But he took *everything*, and it just seems so wrong. She helped him start his business with money she earned from selling jewelry at craft fairs,” she said, a righteous anger edging her voice.

“It’s completely wrong. Completely unfair. Especially when she made his business and livelihood possible,” I said, agreeing.

“She’s very giving and very generous, and that’s one of the things I love about her. That’s why I came here early to try to figure out what happened with the money. Like I’m Robin Hood or something. And that’s why I want to help—” Then she stopped talking. Like she’d simply sliced off the end of the sentence.

“Are you okay?” I placed a hand on her elbow. I was unable to stop touching her.

“Why am I telling you this?” she asked, but the small smile forming on her lips gave her away. She wanted to trust me.

“Because I’m easy to talk to,” I said, hoping she believed that too. Then I turned more serious. “You haven’t mentioned your dad. Is he gone?”

“He died of a heart attack when I was three. Never really knew him.”

I squeezed her hand. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, then took a deep breath, as if the air were refueling her. “What about you? Why do you do this?”

“This is just a job for me,” I said, trying to keep my tone even as we started walking once more.

She gave me an *I call bullshit* face. “Right.”

“Just a job,” I repeated, toeing my own party line. I didn’t like to give up pieces of myself. I’d been burned before.

But Ruby was different. She was driven and kind, persistent and fierce. And she wasn’t going to let me get away with anything less, not when she’d opened up.

She stopped in her tracks and locked her gaze on mine. “Nothing is just a job,” she said, tipping her forehead to the inky black of the sea at night, starlight dancing across the water. “Take what I do. I do adventure tours because I love it. But also because the water is where I’ve always felt most at home. It makes me feel peaceful, like a part of me. The part that makes me whole.”

She shook her head, as if shaking away the memories on the gentle breeze, then shot me that sweet smile I’d grown so fond of. “So what’s your story, Jake Hawkins? It’s only fair. We partnered up, and you know my motivation. I want to know what your story is. All I really know about you is that you have two sisters and you’re some kind of a recovery specialist.”

She deserved the truth. She’d earned it too. I heaved a sigh and pointed to the sand that stretched endlessly in front of us. “Let’s keep walking.” *Walk and talk*. I didn’t often serve up a piece of myself like this, didn’t like to revisit the worst days of my life. But she’d been honest, and I owed it to her to do the same.

“I have a little brother too. There are four of us. And I do what I do because I’m good at it. Because it pays the bills. Because my older sister and I are responsible for our younger sister and younger brother. My parents were killed by a drunk driver several years ago.”

Her eyes brimmed with sympathy. “Oh no. I’m so sorry.” She reached for my arm again, wrapping her hand around it as we walked through the sand. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Long-simmering tension curled through me, winding in my veins, twisting through my blood as memories flashed before me.

The cops at the door.

The knock.

The solemn look on their faces as they took off their blue caps, came inside, and told Kate and me the news. Died on impact. The car had skidded off the road and wrapped itself around a tree.

“Kate and I were in our early thirties, but Kylie and Brandt were still teenagers.”

“That must have been so hard. Did they find the guy?”

I breathed in sharply. “Yes, but nothing happened.”

Those words—*nothing happened*—contained all my anger, all my frustration, and all my reasons.

“What do you mean?”

“The fucker got away with it. He was some twenty-three-year-old trust-fund baby, smashed out of his mind, and he lawyered up and lived his life like it never happened. I think, if memory serves,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my tone, “he did have to put in fifty hours of community service. Reshelving books at the library. I’m sure that taught him a big lesson.”

She huffed in shared frustration. “Amazing how just hiring a lawyer and fighting like an asshole can enable you to get away with stuff.” She squeezed my hand. “That’s why you do what you do,” she said, getting it, getting me.

“I guess I’ve found my own way to try to see justice done.”

“That’s amazing,” she said, a little awed.

I wasn’t sure what to do with her awe. I didn’t feel noble. I was simply a man trying to live by a code. “I’m glad you think so, Ruby,” I said, genuinely.

“I do,” she said, her voice quiet against the night. “I appreciate you sharing all that.”

Hour by hour, it had become easier to talk with her. To connect. “Thanks for listening.”

I tugged on her hand, and the serious moment started to fade away, like grains of sand pulled out to sea. I didn’t want to flip the mood to lightness or to make a joke. But I didn’t want to keep talking about hard things either. In fact, when I looked at her face, silhouetted by the moonlight, I didn’t want to talk much anymore.

The look in her eyes—inviting, vulnerable—said she didn’t either. I tipped my forehead toward a nearby lifeguard stand, unoccupied at this late hour. We closed the distance, and I backed up to it, leaned against it, feeling like we were in our own corner of the night. One I didn’t want to leave.

OTHER USES FOR LIFEGUARD STANDS

Jake

I clasped my hand over hers, pulling her closer to my body. I craved her touch, especially after our talk. I liked this woman. Liked her humor. Liked her heart. I still didn't want to get involved while I was on a job. But I couldn't stay away from Ruby.

Maybe I hadn't tried hard enough. But more likely, I just didn't want to.

I wanted her.

Badly.

"Our track record on this whole *just-work* thing is pretty bad, isn't it?" I asked, soft, seductive.

"Or it's pretty good. Depends on how you see it," she said.

"Good. Bad. Hard to say."

"Maybe we're a real good bad thing," she said.

"You feel pretty damn good against me," I said as I pressed her hand to my chest a little harder then ran it down to my stomach.

She inhaled sharply as she traced me, her touch like a torch, setting my nerves aflame.

I looked back to her face, lit by the moonlight, a siren torch above us. "You have sand here," I said, pointing to her

ear.

She ran her finger over the spot but missed.

“No. Right there.” I reached for her ear and brushed off the grains, catching a faint whiff of the coconut smell that drove me wild. *She* drove me wild. My fingers drifted into her hair and I cupped the back of her head. “What is it about you that I can’t resist? Your kisses are my undoing.”

“Then take another,” she whispered.

I kissed her on the beach by the lifeguard stand. Her lips were delicious, all cherry sweet from the popsicle. She murmured against my mouth, kissing me back with passion, and I took it. She held nothing back as she melted into my arms and pressed against me—lips, tongue, hands, hips. We were relentless in our kisses, in the grind of our bodies, in the frenzy of our touch.

And I knew I had to fuck her.

When I broke the kiss, my breath came out staggered. “Need you. Now.”

“Have me,” she whispered with heated urgency.

I groaned, thick with a lust that had to be sated. I glanced down the quiet stretch of beach then up at the empty lifeguard stand.

The hotel was a mile or so from here—one mile that felt like hundreds.

“Want a little beach adventure, sweetheart?” I asked.

Her lips parted in a delicious O. “Is this one of your recovery expert skills?”

“For you it is,” I said, then yanked her close again so she could feel the ridge of my erection. I could feel her heat. My head swam with desire. My body thrummed with lust. She ran her fingers along my jawline, tracing my stubble and brushing her thumb across my face. Even those small touches turned me on fiercely.

“Good,” she said with sweet, dirty relief. “Because I can’t wait another second.”

Filthy, gorgeous music to my ears. “I can’t either.”

This was risky, but I rolled the dice. I tugged on her hand, and we climbed the ladder up to the lifeguard stand. Wasting no time, I opened the door, letting us into the small lookout. Thank fuck it was unlocked.

“Damn, I wanted to see your lock-picking skills,” she whispered.

“Another time,” I said, shut the door, and spun her against it. There were windows all around—naturally—but enough darkness that we had some privacy. “Next time, I’m going to spread you out on a bed, kiss you properly everywhere—”

“Improperly,” she corrected as I pushed up the skirt of her dress.

“Yes. Very improperly,” I said, then took her mouth again in a harsh, needy kiss as I yanked aside the panel of her panties.

Soaked.

I broke the kiss. “Need to make you come right fucking now,” I rasped out.

“Then get inside me,” she urged.

In no time, I had a condom out of my wallet while she unzipped my shorts.

As I opened the condom, she peeled off her panties then bit the corner of her lips, looking as eager as I felt. I sheathed myself then lifted her dress again and ran my fingers across her slick heat, making sure she was ready to take me. “Mmm. Love how wet you get,” I said, praising as I stroked.

She leaned her head back, shuddering, stretching her neck, offering me her supple body. “Please,” she murmured, and it was a sin to not savor all this delicious wetness with my tongue.

But it was a sin I had to commit. “This is gonna be fast,” I said, glancing around once more to make sure the coast was still clear.

“Give it to me. Fast and hard,” she demanded.

I intended to. I hiked up her thigh, hooked her leg around my hips, and notched the head of my cock against her center. Then, I pushed in.

Just the tip at first. She gasped, a sensual sound that turned into a low moan then a carnal cry as I sank in all the way.

She trembled. “Yessss.”

She was hot and tight and fit me like a glove. “Next time,” I said as I eased out, “I’ll be slow and gentle.” I pushed in halfway. She moaned. “But now, I’m gonna be rough.”

And I thrust so deep into her that she cried out, a gorgeous, feral sound that might give us away. I covered her mouth with my hand. “Quiet as I fuck you, sweetheart,” I said.

She nodded against my hand.

Like that, I fucked her. I rocked in and out. I swiveled my hips. With each pump, her muffled cries grew more intense. Her hands curled around my shoulders, digging in. Desire crashed wildly through me as we both moved faster, building friction, seeking release.

When her noises grew louder, I let go of her mouth. “Play with your clit. Need you to come really fucking soon,” I demanded.

She obeyed, thrusting a hand between us, stroking her clit as I held her against the door, snapping my hips, driving into her, and reveling in the sweet urgency of tonight.

The need we felt for each other.

The unexpected coming together.

She chased her own orgasm, racing after it. She started to shout my name, and I covered her mouth with mine so she screamed into my lips as she came undone in a wild frenzy of silence and heat.

I kissed her cries as she tightened against my cock, her pleasure flipping the switch in me. I gave a muffled roar then followed her there with a few deep pumps. My world spun away, and I came seconds later by the ocean under the stars, stealing a hot, necessary moment with this woman named for a jewel.

* * *

I didn't want to leave her when I took her back to her hotel, but Kate had called, and I had business to tend to.

Besides, I knew it was better I didn't spend every second with Ruby, no matter what I wanted. The more time I spent with her, the harder it would be to leave her.

And I'd have to leave when this was over.

So when we reached her hotel, I kissed her gently, then said, "I already miss you."

"That's just the orgasm talking," she teased, but there was distance in her eyes.

Yeah, she knew about self-preservation too.

WHAT HAPPENS IN FLAMINGO KEY

Ruby

I didn't see him at all the next morning or afternoon—and I missed him. Weird, too, that it had taken such a short time to become that accustomed to his company. But I had prep to do for the tour, so I spent the day focused on my business and when he dropped me off last night, Jake had told me that he'd be holed up in his hotel room with paperwork all the next day. He'd rolled his eyes when he said it, and I'd teased him, saying, "Such a horrible thing for a recovery specialist to have to do."

"Bounty hunters hate paperwork," he'd grumbled before he'd kissed me goodnight.

Now, as the afternoon wound down and I got ready for the boat party, I was excited to see him. He'd pick me up in an hour, and I'd get to spend a little time with him in the water before the festivities.

While I got dressed and then headed for the beach, I thought about Jake and me and this thing between us. I wasn't sure what to call it—a tryst? An affair? A fling?—but I thought maybe we could do this. Make it work. Find a way to keep this up when we returned home. We lived close enough to each other that it was feasible.

There was, of course, the issue with my mother and Eli—we both wanted different things. But once this was resolved,

maybe we could form some kind of life together.

We were going to the boat party to ask questions and gather intel. But I'd also watch for an opportunity to ask Jake if he'd like to keep seeing each other *after the investigation was done*. And if I found the chance to ask him, I would take it.

* * *

I treaded azure-blue waters next to the yacht, looking up at Jake still on deck in his swim shorts with the early evening sun glinting off his light-brown hair. It was strange—good strange—to see him at ease while in the open like this. Since we'd met, there had been secrets and investigations and stolen moments tangled together. But few chances to just lounge in the sun.

We'd arrived early for the party, hoping to catch Kalila with some questions before the rest of the guests arrived aboard Devon's boat, still moored at the end of the pier. Since our quarry wasn't there yet, it had seemed like a good time to goof off. Just a smidge.

"C'mon," I called to Jake. "I don't bite."

He grinned down at me. "Says the woman who roots for the shark in *Jaws*."

"Okay, then. I don't bite unless you deserve it," I said, "and you ask very nicely."

"I will definitely be asking nicely tonight," he said, and that comment emboldened me too. Sure, it was a sexy comment, but it also implied we'd be spending time together.

Maybe more after we left this island. I hoped.

"Only if you catch me," I said, pushing off the hull of the boat with my feet and skimming along the shallow water. Jake dove in and gave chase. I darted away as fast as I could, but soon, he stretched one long arm and hooked my ankle. Underwater, I laughed and then popped to the surface, and so did he.

“Say it,” he demanded playfully.

“Say what?” I asked, splashing water at him.

“Say I caught the mermaid.” His smirk made me grab his waist and try to tickle him underwater. He was impervious, though, and instead he clasped his hands over mine and tugged me close. “Don’t drive me wild in the water,” he said, low and growly.

“What do you expect when you catch a mermaid?” I whispered, loving the way his fingers gripped my waist and his words were just for me. “That’s what we do.”

“I did catch her. I want her all to myself,” he said.

My breath caught. Was this all just innuendo? We’d admitted we wanted each other more than we wanted to keep things strictly business. But something had shifted when we’d talked on the beach and he’d told me about his parents and I’d told him about my mom and Eli’s cheating. Maybe his words were a sign I wasn’t overreaching with my plans to ask for more. Maybe they were a sign he was on board.

“I like when you have me,” I told him in a low whisper.

“Tonight,” he said.

That word thrummed through me like a promise as we swam and splashed some more, then climbed back up on the boat.

“I can see why you love it here,” Jake said, handing me a towel. “This place suits you. It’s beautiful, and peaceful, but also adventurous...like you.”

My heart gave a thump at the sweet compliment. That was a more-than-a-tryst compliment. Maybe? What would he say if I floated the idea of seeing each other again at home, without all the Eli stuff between us?

My name came across the water like a trumpet blast.

“Ruby!”

Delight and anticipation spun me around. I scanned the dock for a familiar face, then beamed when I spotted a woman

with bright pink hair and tattooed arms cycling along the wooden dock toward me. Her ride was a mint-green cruiser and a golden retriever mix frolicked by her side. The ultimate island girl and her dog had resurfaced.

I clambered off the boat and ran to meet her. My friend stopped pedaling, let the bike fall to the dock and closed the distance between us. When she reached me, she hugged the stuffing out of me while the retriever bounded around us, looking for a place to squeeze in to our hug.

“Chase,” she admonished the dog. “Stop acting jealous. You know you’ll get your loving when we get back home.”

I wasn’t one for hugs, but I made an exception for Kalila—and Chase.

Laughing, I stepped back. “I see no one has replaced the golden retriever in your heart.”

“He’s still my main man.” Kalila’s gaze focused behind me. “And speaking of main men, who have we got here?”

“That’s my friend Jake,” I said, trying to keep my voice casual. “Met him snorkeling.”

As Jake reached us, Kalila eyed him up and down. “Hello, there. Glad you could join us.”

“Glad I could make it.”

“What are you up to these days?” I asked Kalila. “I heard you worked for Eli and helped with his club, but Devon said you’re using that green thumb of yours now at a flower shop.”

“I did a little bit for Sapphire, but I helped out at the gallery too. That place was crazy busy when I was there.”

“They’re expanding it now,” I said nonchalantly. I was getting good at this cloak-and-dagger stuff. Casual and cool were my new middle names.

“Probably because they need room for all their precious gems.”

I blinked in surprise. No way was it that simple. I faked a laugh. “You mean actual jewels? Not some kind of exhibit?”

Kalila shrugged like we were talking about the weather. “Nope. Must have been the real thing. Eli didn’t want to leave them at home. Said the gallery was the most secure spot for them.”

How was this happening? I’d endured the sex-toy party from hell, Jake had broken into Eli’s house, and now Kalila had simply handed me this info without me even prompting?

“Did the gallery have some kind of safe?” I asked. “Maybe it was hidden, and that’s why it was more secure?”

“Hell if I know,” Kalila said. “I just overheard them talking. Maybe it was behind a painting, like in the movies. He spent a lot of time picking the frames of the art in the gallery’s office.” She tipped her forehead to the boat. “Let’s get the party started.”

As Kalila walked ahead, I turned to Jake, who looked at me with a wide-eyed stare that expressed exactly what I was feeling.

“Was that *too* easy?” he asked in a low voice.

“Do you mean, don’t trust volunteered information?”

“Something like that.”

“I’d normally say yes, except this is Kalila. I’ve known her for a long time.” I gestured after her, encompassing her lack of artifice and her what-you-see-is-what-you-get-ness. “She’s kind of just like that. She...well, shares. She doesn’t hide things.”

“People like that are the best. And that means we’ll have to check out the gallery very, very soon.”

Heat sparked in me. I was already turned on picturing him scaling a wall, rappelling in on an electrical line, being all sexy and capable and clever. “You mean I might have another chance to see your safe-cracking skills in action?”

“If you’re lucky,” he said, wagging his brows.

I laughed and followed Kalila’s most straightforward advice. *Let’s get this party started.* Grabbing my mesh bag, I headed for the boat’s bathroom, changed out of my bikini and

into a cute sundress, then twisted my hair into a bun, letting it dry in the warm air.

Time for a party with friends.

* * *

Four hours later, the sun had fallen, the moon had risen, and I was enjoying the view. The water, the man, and the ink on one of his strong arms. The social setting inspired possibilities along the lines of the one I'd been entertaining earlier. Jake and me. Tonight, tomorrow, and beyond.

During the party, I hung out on the deck near the railing. While the boat bobbed gently in the water by the marina, I looked out at the inky-black sea beyond the harbor. Earlier I'd spent time chatting with Tanice and her new girlfriend—and yes, Tanice doted on her—along with Devon, Kalila, and Reid, and sometimes Jake, though I was careful to give him space too. He was there with me, but he navigated the social currents just fine, and I didn't want to be clingy.

Maybe now, though, was the chance I'd been looking for to ask about us, and home, and making this thing work. I'd last seen him going below deck, either to the galley or the head.

“Bet you'll miss this place when you leave,” Reid said amiably just as I was near the top of the steps.

I froze, remaining just out of sight. Maybe this was my chance to find out if Jake was looking for more.

Jake chuckled, but I caught a touch of sarcasm in his laugh. “It's gorgeous and all, but I'll be glad to be back home.”

Understandable. I wanted this Eli business done with too. I wanted to be with Jake without the tension of the investigation between us. But what was that tone?

“Yeah?” asked Reid. “You won't miss anything? The sunsets and beaches? Or *anyone*?”

The slightest good-natured emphasis on that last word let me know that my friends hadn't missed the chemistry between

Jake and me.

Jake's pause was long enough to make me peer into the galley where the guys were standing. His back was to me, but he took a long pull of his beer. "I find what happens on Flamingo Key is best left on Flamingo Key."

What. The. Hell.

That was what he thought of me? Like I was just a fling to leave behind in the islands? Something forgettable, or worse, shameful?

Well, fuck my daydream that this island affair would become more. Fuck island trysts. Fuck them hard.

* * *

By the time ten p.m. rolled around, I'd had enough. I said goodbye to my friends; tapped Jake on the shoulder, since he was in the midst of another long chat with Reid, and told him I was taking off. Whatever sweetness I'd felt in the water earlier had fizzled. I was foolish to have entertained thoughts of trysts, and trust, and letting a man with his own agenda into my heart.

He shot me a quizzical look, beer bottle in hand.

"I'm tired," I muttered, and headed onto the dock.

Seconds later, he caught up with me. "Hey. You okay?"

I shrugged.

"That's a no," he said.

"Maybe it's a yes." I needed space from him and me. I was in a mood.

He kept pace with me as I strode down the dock toward land. "You seem annoyed."

"Very observant."

"Honestly, Ruby. What's wrong?"

I waved a hand dismissively. “I just need to call it a night.” I was essentially race-walking now, driven by my hurt feelings to get away from him. To spend the night alone. “We can come up with an art gallery plan tomorrow, right? Isn’t that what’s important?”

“Sure. Of course.” He matched my pace without any problem, which was almost as frustrating as how easily he shifted gears. Obviously he’d have no trouble shifting gears from our *tryst* before he left it behind.

“Did you enjoy the party?” I asked. “And your conversation with Reid?”

He stopped in his tracks and grabbed my arm, wrapping strong fingers gently around me. “What are you talking about?”

Why be tactful? Clearly I wasn’t going to see him again after we found the diamonds. What difference did it make? “You tell me, Mister What Happens on Flamingo Key stays on Flamingo Key.”

His brow knitted as he seemed to puzzle that out. Then it clicked, and he said my name on a frustrated sigh. “Ruby.”

“Well, you made us seem like nothing to Reid,” I said, crossing my arms.

“I don’t know him. I wasn’t going to tell my personal business to a stranger. You want to know why I said that?”

More than anything. “Yes, I do.”

He stepped closer, but he didn’t touch me. “Because I am breaking all my rules by doing this with you, and it’s private. This thing between us is private. It’s nobody’s business but yours and mine.”

My chest dipped.

This man.

How could he go from dismissing me to making my heart flip? But there he was, doing it again. “You sure about that?” I asked, more quietly this time, more vulnerable too.

“So goddamn sure,” he said. “So sure that I don’t need to blab to a stranger how I feel about you.”

Oh god. I was a jerk for doubting us based on an overheard comment. “I’m sorry,” I said.

He smirked. “You wear possessiveness well. It’s sexy.”

I laughed, but then I replayed the last few things he said. *How I feel*. I couldn’t resist. “How *do* you feel?” I asked, nervously, hopefully.

He stepped closer to me and gently took hold of my bare arms. I trembled, feeling so right there with him. “This is how I feel,” he said, his green gaze holding mine intensely. “Every time I think of you when I should be focused on the job, every time I touch you, it feels right. I broke my cardinal rule—don’t get involved while on a job—to be with you.”

I felt like I was floating on a new wild hope—of him, of us, of tonight. “I can’t stop thinking about you,” I admitted.

“Join the club, sweetheart,” he said, then ran his thumb along my lower lip, touching me like I was precious and like I was the object of all his desires.

Now wasn’t the time to ask him to date. Now was the time for something else. Something I was sure we both desperately needed and wanted.

A first.

“Would you spend the night with me?” I asked.

“Yes. As long as we leave right this fucking second,” he said.

I was running off the dock in no time.

SHOW OFF

Ruby

Up the stairs. Down the hall. Almost there. At the door to my room, Jake's lips were on my neck, making me shiver. His hands were in my hair, turning me on wildly. He couldn't stop touching me, and I didn't want him to. I wanted his hands everywhere. Loved how he was relentless in his quest to be as close to me as possible. My entire body vibrated with need.

As I reached into my purse for the key card, he scorched a trail of kisses along the back of my neck that made my knees go weak. I grasped the doorframe so I wouldn't stumble.

"You keep doing that right now, I may not even be able to get the door open," I said, my hand slipping as I tried to slide the card over the lock.

"Let me help," he said, taking the key and sliding it over.

"Showing off your skills again?"

"No. Showing off how much I want to get inside this room and have you," he said, his tone rough and commanding. He pushed open the door.

The card fell somewhere on the floor. Who knew? Who cared? I was alone in my room with him at last. The air-conditioning whirred faintly, and the moon glowed through the glass door of the balcony. Like last night in the lifeguard stand, he backed me up against the wall. I kicked off my flip-flops and dropped my mesh bag.

“Can’t wait,” he said, as if I needed any explanation as to why we wouldn’t make it to the bed.

He planted a searing kiss on my lips that sent the temperature in me higher. He broke the kiss and traveled down my body, past my breasts and belly. He was close, so close to where I wanted him again and I ached. Simply ached.

“Beautiful,” he murmured as he kneeled on the floor, pushed up my skirt, and reached for the waistband of my pink cotton panties. A pulse beat between my legs. In one quick move, he pulled my panties to my ankles. I’d barely stepped out of them before he had molded his hands to the inside of my thighs and kissed me there.

Right there.

Where I wanted him. Where I craved him.

Oh god, it felt so damn good. I cried out from the instantaneous crash of pleasure in every corner of my body. Closing my eyes, I gave in to the wild sensations racing through me. He kissed my wet pussy, flicking his tongue across my sensitive clit, then he lapped me up.

My hands shot into his hair. Quickly, we set a rhythm. I rocked against his face, my fingers tightening in his hair as he kissed and savored and then devoured my pussy. His tongue swirled around my clit, and he sucked hard and hungrily. He thrust his tongue inside and I gasped, pleasure whirling around me recklessly as I raced toward bliss. Seeing it, chasing it, seeking it out.

Close. So damn close.

“That’s right. Come on my face, sweetheart,” he urged, then returned his attention to my pussy.

I rocked against his mouth, and he moaned as he consumed my pleasure. His sounds were the sexiest noises I’d ever heard, the soundtrack of his endless desire.

They were all I needed.

I shattered, riding his face like that. A chorus of *oh gods* echoed in the night as aftershocks of pleasure rippled through

every damn cell in my body.

He rose, cupped the back of my head, and arched a playful eyebrow. “Now, come on my cock.”

Well, I liked the sound of that. I breathed out hard, still riding the waves of a powerful orgasm. “Take it out and let me have that beautiful dick again.”

In seconds, we stripped off the rest of our clothes, and I fell back onto the bed, watching his strong frame as he rolled on a condom.

I could get used to that sight.

Oh yes, I could.

SKILLS AND STORIES

Jake

She'd been under my skin all week, and every encounter had amped up my want. Every touch, every taste, every goddamn moment with Ruby. In and out of bed. Every narrow escape, every second of our stakeouts.

All of it.

I wanted her more and more. Now, that desire ran deeper, beyond the physical. I cared for her so much more than I should, more than I had room for in my life. But I was ignoring all those risks tonight.

I'd been ignoring them all along, swimming farther and farther from shore with her.

I climbed over her, spread those beautiful legs, then rubbed my aching cock against her slick heat, my breath hissing at that first delirious contact. "Even better than last night," I said, then slid into her.

More intense than last night too. We fit perfectly.

She gasped, her mouth falling open. She looked so deliciously sexy like that, and so vulnerable. That was what undid me—how much I wanted *all* of her.

"It was so hard to leave you last night. I don't know why I try to resist you. It's the hardest thing I've done," I admitted as

I filled her, taking a beat to linger in the sheer pleasure of being inside her.

“Don’t resist me,” she whispered, soft and vulnerable.

“I won’t.” I pulled back then thrust into her again, her eyes going hazy with lust.

She moaned my name, the sound of that one syllable so wanton, so needy. “Deeper,” she panted.

I thrust harder, filling her all the way.

Her cry was animalistic.

“Like that?”

“Yes, god yes,” she gasped. “More.”

“Anything you want,” I said, and her need sent the lust in me on a high-speed chase through my bones.

I craved her pleasure fiercely, with an intensity that surprised me. No, it wasn’t just intensity. It was a damn obsession. I was obsessed with making her cry out in ecstasy again. I reached for her thigh and wrapped her legs around me. I drove deeper like that, electricity surging in my veins.

Her nails dug into my shoulders, a sign she was close. I was learning her signs. I wanted to be a goddamn expert in them. I maneuvered a hand between her legs, sliding a finger against her. With that touch, her pants turned fevered, her moans frenzied. “Yes, coming,” she cried.

Then she unleashed my name. Hungry, heated, and nothing had ever sounded so good.

Bliss. Fucking bliss.

And yet, how about one more?

I slowed my pace, gripped her hips, and rolled us over. I was on my back, and she straddled me. “Now ride me, sweetheart. Use my dick to come again.”

She smiled like she couldn’t believe her luck. *Same here.*

Then she rose up and down on my dick like she was having a field day with it. I thrust up as deep as I could,

hoping to hit that magic spot inside her that would send her over the edge again.

Because hell, I was nearly there myself.

“Fuck. I can’t hold back,” I muttered, and I stopped trying. The base of my spine ignited, my muscles tensing as lust stormed through me, taking no prisoners.

As my climax crashed into me, she cried out again, fucking me fearlessly till she came hard too. She collapsed on me, murmuring incoherent sounds of bliss.

I was so damn happy.

I lay next to her, hot, sweaty, panting, and sated as we floated down.

She kissed me gently. Soft, slow, lingering.

“I’m staying the night,” I said. She’d already invited me earlier. But I needed to say it again, so she’d know how much I wanted to be here. Couldn’t imagine being elsewhere.

“You sure are,” she said.

We didn’t fall asleep right away. Talking seemed easier in the afterglow of great sex. We talked idly about work—she told me about a favorite dive trip in the Bahamas and I shared my Stradivarius story with her as well as more details about the knife fight in London. When I finished, she ran her fingers once more against the scar on my forearm and whispered sweetly, “I like this. It’s sexy. It says you’re rugged.”

“You like your men rugged, Ruby?” I asked, brushing a hand through her soft hair.

She shrugged, snuggling closer in my arms. I pressed my nose to her hair, inhaling her, relishing this moment.

“I do like rugged men,” she said. “It says you can do things. My ex did nothing. But you—you work hard, and I like that.”

I smiled. “I try. I like what I do, and I like that it lets me take care of my family.”

Her contented sigh worked under my skin, wove through me, seducing me. If I wasn't careful, I'd start having feelings for her.

Having *more* feelings for her.

Because who was I fooling? The way my heart tripped just being near her said that ship had sailed.

"This is wild," she said, gesturing from me to her. "And it's everything we said we shouldn't do."

I kissed her forehead. "I know," I said softly, letting a sliver of vulnerability slip through. I couldn't find my resistance tonight, and I was done searching for it. "Seems pointless to fight this right now," I said softly, running a thumb over her chin. "You have your hooks in me."

She mimed latching onto me, and I laughed then wrapped an arm around her. She felt so damn good in my arms. So right. She wasn't a bit like Rosalinda. She wasn't a mercenary. She wasn't conniving. Ruby had so much at stake, and she only wanted justice. She only wanted to do the right thing. None of this was remotely similar to the Medici job, and realizing that made what I wanted to say next easier. I took a deep, fueling breath, then laid it out. "What do you say we give in and enjoy this for the rest of the time we're here?"

She beamed, like I'd said the perfect thing. Maybe she'd been hoping for that too.

"Are either of us still resisting?" she asked, tap-dancing her fingers across my chest. "It feels like we'd be acknowledging what we're already doing."

"That's just semantics." I held my breath for just an instant. "Is that okay?"

"I like working with you, and I like the way you work on orgasms for me."

I chuckled deeply, more relieved than I could admit. "Excellent. Count on more. Because I am enjoying this. I'm enjoying *you* so much. More than I ever expected to," I said, then kissed her once more.

Soon, darkness cloaked us, and the peaceful, easy feeling of her lying in my arms almost made me forget why I was there.

The job. The jewels. The bounty I was hunting.

I fell asleep thinking of diamonds and Ruby, Ruby and diamonds, and soon the two blurred together.

HONEY

Ruby

Early the next morning, Jake and I parked ourselves on the end of the bed and made a plan to investigate the art gallery. Even without Kalila's candid mentions of Eli and his diamonds, the gallery was the logical place to look after Jake's recon of the house and club had turned up nothing but some criminally delicious chocolate.

I pulled up street-view maps on my laptop, and Jake sketched a rough floor plan and described the place with detail that shouldn't have surprised me.

"All the art on display in the public gallery is frameless. No hiding a safe behind those," he said.

"So the safe has to be in a storage room or office."

He tapped his pen on the notepad. "What was it Kalila said? Eli spent a lot of time looking at or talking about frames?"

"Something like that," I confirmed, watching the theories churn behind his eyes.

"What if the diamonds aren't behind the frames, but *inside* the frames?" He flipped to a clean page and started drawing again. "In the club, the frames were clunky and out of proportion to the artwork."

My heart sped up, racing my brain to put together the clues. “Clunky like they could be hollow inside?”

He nodded, the gleam in his eyes betraying his excitement. “Yep. Hollow enough to hold a bunch of diamonds.”

We grinned at each other for another few seconds, then put our heads together to figure out how to get into the gallery office to check our theory.

By the time the sun was fully up and shining through the sliding glass door of the balcony, we had a plan.

Jake’s stomach rumbled, and I raised my eyebrows. “I have a crazy idea,” I stage-whispered.

“About how to get into the art gallery and find the diamonds?”

“No.” I patted his flat belly. “About breakfast. Let’s get some room service. This place isn’t fancy, but it has good eggs and toast. And they also have these little jars of honey that are weirdly amazing.”

“Sold,” he said. “Who could resist weirdly amazing honey?”

A half hour later, a cart squeaked outside the door. I heard a knock on another door.

Hmm. I’d better let them know we’d ordered room service.

“I wonder if they got the wrong room,” I said, popping up from the bed. I went to the door and peeked down the hall.

Outside another room stood a waiter with a tray and two plates of eggs and toast, studying a paper docket intensely.

I waved to him. “Good morning. Are those for us?”

“Oops,” he said with an apologetic smile. “I went to the wrong room.”

“No big deal. I’ll happily take those off your hands.”

He walked over to me and brought the food inside, setting it on a table by the door. Stepping into the hall, I signed the

check, charging the food to my room, then Jake and I enjoyed a delicious breakfast on the balcony.

He held up a cup of coffee in a toast. “To our island tryst.”

I raised my cup as well. Did I want something more and longer? Yes. But I was happy to enjoy our island affair for the time being.

“To being partners,” I said.

“To trusting your partner,” he said, his gaze fixed on me, telling me I could trust him.

“To three orgasms.”

“Make it four next time.” He downed some of his coffee, then leaned over and kissed me, lingering, his lips exploring mine like it was the first time. A shiver of excitement raced through me. The kiss turned hotter after we finished breakfast, and he pulled me on top of him in the deck chair, and I rode him like that on the balcony to another fantastic climax.

A little while later, he tapped his watch. “I should go. I need to talk to Kylie and help her get some things sorted out tutoring-wise.”

“I’ve got some things on my plate too. I’m doing a stingray tour with Devon for two hours, but I’ll see you at noon.”

After a quick goodbye, I took a long, hot shower, replaying the night and the morning and what might come in the afternoon.

I turned off the water, toweled dry, applied some sunscreen, and slipped into my royal blue bikini. As I was pulling a light-blue sundress over that, some small, almost insignificant detail caught my attention out of the corner of my eye.

The door to the safe didn’t look closed.

I walked over to it, my heart pounding hard enough to leap into my throat. I knew I’d locked the safe after the last time I’d checked on my diamond. I was dead certain. With my pulse

spiking in worry, I reached for the small door. I barely touched the handle, and it swung open.

The safe was empty. My diamond was gone.

IN FISH I TRUST

Ruby

I wedged a fake ruby into the treasure chest, right next to a gleaming emerald.

That jewel was fake too.

Fake like Jake's feelings for me.

I was still fuming over his deception later that morning at Devon's snorkel shop as I arranged the gaudy gems inside a plastic underwater treasure chest. I couldn't believe Jake had stolen so brazenly from me.

He'd told me he was a "recovery expert" as soon as we'd met, and he'd been bragging for days about his ability to crack open a safe. He'd even given me a demonstration. The show-off.

I placed one more bauble in the chest and stood back to look at the faux pirate treasure that I would place in the sea for Devon's tour group to find. I'd tackled the project to distract myself from the cocktail of hurt and frustration filling my heart and head.

It hadn't worked.

Devon joined me in the corner of the store. "Ah, but that's a beauty right there. Worth several thousand doubloons," he said in a pirate voice.

Despite the anger simmering in my veins, I managed a small laugh. “Arr. I’ll just go bury it in the sea now.”

I grabbed the box and pushed open the door of his shop. I walked along the dock, set the treasure chest on the worn wood, then jumped into the shallow blue waters.

The ocean’s caress felt good. But even it wasn’t enough to numb the pain.

Carefully, I tugged the chest off the dock, into the water, and under the placid surface of the sea.

These phony gems were worth more than the contents of my hotel safe now that Jake had pilfered my very real diamond. Handsome, charming, no-good Jake. He had used me after all. Used his charms to get me to let down my guard. Drugged me up on multiple orgasms so he could make off with my big rock.

I hauled the chest beneath the dock, then popped open the cover. The ten-cent fake gems glittered like a pirate’s booty. The customers would surely get a kick out of discovering this pretend treasure after they smooched the nearby stingrays.

Stingrays. Turtles. Fish.

I’d be wise to focus on the water, rather than the deception of men.

For a few peaceful seconds, I let the water calm my red-hot anger.

Then, I popped up, slicked back my wet hair, and climbed onto the dock. I threw my shoulders back and decided to put on a good face as I headed to Devon’s snorkel shop and yanked open the screen door. It banged against the outside of the building when it closed.

Oops.

I guessed I hadn’t calmed down. The teeny bit of Zen I’d managed to achieve in the water had evaporated.

“Careful there,” Devon warned.

“Sorry,” I said with genuine remorse. He’d been my friend for ages and hadn’t done anything to deserve having his shop damaged by my anger and frustration. I called up my best chipper tone. “Everything’s ready. The underwater treasure is now underwater.”

And chipper I would be because it was business time. I would make sure every single customer had fun in the water with the stingrays. I wasn’t letting a man get in the way. Not even a man I wanted as much as I wanted Jake.

Had wanted. I couldn’t want someone I didn’t trust. Couldn’t fall asleep cuddled up beside him. Couldn’t wake contentedly in his arms.

My sentimental heart didn’t want to believe Jake could do those things and then rob me. If I really dug down deep, I’d have to admit I *wanted* to trust him.

My brain, though, said, “*Trust fish, not men.*”

I loved my work at least, and when two women, smiling and holding hands, and their kids arrived for a private stingray tour, I greeted them with an upbeat, “Who wants to kiss a stingray and get lucky?”

Devon and I escorted the family into the shallow waters.

If only luck were that easy. I’d thought I’d gotten lucky with a guy I wanted and who wanted me. But it had come with a price this morning.

A ten thousand dollar one.

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Jake

I stopped to drop a few coins in the donation box as I entered the island church. The air inside was cool, and the midmorning sun streaked through stained-glass windows, casting jewel-toned splashes of light across the white walls and the wooden floor. Churchgoers dotted the pews, their heads bent in prayer.

Silently, out of respect for their quiet contemplation, I moved to the staircase near the corner of the vestibule then climbed the curving steps to the second-floor loft. The windows around the perimeter made the space feel light and airy, but the best feature was the view—a clear sightline into the art gallery across the street.

It was wedged between Atlantis Submarine Tours and an empty storefront, with a slim alley between the gallery and the vacant shop. I imagined that might be the property that Willow and Eli were trying to purchase in order to expand the gallery but that was conjecture. *Everything* was conjecture at that point, and I had no words to express my frustration about that.

Well, no words I could've said in a church.

I was hungry for real answers. Answers I could sink my teeth into. I felt like I'd gotten as far as I could on informed guesses. And more than anything—almost anything—I wanted to pin Eli down so the slick bastard could pay the piper. About fucking time.

Made sense that the rocks might be in there. The more I thought about it, the more I could picture them stuffed inside the frames.

I slipped on my sunglasses and leaned on the window frame to take advantage of the bird's-eye view of the gallery. Thanks to the binoculars built into my shades, I had a clear, close-up view of the front and back door of Willow's Island Gallery, as well as the alley alongside it. I noted the number of employees visible in the gallery—three, including one at the reception desk—as well as the steady stream of visitors to the establishment.

A tall, graying man parked his Honda in front of the gallery. He struck a familiar chord, but I couldn't entirely place him. Instead of going in, he glanced at the doorway, lingered there for a while, and then popped into a souvenir shop down the block. A burly man in a suit strolled into the gallery, stayed about five minutes chatting with Willow, then left. The next visitor was a woman in a flowy red dress. When she reemerged, Willow held open the door for her, and the woman blew her a kiss then breezed down the street, glancing at a brochure she'd taken with her.

I checked my watch. An hour until go-time. In Ruby's hotel room that morning, we'd scoped the location, studying every angle of Willow's Island Gallery with Google Street View as we'd prepped, but there was no substitute for having eyes on the objective. That was what had brought me there—and maybe some impatience to get my hands on the diamonds I was sure waited inside that gallery.

Okay, a lot of impatience.

I patted my pocket, running my thumb along the outline of a little something I'd taken from Ruby's hotel that morning. I chuckled silently at the memory of lifting the sweet object. So easy.

Hopefully, snagging Eli's diamonds went as smoothly. Once those blue-tinted beauties were safe in my hands, my work there would be done. I'd deliver the ice to Andrew, head home to Key Largo, see my sister, ride bikes with my nephew,

and maybe have a brew with my buddy Dan while we fished off the dock near my house.

It sounded good.

It also sounded like something was missing from the picture.

Ruby.

She was sweet, feisty, smart, game for adventure, and had a vulnerability in her that latched onto my heart. We'd had a damn good time together, and I was closer to cracking the case because of her.

Footsteps on the wood floor snapped me to attention. I turned to see a man wearing a name tag ID'ing him as a volunteer at the church. He flashed a brief smile and said, "Welcome. Can I help you in any way?"

I interpreted his question to mean *What are you doing here?* Nothing marked the second floor as off-limits, but I had been there long enough to pique curiosity.

"I'm just admiring the view," I said.

"If there is anything you need, let me know," he said, making it clear I was welcome, but not that welcome.

"Of course. Beautiful church you have." I gestured to the historic stained glass that made my excuse plausible.

"Thank you." He smiled but didn't leave. "Can I answer any questions for you?"

Sadly, not the questions I need answers to.

I gave him a polite, "thank you, but no," and made my way down the steps. I'd gotten all I could for now.

Stopping in front of a stand full of votive candles, I took out my wallet and slid a few bills into the donation box in gratitude for the use of the church's well-placed windows. Then I pushed open the bright white door and blinked against the blast of sunlight and warm air.

My phone sang out with my little sister's ringtone. I turned away from the art gallery, threading through the late-morning

tourists and souvenir shoppers as I answered Kylie's call, braced for more potential bad news about her grades.

"How's it going, physics whiz?"

I could hope, right?

My sister's moan killed my optimism.

"Whizzes don't have to take summer school classes."

I closed my eyes and silently echoed her sound of lament, picturing another tuition bill floating from on high to land on top of the already substantial pile.

"What about your tutor?"

"He's great. But the department says I don't have the science requirements to finish unless I pick them up during the summer semester. I need the tutor *and* the classes."

"Then we'll get you into summer school." I didn't sigh, didn't want Kylie to hear any frustration or disappointment. "So, talk to me about physics."

"The tutor is crazy smart and it's really helping so far. Thank you for helping me find him. He's been getting me prepped for my test on Monday." She pivoted the subject without pausing for breath. "Now, talk to me about chemistry. How's your island hottie?"

Sisters. Sheesh. Mine all had the matchmaking genes. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I answered, my voice perfectly level.

"Ha. Deny all you want. You can't fool me."

"Alright," I chided playfully. "How about less studying my social life and more studying science?"

"I will. I promise," she said in earnest. I knew she was trying. But she was a complicated girl, and it was my job to see her through school. That was what my dad would have done. That was what I was happily doing.

When I hung up with Kylie, I shoved the phone into my pocket where it clanged against the trinket I'd *lifted* from Ruby's hotel. I didn't want anything to happen to that little

goodie, so I patted my pocket to make sure everything was secure.

Safe and sound, where it had been since that morning.

MESSY DETAILS

Ruby

“Check out the emerald! I bet it’s worth more than a house.”

Splash.

“Yeah, well this ruby is worth more than...an airplane.”

Eight-year-old Carson said something that earned him a faceful of seawater as he and his sister splashed in the shallows under the pier, uncovering pirate treasure while their moms floated in the crystal-blue water. Devon and I watched from fifteen feet away, digging our toes into the sand while the family from our tour group relaxed after an exciting stingray-smooching session. There had been many snaps and selfies for the socials, but Carson and his sister seemed much more into make-believe loot than fish kisses.

I couldn’t help but think of Cole and me as kids, and also of the pictures of Eli and me on the wall of the surf shop. The memories of our family trips made for a powerful mix of nostalgia and melancholy.

I wished the hunt for Eli’s diamonds was as easy as diving underwater for a chest of gems. As easy as scooping them up, converting them to cash, and repaying everyone who was poorer now because they’d trusted my stepfather.

Like I’d trusted Jake.

Was that comparison fair? On a large scale, maybe not.

On a personal scale?

I wasn't sure.

If I was sure, I'd have called the hotel manager, who would have called the police. But then I'd be on my own trying to reclaim the treasure pilfered by a modern-day pirate. I hated to admit it, but Jake did have useful skills.

In burglary, I mean.

But what hurt most was that I liked the guy. He'd been fun and forthright, witty and sharp. Caring and big-hearted...or so it had seemed until he'd stolen my diamond.

The moms swam to shore, waving to their kids in the shade under the dock. "What would you do if you found a buried treasure?" I asked Devon.

"Hmm..." He looked around the snow-white sand and crystal water for a moment. "I'd fix the screen door on the shop so my friend couldn't rip it off the hinges when she's raging."

I didn't deny it.

I *couldn't* deny it.

"Sorry," I said with a wince.

He patted my shoulder. "No worries, Ruby. I know where to send the bill."

I laughed, grateful for the levity.

I'd been so furious that it was only now in the calm of the summer sunshine that I realized how many messy details of the theft nagged at my brain. Like why a pro like Jake would leave the safe door open.

"Mama, look at this sapphire! It's the best because it's my favorite color."

Sapphire. Eli. Diamonds. Money.

I needed to focus on what was next. To stop alternating between anger and sadness over Jake. This trip had never been about a man. Not even Eli, really. It was about righting a

wrong and helping my mother. They were the only things that mattered.

In less than an hour, Jake and I were due to meet and infiltrate the gallery. I still had to figure out how to play the angles with him, but my distrust would keep me sharp and focused.

Twenty minutes later, Devon and I saw the happy family off from the snorkel shop. Each kid had a souvenir gem and each mom had a slew of pictures to share on social media.

“Be sure to tag Stingray Town Hire and Tours so we can see them,” I told the taller of the women while her wife shepherded the kids out the door.

“Definitely. We’ll leave reviews too. All of us had a spectacular time.”

“Make sure you don’t just review Stingray Town,” Devon said, slinging an arm around my shoulders. “Ruby here runs Ariel’s Island Eco-Adventure Tours, and I’m sure you’ll agree she was invaluable today.”

“She was. A review for the two of you!” one mother said as they thanked us again and then left.

I set to work straightening up the shop and putting away gear on the shelves. “Thanks again for letting me do this with you, and for the business mention,” I told Devon.

“I’ll do anything to help you rebuild,” he said. “It’s good to see you in your element again.”

It felt great to be in my element.

My own tour started in three more days, though it would be more challenging, starting with a dive through some of the wrecks not far from shore.

“This was a good warm-up for next week,” I said.

“Never would have known this was a warm-up,” Devon said, clearly pleased. He nodded to the door where the customers had just departed. “Diana loved the way you talked to the kids about marine ecology.”

In spite of everything, my mood brightened and a warm glow of both pride and optimism filled my chest. “That pretty much makes my day.”

“Good.” With a smile, he leaned his elbows on the shop counter, watching me stow clean snorkels and masks. “It seemed to me earlier that your day could use some improvement.”

Oh yeah. He’d mentioned the door earlier. That had been a hard clue to miss, especially for a friend who’d known me for so long.

When I didn’t pick up the baton of conversation, Devon gave me a verbal nudge, “What’s on your mind, Ruby?”

I sighed. Fiddled with my hair. Fooled no one. Finally I bit the bullet and asked, “What would you do if you suspected someone you liked of taking something from you but you weren’t entirely sure. Would you confront that person?”

His eyebrows climbed. “That’s a specific question.”

“I know.” I adjusted a mask neatly next to some fins so he couldn’t see that I was embarrassed I’d been hoodwinked.

“If you tell me more, maybe I could help,” he offered.

I pursed my lips, rewinding the last few days with Jake. How *did* one say *I think the guy I slept with stole a diamond my stepfather bought with money stolen from someone else?* That was a riddle wrapped in a conundrum. I didn’t want any of it to be true, and voicing those concerns aloud might make them a reality. I was careful with words, saying, “Let’s say I suspect this guy of something unethical. I’m just not sure I should say anything to him about it.”

“You mean tell him what you think and give him the chance to explain himself?”

I stared at Devon, pretending I could actually resent him. “Stop being so smart and logical.”

“It’s a passing phase,” he assured me. Then, more seriously, he said, “I think it’s best to be direct. And maybe, if you like him, give him the benefit of the doubt.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “But if the guy is being unethical and does hurt you in any way, you come tell me about it. Got that?”

I laughed at his tough guy act. It was good advice, but in the end, this was a mystery I’d have to unwrap solo.

I finished straightening, grabbed my stuff, and headed to my Jeep, still noodling on those messy details.

Jake was a professional. Leaving the safe open was an amateur move. Smarter to close it and put off my finding it empty for as long as possible. And I knew Jake wasn’t sloppy. The man had amazing follow-through, both on the job and in bed.

On the other hand, he’d been in my room all night. He knew how to break into a safe. Maybe he’d left the door open to make it seem like someone else, someone less experienced, had stolen the jewel?

I burned with frustration.

Jake was wily. Devon’s advice was good, but being direct with Jake would only alert him to the fact that I suspected him and give him a chance to backpedal.

So I’d have to be wilier.

I wouldn’t let on that I suspected he was a thief, or that I even knew the diamond was missing. I’d play it...friendly. I’d play it flirty. I’d be all island tryst-y.

Then, I’d watch his reactions.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

I wasn’t sure which of those Jake was, but oh yeah, I could keep him close.

IS THAT A DIAMOND IN YOUR POCKET...?

Jake

She looked good.

But then, that seemed to be her specialty.

Wearing a turquoise sundress that hugged her curves, she walked down the block toward me. With her looking so carefree, all I could think about was smothering her in kisses. Cupping her face in my hands, lacing my fingers through that blonde hair.

All these desires were annoyingly distracting.

We had business to do. Catered lunch to order. A mission to accomplish.

I'd chosen a spot outside at a café a few blocks away from the gallery. A Frommer's guidebook lay open on the table, announcing "tourist" as much as my tropical shirt.

When Ruby reached the table, she shot me a scorching, sultry stare. An hour ago, I'd wanted nothing more than to be done with this job, but that heated look changed my mind. Let the case drag on. Let the diamonds go unfound for a few more days. I wanted time with her. To get to know her better, her body and her mind.

But the voices of reason and experience told me the longer this dragged out, the greater the risk of disaster—in more than just the job. Only, I wasn't thinking with reason right now. I

wasn't thinking at all, only feeling how much I longed for this woman.

"Hey there, sweetheart," I said, my voice dry and husky.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she said with a wink.

Then she parked herself on my lap and threw her arms around me.

Whoa. That was a surprise. She'd never struck me as a sit-in-my-lap kind of woman.

"Good to see you too," I said with a chuckle.

She clasped my face in her hands and purred. "I missed you this morning." Her voice became a feathery whisper in my ear. "I can't wait to have you again."

Oh, Lord.

The woman did not play fair.

My dick shot straight up, and I was grateful she was on my lap, covering my hard-on. Even more grateful that she claimed my mouth in a heady kiss. Her taste was so damn sweet. I swallowed a groan of pleasure that could have been grounds to lock me up for indecency.

We had work to do.

But I'd have to be a fool to turn down a kiss like this.

My brain went hazy as I kissed her deeper. All thoughts of work, and tutors, and summer school, and responsibility surrendered in the caress of her lips. She kissed like a dream, and I could get lost in the spell of this sweet, feisty, fiery woman.

I did, for a minute or two, her hot kisses blurring out the world.

But a clock ticked loudly in the back of my mind. As much as it pained me, I broke off the kiss.

"One," I said, holding up a finger, "that was epic. Two, I want more. Three, I've been thinking about you all morning."

“I’ve been thinking of you too.” She ran her fingers along the front of my shirt and smiled, a grin that spread over her face and up to her eyes. She was happy. Wildly happy, and it was infectious.

“You’re festive today.”

She shrugged coyly, brushing a finger along my jaw. “I guess good sex has that effect,” she said, pursing her lips playfully.

“Just *good* sex?” I asked, matching her playful tone.

“Great sex,” she corrected, then nibbled on the corner of her lips.

If we were playing a game, she’d won. I let out a shuddering breath. “Agreed. But I work better when I can think of things other than fucking you.”

I lifted her off my lap and set her on her feet. Then I stood—carefully—tucked the guidebook in my pocket, and we left the busy café, turning to a side street, away from the crowds. We ducked down a quiet block along the beach, leaving the bustle even farther behind.

“Ready to place the order?” I asked.

All-business, no-flirt now, Ruby took her phone from her bag, blocked her number, and made the phone call we’d planned early this morning.

We needed to get inside Willow’s gallery to look around. Nighttime, while the gallery was closed and empty, would have been preferable, but there was too much security in the evenings in this section of town, with its stores, restaurants, and high-end hotels nearby. So, we’d have to find a way into Willow’s office during the day.

As Ruby made the call, I crossed my fingers, hoping all the pieces fell into place. Then I’d give her the jar of honey I’d snagged from room service just for her this morning. Fine, technically I’d *lifted* it. But really, that was what room service condiments were for—snagging for later. It was a little gift, but I still hoped she’d like the gesture, hoped it said I knew

her. I hoped, too, that I could spend more time with her beyond this island tryst.

For now, I watched her order our *distraction* from a local place we'd found called Clementine's Catering.

"This is Lynx O'Malley's personal assistant," Ruby said in a thoroughly professional voice that was, admittedly, sexy as sin. "I'm calling to confirm the lunch we ordered will be delivered to Willow's Island Gallery." She pushed her sunglasses up on the bridge of her nose. "In twenty minutes? Yes, that will be fine."

Damned nice of Willow's favorite artist to order in lunch, especially while he was unreachable at a meditation retreat.

The lunch decoy idea had been Ruby's during our strategy session that morning. Her resourcefulness turned me on. She liked that I was *rugged*, her words, and I liked that she was clever. We were becoming a damn good team.

Scary thought.

But a sexy one too. And I needed to focus on the immediate tasks, not the many reasons I was attracted to Ruby Ashley.

With the order confirmed, we left the alley and returned to a main street, headed toward the church I'd scoped out earlier. We walked past a sandwich shop boasting Caribbean-themed panini served on the patio under a red-checked awning.

I stopped there, since we were getting close to our destination. "Let's review," I said. "You're my lookout from the church. If you see or hear anything, or if anyone outside the gallery or inside starts to move, text me."

"I'm so ready." With a purr, she slipped her hands around my back, sliding them down to my butt, patting me down. In the same husky tone, she murmured, "Just making sure you have your phone with you."

Who didn't?

"I'm always prepared," I said, then gently removed her hands from my ass. Sure, I couldn't wait to touch her again,

but I also couldn't get distracted before a critical mission. "Let's save all that for later. I promise as soon as we finish today, I will deliver a well-deserved trio of your favorite things." Then I tipped my head to the sandwich shop. "And I'll take you there for lunch if you want. I think the look in your eyes says you're lusting after a panini."

"No. Just you," she said, all flirty and dirty.

I resisted the bait this time. "You'll need these," I said, reaching for my high-tech shades. She watched intently as I took the binoculars from my pocket.

I flicked them open and set them on her face and then explained how they worked, where she should station herself in the church, and my expected timeframe. "You'll be safe there. No one will know you're involved."

"Don't you get yourself caught," she warned.

I saluted her. "I'm like a cat. My job is to be invisible."

Twenty minutes later, we were in place. Ruby watched the gallery through the church window while I ambled along the street, checking out souvenirs of seashells at a shop kitty-corner to the gallery. As I pretended to consider a conch shell keychain, a white Subaru with an orange logo on the door pulled up and parked—my cue to stroll casually toward the gallery.

A woman in chef whites emerged from the Subaru, yanked open the hatchback, and grabbed a tray full of gourmet food. I smiled in satisfaction as she headed to Willow's Island Gallery.

A lunch ambush.

Who didn't love free food? That should give me a few minutes of distraction while everyone converged on the goodies, especially since Lynx O'Malley had spared no expense when he'd surprised the gallery staff with lunch out of gratitude for their hard work.

As soon as the caterer was inside, I slipped into the alley and made a beeline for the gallery's back entrance, picked the lock, and opened the door a crack to listen for anyone nearby.

Silence. And when I peered inside, there was no one in the narrow hall.

So far, so good. I let out my held breath along with a quick prayer. *Let me find the diamonds.*

While Willow and the staff appreciated lunch in the main gallery, I slid inside the door labeled “office” and left it ajar behind me. Then I stared, slack-jawed, at the walls, turning in a slow circle to make sure I didn’t miss a thing.

There was no art.

There were no frames.

The walls were entirely, indisputably bare.

REVERSE CON

Ruby

He was inside.

So easily.

Because that was what he did. Slipped in and out and stole.

I was damn near ready to just let him dangle in the breeze.

Hell, he was probably going to do the same to me. While we were together, it felt like we were working together. But as I stood lookout, my worries from earlier resurfaced. We wanted different things from the jewels. I wanted to help my mom—he—wanted to help the investors. Jake could steal the gallery gems, then give me the slip. He'd have all the diamonds and I would have none. No down payment on what Eli owed to my mom, and no leverage to make him do the right thing by her.

Jake could waltz back to Andrew, repay all the clients that Eli had defrauded, and fulfill his contract. The *recovery expert's* job was to recover the investors' money. But Mom wasn't a formal investor. I was the only one looking out for her interests.

I spun around from the window and nearly ran into the gentleman who'd come up to the second floor and stood between me and the stairs. My pulse jumped—I hadn't expected to see anyone—but I breathed easier when I saw from his name tag that he worked at the church.

“Hello. Do you need anyone to pray with?” he asked, hands pressed together, bowing slightly.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth as I skirted around him to the stairs. “But it would be great if you could pray for mercy for Jake. Thanks so much.”

I vaulted down the steps and out the main door, improvising a new plan as I went. Because the fact that people knew me in this town might have been a liability, but it was an advantage too. I could walk right into the gallery. Willow liked me. And after the sex-toy party, I knew way too much about her private life to call myself a stranger.

Reaching the gallery, I pushed the sunglasses up on my head, opened the door, and entered a scene of art and laughter, and a verifiable smorgasbord.

Casual and cheery, I waved to Willow. “Just in the neighborhood. Wanted to say hi.”

Willow’s chocolate-brown eyes lit up. She wore a sleek, short cranberry dress, and her dark hair was curled in waves around her shoulders. “So good to see you, Ruby. You came by at the perfect time.”

“Oh!” I feigned surprise, looking at the spread as if I hadn’t been the one to order it. “Are you having a party?”

“An impromptu one.” Willow beamed and clutched my arm. “Can you join us? It’s such a treat to see you again, and there’s plenty of food.” She gestured to the spread. “Lynx surprised us with a catered lunch. This is his art, which I was telling you about.” I took the cue to look around at the bright white walls adorned with his images. “Have something to eat, and we can catch up properly.”

“I would love to,” I said, though I had no interest in food or a tour. I gestured to the only hallway, lowering my voice. “I’m just going to pop into the ladies’ room first if you don’t mind.”

I walked to the rear of the gallery before Willow or her employees could offer to show me the way. My feet sped up with my pulse, but nobody followed. I didn’t want anyone to

stop me and, even though I was pissed at him, I didn't want Jake to be caught.

Pausing only a moment to listen to the gallery owner and staff chat over their lunch, I yanked open the office door.

Jake stood at the desk, glancing through some papers, but he didn't startle at my intrusion. The smooth operator. He simply looked at me, brow furrowed, and mouthed, *Everything okay?*

"No," I whispered in warning. "Get the diamonds and let's go."

"They're not here," he said in quiet disappointment.

Like I believed that.

"What's taking so long?" I hissed then tipped my head toward the door. "We need to go."

Nodding crisply, he folded the paper, and stuffed it into his pocket, and I hurried him down the hall and out the back door into the alley.

"What's going on?" he asked quietly once the door had closed behind us.

I pressed my lips to his for a quick, consuming kiss then told him something true. "I was worried." The decision to kiss him had been calculated, but it also intoxicated me, and my instincts took over. I hummed with desire as I explored his mouth. He groaned in response, a sexy, masculine rumble that I'd evoked by taking the reins in this carnal moment.

With effort, I remembered my ulterior motive. My hands rested on his shoulders. I slid them down, over his chest, his pecs and shirt pocket, then ran them along his sides.

Jake squirmed and laughed.

I fought back a grin. "Ticklish much?"

"Suspicious much?" he asked, one brow raised. He looped his arms around me. "Not that I mind your hands on me, but something tells me you aren't trying to cop a feel."

“Maybe espionage turns me on,” I said, sliding my hands around his waist to his back and then down, spreading my fingers to cover his ass.

His insanely toned and sexy ass.

And his empty back pockets.

“My wallet is in my right front pocket if you’re planning to rob me.” His voice was calm and tinged with curiosity along with the teasing. Mister So Freaking Smooth.

“This front pocket?” I asked, sliding my hand into the pocket in question, enjoying the way he sucked in a shaky breath as I felt his wallet and then...a jam jar?

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s some of your weirdly delicious honey that I lifted so room service wouldn’t clear it.” The corner of his lips quirked up in a rueful smile. “It was supposed to be a surprise, but you caught me.”

Was he that innocent or that good an actor?

In either case, I’d found nothing in his pockets but that, his wallet and phone, and the paper he’d taken from the office.

“I was anxious to see the diamonds,” I said by way of explanation, fixing on a sweet smile.

“They weren’t in the gallery office. I told you that before.” He huffed in frustration. “If they were ever there, they’ve now been moved.”

A vision of the empty walls of the office caught up with me, and I gasped in realization. “No art. But Kalila said there were several pieces hanging there in her office. She said he spent a lot of time picking the frames,” I said, sounding desperate as I recalled her words. Desperate because I wanted them to be true.

He shook his head. “Not a single frame on the wall. They might have been moved recently. I did find some interesting paperwork, though, about some donations—”

I pressed my finger to his lips. “Hold that thought. I need to make an excuse to Willow so she doesn’t wonder why I never came back from the ladies’ room.” I trailed my finger down his chin, his neck, and the buttons of his shirt. “Be good and wait for me by the souvenir shop.”

He nodded but furrowed his brow. “You’re in a bossy mood today. I kinda like it.”

I pulled him close by tugging on his shirt and gave him a deep, drugging kiss. The kind of kiss that said *don’t question it, just enjoy*. “Hold that thought too.”

Then I stepped back, feeling smug about his slightly dazed look, and returned to the gallery’s rear entrance. Once Jake had left the alley, I doubled back into the main gallery, where Willow’s employees were praising the coconut flan. My heart raced until I returned to the front.

I tapped Willow’s shoulder and motioned for her to come with me to the foyer, where I could see Jake across the street, looking at postcards. “I hate to do this, Willow, but I just got a last-minute call to do a snorkel lesson for some beginners over at Happy Turtle, so I can’t stay,” I said apologetically.

Willow frowned. “Oh no. I was looking forward to showing you the art. Can you come back?”

“I’ll try.” I cast a brief glance toward Jake, thumbing through the trinkets on display street-side.

I returned my attention to Willow, then jerked in surprise when I realized there was something missing from Willow’s wardrobe. I found myself touching my fingers to my own throat and my treasure-chest necklace.

“Willow,” I whispered, pointing to the other woman’s neck. “What happened to your diamond? Is it being resized or something?”

Willow sighed heavily and clasped her hand over her heart. A pendant dangled from her neck, but it wasn’t the blue-tinted gem she’d worn at her house party. There was a substitute rock in its place, a too-bright cubic zirconia. Willow dropped her voice to a barren whisper. “*It was stolen.*”

My brows shot up in surprise. A knot of tension twisted in my bones. “Are you serious? When? Where?”

“Last night. Right here,” Willow said, pointing to the gallery’s blond wood floor. “During a reception. It was on my neck, then it was gone. I was freshening up my drink, and moments later, Eli noticed it was missing. It must have fallen out of the setting on the necklace, and then someone took it.”

I blinked. I swallowed. My skull echoed. “What time was that?”

“It was around eight.”

Jake had been with me on the boat at that time. He couldn’t have taken Willow’s stone. “We looked everywhere. We canvassed the entire place,” Willow continued. “As you can see, there isn’t a lot of clutter. It’s quite bare. But there was no diamond anywhere. So it can’t have been lost.”

“Do you have any idea who took it?”

“None. But thank God we moved the other diamonds from here a while ago.”

The other diamonds.

Holy moly. I did not expect Willow to hand me confirmation of our suspicions. “Other diamonds? Here?” I pointed to the floor like she might mean anywhere else.

Willow nodded and leaned close, placing her hand on my back and lowering her voice even more. “We used to have a lot here but not anymore. You can’t be too careful. I do hope you’re keeping the stone that Eli gave you safe.”

“Of course,” I said on autopilot as I tried to make sense of this new information while the surprises kept pummeling me. “I should go.”

“Let’s do this another time,” Willow said, rebounding to the upbeat woman I had originally met. I agreed and exited the gallery, nearly stumbling and breathless with confusion.

Jake leaned against the brick wall of the souvenir shop, right where I’d told him to wait.

Was I wrong in my assumption that Jake had taken my gem? Everything was topsy-turvy, and I desperately needed to get Jake alone.

MR. SMITH AND MY CONFESSION

Ruby

I hardly knew which way was up anymore. I wanted to trust Jake so very badly. I didn't think he was playing me, and while I was tempted to strip him, blindfold him, and then check his pockets, I also needed to be an adult.

Be direct, like Devon had said. My friend was right.

With everything I'd learned at the gallery—and in the alley where I found out that Jake had swiped that honey from the breakfast tray because it made him think about me—it made less and less sense that Jake had stolen my diamond.

He wasn't hiding any of Willow's diamonds from me—they hadn't been there to find.

He hadn't pilfered Willow's stone last night—I was his alibi.

That meant I'd suspected Jake unfairly.

That also meant someone else had taken my gem, and we couldn't talk about that critical detail until I was direct and honest with him. But god, honesty was hard. As we walked to my room, my stomach churned. Honesty was part of trust, but it was painful.

Putting yourself on the line was like diving into a bracing sea. But there was only one way to do it.

Jump in.

The second the door to my room shut, I turned to Jake.

“The jar of honey...” I began. “That was the only thing you took from the room this morning, right?”

He gave me a baffled look. An I-have-no-idea-what-you’re-talking-about side-eye. “What else would I have taken?”

I dragged a hand through my hair, then took the leap. “I need to know if you took my—”

But before I could explain myself, someone knocked at the door. Jake and I exchanged a glance, and I called, “Who is it?”

“This is the hotel manager.”

There was another look between Jake and me, this time with a shrug. “I’d better answer that,” I said.

In the hall stood a tall, red-haired man in dress slacks and a suit jacket with a brass name tag that said Alfredo.

“Hello, Ms. Ashley,” he said politely, nodding to me. “So sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to make sure you received the delivery yesterday, and everything was in order.”

I frowned, a small kernel of worry tightening inside me. “Delivery? I’m not sure what you mean?”

Jake joined me at the door and draped an arm around my waist. The comforting and reassuring gesture was welcome, but I didn’t deserve it after doubting him the way I had. “What was delivered?” Jake asked.

The manager’s brows knotted in worry. “The envelope of documents?”

“I didn’t receive anything,” I told him. “And I wasn’t expecting anything either.”

Jake seemed on high alert. I could feel his tension everywhere we touched. “What time was this?”

The man scratched his chin as if recalling the details. “Yesterday evening, around six o’clock, a man came to the front desk and asked if he could deliver some urgent paperwork to your room.”

“And you let him?” Jake asked, thoroughly protective.

“Absolutely not. We do not give out our guests’ room numbers for any reason. But the man insisted it was urgent, so my clerk took the envelope and brought it to your room himself, leaving it on the desk at around six-fifteen. I came to confirm you had received it.” He paused awkwardly. “But obviously, you did not.”

I gulped nervously and glanced behind me in case I’d somehow missed the envelope—but the desk was bare. Wild ideas and worries swam through my brain.

Jake went to the desk and looked around and under it, then reported, “Nothing.”

The manager sighed. “I’ll check with the clerk—”

“Did he give his name? The man who dropped the envelope off?” I asked, not caring if I was rude. “What was it?”

Alfredo cleared his throat as if owning up to something embarrassing. “Ahem. Mr. Smith, I believe,” he said. “I’ll go inquire with the staff.”

He turned sharply and marched down the hallway, his steps matching the staccato rhythm of my heart. Could the clerk have stolen the diamond when he made the delivery? If so, why take the envelope that had been his excuse to come in?

I shut the door and turned to Jake, my world spinning like a mad teacup ride in an amusement park.

“Mr. Smith?” Jake scoffed, with all the suspicion I felt.

I swayed, and the floor felt wobbly. I had no idea who Mr. Smith was, but probably someone who didn’t want to risk following me to find my room. “I think someone tried to get my room number,” I said in a tiny whisper. “And when he couldn’t, he followed the clerk here, then broke in to steal the diamond.”

Jake’s stunned expression dispelled any lingering doubts I might have had. His jaw dropped, and his eyes widened. “The what now?”

“The diamond was gone from the safe this morning. Someone must have broken in—”

His green eyes registered confusion, then a hint of anger. “Wait. Is that why you were patting me down earlier outside the gallery?” He crossed his arms. “You dragged me from the gallery, and you treated me like you didn’t trust me—” His eyes grew impossibly wider. “Holy shit. You think I stole your diamond? Is that what you were about to say?”

“I was worried it might have been you.” The words tumbled free before I could consider them or analyze the risk in admitting that I didn’t trust a single soul right now. I squeezed my eyes shut, and a hot tear slipped down my face. I wiped it away with the back of my hand. “I freaked out because I trusted you. I let you into my room and my body, and this morning after I came out of the shower, the diamond was gone. Completely gone.”

He stumbled backward, and braced himself with a hand on the wall. “Are you serious?” he whispered. “From your safe?”

I nodded. “I found it missing right after you left. Jake, what else would I think?”

He shot me a look like I was crazy. “*Anything*. Anything but that.”

“But you know how to break into safes. You broke into this one, even.”

He held out his hands as if pushing away my words and shook his head. Anger seemed to roll off him like smoke. “I would *never* steal from you.”

“But you figured out the combo before. In seconds.”

“And you changed it, right?”

I nodded. “Yes, but you could have figured it out again.”

He huffed and inhaled deeply, then dragged a hand roughly through his hair. “Please tell me you didn’t change it back to A-R-I-E-L.”

“No, it was—”

“I don’t want to know what it is.” He sighed in frustration, then fixed me with a stare. “Why did you bring me back here to your room if you thought I stole the diamond?”

Time to ’fess up. To tell all. “Because Willow told me this afternoon that the diamond in her necklace was stolen last night too. And with this Mr. Smith dropping off fake papers, and with you not having any diamonds in your pockets earlier...”

When I finished, he ran his hand over his face. “Not to be rude about this, but what the hell, Ruby? I trusted you.”

Trust. That was what I longed for. I tried to believe in it. But after two such important men in my life—Eli and Duke—had betrayed my trust, how could I give it to anyone else easily? Especially a man gunning for Eli?

“I did trust you,” I said, my hands together, imploring him. “I swear I did. I woke up this morning having had the most amazing time with you last night and feeling like we were on the same page. Then my diamond went missing. All I could think was you took it. What else was I supposed to think?”

“You weren’t supposed to think. You were supposed to talk. To me. Because I didn’t do it,” he said softly, his green eyes locking onto mine.

I didn’t look away. “I believe that now.”

“Then let’s figure out who might have done it.” He took a deep breath but his mouth softened, as if he were perhaps ready to move on. “Tell me everything.”

CHECKOUT TIME

Jake

Ruby led me to the safe, recounting the details of the discovery while she opened the door and showed me the empty interior, her distress heightening as she reached the end of the story.

“So I looked in, and the diamond was gone. I don’t even care about it for me. I wasn’t going to keep it. That diamond was my insurance that I’d be able to give Mom something, even if I couldn’t get Eli to do right by her.”

Maybe it made me a fool, or maybe it was repeating past mistakes, but I believed Ruby wasn’t in this for herself. There was still a problem, however. “If the gem was part of the funds Eli embezzled though...”

I didn’t finish, because she nodded, looking miserable and guilty. “Then I wouldn’t have a right to it. Which was why I thought—”

“Why you thought I took it.” Annoyance still churned in my veins. At least she didn’t think I’d taken it for my own benefit. Small mercy, I supposed.

She shrugged. “You proved you could break into the safe,” she said in a small but certain voice. “You were in here alone when I talked to the room service guy.”

Her voice quivered, her pretty blue eyes full of guilt. Still, it stung that she thought I could sleep with her and then steal

from her. “I’m not that guy,” I said firmly.

“I know that now. But I was so upset, I didn’t know what to think then,” she said, and though she seemed to try and hold it back, a tear slid down her cheek.

That errant tear did me in. It revealed fears I longed to erase, to take off and carry for her. Relenting, I wrapped my arms around her and tugged her close. I was pissed, but I understood her reaction. To find your precious stone stolen after you’d invited a man who cracked safes to spend the night must have felt like she’d welcomed the perpetrator.

I hadn’t taken the gem, but someone else had, and that changed everything. Doubt or no doubt, all that mattered to me was Ruby’s safety.

“You can’t stay here any longer,” I said firmly as we stood by the foot of the bed. “It’s not safe. Someone else is after the diamonds too.”

She lowered her voice and whispered with a nervous quiver, “Do you think they sneaked in while we were sleeping?”

I shook my head, reassuring her. “They must have come in when we were on the boat. I would have noticed someone slipping into the room and opening a safe, even if I was deep in the land of nod. Besides, if it were me taking something, I’d do it when no one was around.”

She arched an eyebrow. “So that’s your professional opinion?”

“Yes, Miss Sarcastic, it is. That doesn’t mean I did it.”

She sliced a hand through the air, cutting off that subject. “Forget I said that. It’s just...” Her voice wobbled then broke, etched with frustration. “I just wanted to do my tour, talk to Eli, and help my mom. And now someone is breaking into my room to steal diamonds, and maybe it’s the same person who took Willow’s too.”

“No way is this a coincidence, stealing two of the same watermarked stones on the same night. Someone is after the diamonds, and that someone knows you had one and Willow

had one.” I locked eyes with her. “No matter how you slice it, Mr. Smith was in your room last night and took a ten-thousand-dollar jewel. I want you by my side. I will keep you safe. I’m good at it. It’s what I do.”

The rough edges around her melted away, and she smiled sweetly. “Thank you for saying that.”

I walked around the bed and dropped a hand onto her shoulder. “Say you’ll stay with me,” I said, in a gentle but firm command.

“I’m leaving for a tour in three days.”

“Then that gives us seventy-two hours to figure this out.”

Her lips quirked up. “What if Mr. Smith is onto *us*? Is it bad if we’re seen together?”

I shook my head thoughtfully. “My gut tells me Mr. Smith is angling for Eli, so he stole the gems Eli gave his fiancée and his stepdaughter. We just need to keep being stealthy and work together to stay ahead of Mr. Smith.”

“Work together, huh?” she asked, her arms crossed.

“Yep.” I held out a hand to seal the deal.

She took it and we shook, her lips quirking up with a little mischief. “So you admit I’m a good amateur detective then?”

“You damn well know you are,” I said, then after we reported the missing goods to the hotel staff—of course there was no security footage to help our case in this cheap hotel—we gathered her things and left the scene of the crime.

A TYPE OF GUY

Jake

I dropped her suitcase on the tiled floor. The fan circled lazily overhead, stirring the gauzy white curtains that hung by the sliding glass doors. Grabbing her hand, I pulled her to the open balcony. The sun was still high in the sky and my room had a stunning view of the endless blue water. I also had a clear view of how to resolve this turmoil still roiling in my chest.

On the one hand, I was grateful she'd come to my hotel. I was hellbent on keeping her out of harm's way. On the other hand, I damn well wanted her to know the truth of who I was, once and for all. No more lies. No more doubts. If we were working together—and that sure seemed to be the plan—we had to be on the same side.

Time to talk to her about the harder stuff. If not, this would be Rosalinda and the Medici job all over again.

That conversation would start like this...

"Just look," I said, gesturing to the vast sea.

She gazed toward the water. "It's gorgeous."

"It is. And I'm showing you to make a point."

"Okay?" She parked her hands on the railing.

I turned to her and met her eyes, fueled by remnants of frustration or hurt, but also by this new, powerful desire for her to know me. "Yes. I'm showing you this because it's beautiful.

Because you love the water. Because you are an outdoor girl through and through. Because I know these things about you.” I took her hands and clasped them in mine, squeezing. “I know already that the water calms you. I know the sunshine is like some kind of magic to you. And I know you love your mother with a fierceness that can move mountains. You’re like this warrior princess who’d go to battle for her, and even though I’ve never met her, I can picture her. I imagine she is the gentlest, kindest person in the world who wouldn’t hurt a fly, and you fight for her. Not because she’s the kind of woman who won’t fight for herself, but rather because she chooses not to. Am I right?”

Ruby swallowed down obvious emotion as she answered, “Yes. You’re right.” Her voice was soft. A warm breeze blew by, stirring up the ends of her pretty blonde hair. The moment was becoming romantic, fast.

As the waves lapped the shore in the distance, and boaters skipped over the blue waters, I clasped her hands tighter. “But what do you know about me?”

She parted her lips but didn’t speak.

“Ruby,” I said, fixing her with a sharp gaze, and then asked again, needing to set her straight, desperate to avoid another on-the-job mistake. “What do you know about me?”

“That you like ice cream?” She said it like a question.

I smiled but only briefly. “That’s a good start. What else?”

“That you like sweet things,” she said, squinting as the sun shone brightly overhead.

“Keep going.”

“That you’re motivated by your family.”

“Good. And?”

“And you hate it when bastards get away with anything.”

I tapped my finger to my nose. *Bingo*. “Know what else?”

“What?”

A knot of discomfort clogged my throat. But I pushed past it, speaking plainly, honestly. “I once dated a woman who nearly cost me a job. She tried to steal the artifact we’d teamed up to find.” The memory of how foolish I’d felt when Rosalinda stole it from under my nose haunted me. “I’d trusted her. I’d thought she cared about me. She’d only cared about the prize.”

Ruby’s eyes swam with sympathy. “I don’t even want the prize for me,” she said, raising her chin, meeting my gaze. “I’m after Eli to do right by my mom. To do what’s fair.”

“But it seemed this morning that you were playing me.” My tone turned rougher. “That when you saw me at the café, you were all sexy-snuggly because you thought I’d run. And outside the gallery, you were pretending to get cozy when you put your hands in my shorts, but you were only searching for stones even after I told you there weren’t any.”

“I was,” she said, dipping her face.

Nope. She needed to look me in the eyes. I let go of her hands, tucked a finger under her chin and raised her face. “Don’t fuck with my feelings. You know I want you. You know I like you. Just don’t fuck with me,” I said, as clear as if I were giving an order to my troops.

“I’m not. I won’t. I’m sorry.” Her tone was full of contrition.

That knot unwound. “So tell me the truth. Do I seem like the type of guy who’d screw you over?”

She sighed but smiled softly. “No. You don’t seem like that kind of guy.”

I brushed the back of my fingers against her cheek. Her skin was soft, and she smelled so good, like coconuts and the beach. “You tell me what kind of guy you think I am.”

She leaned into my hand. “A good guy,” she whispered, her voice breathy while her eyes never strayed from mine.

I was glad she’d said it. That I hadn’t put those words in her mouth. “A really good one,” she added, angling her hips,

her body seeking out contact. I tugged her against me so the only thing she felt was how damn ready for her I was.

She drove me wild. She was a pistol, a fiery, sexy, determined, tenacious woman who made me crazy, and who I wanted fiercely at the same damn time. I backed her up against the railing, pressing my hard-on against her and caging her in with my arms. “Are you sure about the man in front of you?”

I pushed against her, letting her feel what she did to me.

She grabbed my shirt. “Can we please just fuck it out now?”

Yes. *That*. That was music to my ears. She’d come around, seen who I was, and wanted me even more. Or so I hoped.

“Yes, we damn well better fuck it out. Once and for all.”

I held her face. “In about one minute, you’re going to put your hands on the railing, bend over, and raise your skirt for me.”

Her eyes lit up, sparkling with a naughty kind of excitement. “Happily.”

“But first, I’m going to steal something. A hot, dirty kiss.”

Her breath caught.

I roped a hand through her hair, yanked her close, and planted a scorching, searing kiss on her delicious lips. She melted under my touch. My hands traveled to her leg, along the warm skin of her thighs, quickly finding what I wanted—the wet scrap of fabric between her legs. She was so damn turned on too.

Good. I needed all this wetness. It was mine. I’d earned it. She’d doubted me, and I’d proven who I was to her.

I was someone else as well—the man who fucked her good.

I groaned as I kissed her mercilessly, then tugged off her underwear, broke the kiss, and spun her around.

Covering her back with my chest, I wrapped her hair in a fist and tugged. She gasped and arched her ass higher. Yup.

She liked a little rough play. I brought my mouth to her ear. “Do you like it hard? Do you like it rough? Do you like it angry?”

She turned her face to look at me with desire in her eyes. “I like everything with you.”

“Good answer.” I grasped her chin and held her gaze, staring at her. “Stay here.”

I headed inside, grabbed a condom, and returned to the gorgeous sight on my balcony—Ruby, with her sundress bunched up above her hips, her panties on the ground, and her lovely, delicious body ready for me.

I grabbed the hem of my shirt and yanked it off, then unzipped my shorts enough to take out my length. “You need my cock now, don’t you, sweetheart?”

“So badly,” she moaned.

I rolled on the condom, so damn ready. So damn needy. I wanted to banish all the frustration that had stemmed from our cat-and-mouse games. No better way than the physical. It was the one thing that didn’t lie. It was a language comprised only of truth. There was no doubt in the way she glistened for me. In the lift of her hips, the look in her eyes, the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed hard.

There was nothing but truth to the way I ached to fill her.

I positioned my dick at her slick entrance, and in one delicious thrust, I pushed inside my woman. All the way. I snaked an arm around her chest, sliding my hand between her breasts and up to her neck.

I wrapped a hand around her throat, not too tight, not hurting. Just letting her know, like this, that she belonged to me. I squeezed gently with my thumb as I fucked her.

Like that, with a rough, hard rhythm, I showed her the truth.

“This, Ruby. This isn’t a lie.” I growled in her ear.

“I know,” she panted, gasping as I drove into her.

“This is the truth. The way we fit like this.”

“It feels so good,” she said, her voice rising as I moved in her.

It was the purity of the connection—that was what had brought us together in the first place. And on this balcony, overlooking the sea, with all the tourists below who had no clue diamonds were being stolen across the land, and hearts were being toyed with, and heists were being plotted and replotted, I proved the one thing I could.

That this connection between us was real. It was honest.

It might not last. It might have an expiration date. But for now, as I thrust into her, this was as true as the sun blazing overhead. It was as real as the waves crashing onto the shore.

She rose up on her toes, bowed her back, and gripped the railing. I dropped my hand from her throat, grabbed her hips, and took her hard. She moaned and cried my name. Soon her cries were coming faster, and I was sure someone else in the hotel might hear, but sure, too, that I didn't care. Not as she clenched around me and whispered that she was coming.

She shuddered several times and I followed her there, my own orgasm blasting into every corner of my body. As pleasure whipped through me, the world winked off.

I wrapped my arms around her, held her close, kissed her neck, then at last, eased out.

After I disposed of the condom, I scooped her into my lap on a deck chair, and held her. She let me, looping her arms around my neck. Yes, this was the opposite of her flopping into my lap earlier. This was real. “I'm sorry someone broke into your room,” I said softly, then kissed her cheek.

“Me too.”

“You're safe with me. Know that, Ruby. Just know that.”

“I do know that. And I do know you, and I like you.”

“Same here,” I said, then wrapped my arms around her.

I liked this contact too, far too much for my own good.

PARTNERS AGAIN

Ruby

We showered, Jake washing my hair and then soaping my body. I savored every second of it as he moved his hands from my breasts to my belly, then down my legs. I was slippery and wet, and he couldn't stop touching me.

I liked it that way. I loved the attention. I was so very glad to be past my doubts about him. The mysteries around Eli, the case of the diamonds—those worries still loomed. But I could face them with Jake unreservedly as a partner and a temporary lover. He excelled in both roles, I was learning.

"I'm hardly that dirty," I teased as he lingered while washing my calves.

"I know, but I can't seem to stop touching you. Your fault for being so sexy." He stood and dropped a kiss onto my nose. I smiled and sighed happily.

I wasn't wild about fighting, but hard, hot make-up sex and a tender moment in the shower was a better resolution than I'd ever known before. I grabbed the bar of soap and returned Jake's favor, washing his arms, flat belly, and back. I shampooed his hair too, loving the way the wet strands felt in my hands.

Once we were both rinsed and clean, we stepped out of the shower and toweled off.

And then my stomach growled.

Jake arched an eyebrow in a silent question. I grimaced. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast, which seems ages ago.” I shrugged with a coquettish jut of my shoulder and said, “Want to take me on a date, roomie?”

He shook his head, bemused as he finger-combed his hair. “An hour ago you thought I stole your diamond. Now you want me to take you out for food?”

“I do,” I said, wiggling my eyebrows as I met his gaze in the mirror.

“Then I’m taking you on a date. Even though you’re a pain in the ass. Evidently, that’s one of the things I like most about you. So get ready to be wined and dined,” he said, giving me an order.

I gave him a cheeky salute. “Yes, sir. May I have the lotion now? And a full report on your findings from the gallery, sir?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you, but you had your mind on other things.” He handed me the hotel lotion.

“I did, but now you’ve satisfied me, so I’m ready,” I said, even though I knew sex wasn’t what he’d meant.

Jake caught me up on his gallery visit as I rubbed lotion onto my legs. “The obvious thing first,” he said. “No art. The walls were absolutely bare. Kalila’s tip was wrong or just out of date.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “I think she worked there some time ago. She wouldn’t know if they’d moved things recently.”

“And she didn’t say the stones were hidden inside the frames. That was our theory based on what she’d told us. The art could be unrelated.”

Two bits of info connected in my head with a spark. “Except Willow told me they’d recently moved the diamonds out of the gallery. It would be too coincidental if they removed the art from the office and it wasn’t related.”

“That would definitely support our theory about where the gems are hidden,” he agreed. “So, anyway, I figured if I couldn’t leave with precious stones, I’d have a quick snoop for

valuable information. And fortunately, Willow is quite organized.” He squeezed a dollop of toothpaste onto his toothbrush. “Her office is a shrine to minimalism. Her desk held nothing but pens, a Moleskine notebook, and some nuts.”

I scoffed. “Nothing like a little high-protein snack between grueling hours of walking around an air-conditioned gallery, selling paintings of straight lines.”

“Well, not everyone is cut out to be a brilliant private-eye-slash-bounty-hunter,” he said, tapping his temple with humor in his eyes and a smug grin on his lips.

“What was the document that you took with you?” I asked.

“Why, I’m glad you asked, Ms. Ashley. Basically, it’s a document saying Willow donated fifty grand last month to a charity that helps kids affected by child labor in diamond mines go to school and get an education.”

“Is it the one the Frayer mine supports? She’s listed on their website as a major donor.”

He nodded. “Same one.”

I headed to my suitcase for fresh clothes. “We’ve been focusing on Eli, thinking he might be converting the diamonds to cash bit by bit. But could Willow be cashing in the stones for charity? Or maybe laundering them through a charity? Either way, both Willow and Eli could both be involved.”

Jake followed my every movement as I dropped my towel and pulled on panties and a bra. “That would be an interesting twist, wouldn’t it?” he asked while I rifled through my suitcase for my blue dress with slim white stripes. “When I scoped out her gallery the first night I was here, I noticed that the Lynx paintings sold for five thousand apiece. Today, a peek at the gallery records showed that she’d sold ten of them.”

“Then maybe it’s the proceeds from those sales she’s putting into this charity? Could there be a connection?”

It was my turn to stare as Jake emerged from the bathroom in all his naked glory. I sighed as he put on boxers. “Makes me sad to see you in clothes.”

“Speaking of clothes, you need to add a bikini for our date,” he said.

I smiled, grabbed one, and stuffed it into my purse. “Done.”

“Excellent,” he said as he grabbed a pair of trim shorts. “And to answer your question, there are too many coincidences here for things not to be connected.”

I gasped and clapped a hand over my mouth as a terrible thought slammed into me. “What if they’ve cashed out all the diamonds, Jake? What if there is no more missing money? Maybe it’s a lost cause.” The awful possibility of coming up empty-handed clanged in my brain. No justice, no chance to do the right thing, just thieves getting away with thieving.

“Not every case is solvable,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone as he snagged a shirt from the closet and put it on. “Sometimes people move on and the money is gone. We don’t know what they’ve done with the rest of the diamonds they bought from the Frayer mine or who stole the two Eli gave as gifts to you and Willow. We only have evidence that Eli moved thousands of valuable items and his fiancée has donated a large sum to a charity for those affected by the diamond economy. The rest is circumstantial.”

“What if we find the gems and prove Eli bought them with stolen money? Are you going to turn him in?” I asked. We’d talked about this topic before, but still it nagged at me. Thieves should be held accountable. But if Eli was arrested, I could say goodbye to recompense for Mom.

Jake shook his head. “Andrew wants to keep this as quiet as possible. He seems mainly focused on restoring the money to the investors rather than turning Eli over to the authorities. So that’s my goal too.”

Conflicting feelings swirled inside my chest, making a whirlpool that threatened to draw me under. If the diamonds went back to Andrew’s company, he could put things right with the defrauded clients, and I would have leverage to hopefully make Eli treat Mom fairly. But that only worked if we got the gems before “Mr. Smith” could steal any more. The

thought that I might never make this right for my mom weighed heavily on me.

“I need to see Eli again,” I said, swallowing thickly, fighting the pull of anxiety. It would be hard—confronting him one more time. Pressing, pushing, trying harder. But I had to stay ahead of the thieves, and my access to my stepfather was an advantage I couldn’t ignore. “I’ll give him a call in a few minutes. Set something up. See what I can find out. Surely this time he’ll give me some more intel.”

“Maybe another breakfast at Tristan’s,” Jake suggested. “I have fond memories of that street in the diamond district.”

He smiled wickedly. Judging by the heat in his eyes, I knew he was remembering the time when I’d grabbed him and we’d made out so Tristan wouldn’t see and recognize me.

“You just want to go to the diamond district to stage a reenactment,” I teased.

He snaked his arm around my waist and tugged me closer to his body. “Why drive all that way? You can pounce on me right here.”

In spite of our serious conversation, I laughed at his moment of playfulness. “Maybe after dinner. I’m too hungry to drag you in for a lip-lock...”

I trailed off, noticing that Jake’s expression had changed. He stared blankly as if he was looking inward at the churning wheels of his brain. Then he focused on me so fast I could almost hear the puzzle pieces snapping together.

“Does Tristan have gray hair?” He ran his hand over his own golden-brown locks. “And is he tall?”

“Yes. Did you glimpse him when he walked by that day?”

“Barely.” His voice rang with excitement, and his words sped up along with my pulse. “But if I’m thinking of the same person, a glimpse was enough for him to look familiar. Any chance he drives a green Honda?”

Now my head was spinning, and I made a *stop there* gesture. “How would I know that and why is it important?”

You've lost me, Jake."

"Because a tall, gray-haired man pulled up to the gallery in a green Honda this morning, but instead of going inside, he went to the souvenir shop across the street."

In an instant, I'd whipped out my phone, called up the website for Tristan's restaurant, and zoomed in on the owner/chef's photo. "Is this him?"

"Bingo!" Before I could react, Jake swept me up in his arms and kissed me. "You're brilliant. And impressively fast with a search engine."

"We amateur detectives are strong in the ways of Google," I said, glowing with pleasure from the kiss and the compliment. I smoothed my dress when he released me, and my thoughts turned more serious. "Do you think he's our Mr. Smith?"

"It's possible," he said. "What's his motivation, though? Usually, there's a specific one."

I snapped my fingers. "Eli said Tristan wanted to do business with him, but Eli didn't seem too interested. Maybe Tristan is pissed because Eli turned down a business deal?"

"Nice work, Sherlock. Let's make him suspect number one."

The ideas came together faster and faster, and I couldn't stand still. I paced the room like Jake had the other night. "When we talked about hiding the gems, you said the art at the club had the same out-of-proportion style of frame. What if Eli and Willow moved the diamonds to Sapphire?"

A devilish smile curled Jake's lips as if he couldn't wait to infiltrate the club once again. "I believe this calls for a return visit to Sapphire."

A burst of heat shot down my chest as I remembered what he did to me up against the wall in the bathroom. "I did enjoy our last experience there."

Heat flared in Jake's eyes as well. "Let's make it a double then."

I was so there.

HAPPY PLACE

Jake

“I’ve got to hand it to the guy, Andrew,” I said on the phone. While Ruby made calls of her own in the room, I updated my client while walking the stone path that edged the hotel property. “Eli knows how to hide things.”

Andrew heaved a sigh, but said on the bright side, “But now we know that he turned the stolen money into diamonds, and it’s on Flamingo Key.”

I slowed my pace and rubbed the back of my neck. “It’s not quite that simple. He’s moving things around a lot. We’re closing in on them, but there’s luck and timing involved.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Andrew asked.

I winced. I didn’t intend to hide Ruby’s participation from Andrew, but I gave myself a mental slap for revealing it by accident. “You remember I asked about Ruby, his stepdaughter? Turns out she’s after the same thing we are—following the money and making things right. So we’ve teamed up. Pooled our resources.” I left out mention of anything else we were sharing. That was our business alone.

Andrew made a thoughtful sound. “She’s a lovely lady. Takes after her mother that way.”

Okay, that was an interesting tidbit he’d volunteered. But I left the non-sequitur alone and turned back to the case. “You

should also know we're not the only ones looking for the gems."

Andrew grumbled an unintelligible string of curse words, and I let him vent, but not too long.

"What would you like me to do?" I asked. "I'm willing to go the distance, but I need to know if that's what you want."

"Do what you can do. My shareholders are breathing down my neck. I need this resolved, the sooner and quieter the better. But please don't get yourself arrested."

"I'll do my best to stay above the law," I deadpanned. Andrew likely wouldn't appreciate the irony.

Instead of hanging up, Andrew cleared his throat. "Listen, there's a bonus in it for you if you can pull this off."

He rattled off a healthy number that stopped me in my tracks. That would cover summer school and a big chunk of law school tuition, making life for my family a hell of a lot easier. All I had to do was beat the competition and wrap things up before Ruby left for her tour in three days.

"You're on," I agreed. I hung up with Andrew and returned to my room and my date. The next few hours were a reprieve from the jewel hunt, and I intended to enjoy them.

* * *

Later that evening, I glided across the seafloor at Turquoise Rock with Ruby. The underwater grottos made a perfect dive at dusk. A school of silvery grassy sweepers darted past us, stirring the cool waters forty feet below the surface.

My hometown of Key Largo was one of the top scuba destinations in the world, and I'd gone on a lot of dives there, but Ruby knew this place. Her ease in the water was evident as she slipped through the rocky tunnels. She'd bounced with delight when we'd arrived and I'd let her in on the surprise date—a thirty-minute sunset dive that was coming to a close. With air running low, it was time to say goodbye to the ocean.

We broke the glassy surface under streaks of vibrant pink and bright orange across the sky. We treaded water and watched the sun disappear below the horizon in a burst of radiant color, then a glorious fade to dusk. I shifted my gaze to Ruby, keeping silent because nature's beauty said everything I could have voiced. Rapture was in her eyes—they sparkled as she stared into the distance. This was her happy place and I felt beyond lucky to share it with her.

Fifteen minutes later, we'd come ashore and returned to the dive shop with our rented equipment, then walked in the humid evening air toward my car. The air-conditioning in her Jeep had been on the fritz, so we'd taken my rental.

As I opened the passenger door for her, she met my gaze and said, "Thank you for taking me on a dive. It was perfection."

"You're welcome, but I'm pretty sure you were the one taking me. You're the pro," I corrected. "I will, however, finally take you to dinner. Seemed like you were making googly eyes at the panini shop earlier today."

She swatted my leg. "Was not. At least, no more than you were," she said, lowering her voice to a tease. "Which means—I was absolutely, positively lusting over a sandwich."

A laugh shuddered through me. "That's what I thought."

"Sounds like a perfect dinner spot."

I was delighted to hear that. I'd happily take her to a fancier joint, but I loved Ruby's casual vibe, with her sundresses and beach hair. And, of course, the fact that she liked rugged guys. I wasn't a swirl-wine-at-the-country-club guy. I preferred baseball, boats, and sandwiches.

At the panini shop, we placed our order—Caribbean chicken for her, a spicy grouper sandwich for me, and beers for the both of us.

Island music, full of the cheery plink of the kettledrum, drifted from the eatery and onto the patio where we enjoyed a view of the deep indigo sea in the distance. After a few relaxing minutes, Ruby spread her napkin on her lap, and said,

“I’ve been thinking of something we talked about earlier on your balcony. When you asked me earlier if I knew you.”

I nodded. “Go on.”

“And I want to know more, Jake. Seems only fair. You’ve been to my happy place with me,” she said, gesturing to the ocean that hugged the island. “Tell me about yours.”

“My happy place?” I arched an eyebrow. “You mean seats along the first baseline for the Miami Aces?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Your family. They’re your happy place, aren’t they?”

The thought of them brought a grin to my face. “Yeah. They absolutely are.”

She placed her hands on the table and leaned forward. “Tell me about them.”

Easiest conversation in the world. Even though Kylie was a handful, and Brandt had been a wild child, they were *mine*. And I loved that she recognized that my siblings were to me what the water was to her—my magic.

“There’s my older sister, Kate. It was her idea to start the retrieval business when I got out of the Army. She’s very nosy about my love life and gives me a hard time about *everything*.”

“I think that’s in the Sibling Code,” Ruby said with a smile that wrinkled her nose.

“Must be. I give her a hard time about her tabby cat, which she named Inspector Cat because he has to paw everything—mugs, flowers, pens, papers, earrings—until he knocks it to the floor.”

“My mom has a cat like that. A tuxedo. Gets into everything. Rips the toilet paper to shreds and eats the plants.”

“Kind of an asshole?” I asked dryly.

“Well, she is a cat, so...”

I chuckled at that fundamental truth. “My nephew, though, loves that cat. Mason is pretty much the only person the cat is actually sweet to.”

“What’s Mason like?”

“He’s a pistol, just like my brother, Brandt, the athlete of the bunch. Wild and playful. We used to say when Mason woke up, it was like a bomb going off. Brandt was like that too when he was younger, so it’s kind of funny to see that in Mason now.”

She took a pull of her beer, then set it down on the red-checked tablecloth. “And what about Kylie? Why is she a handful, as you say?”

I scratched my jaw. “She’s sweet but super scattered. She’s the youngest, so the parents’ passing affected her differently. Her anxiety issues make school a bit of a struggle for her. She pulls through but needs extra help, like on this science test she has on Monday.”

Ruby frowned. “That’s too bad.”

I nodded. “I wish I could make it easier for her. It’s hard to watch her struggle and get frustrated with herself. My goal is just to get her through it and be as supportive as I can.”

“And it sounds like you’re doing that,” she said, reaching across the table to put her hand over mine. I smiled my appreciation, and the moment lingered. “What about Brandt? Is he still the wild child?”

I shook my head, thinking of my kid brother and how much Brandt had changed over the years. “Nope. School settled him. He’s intense and focused. He spent a year as a paralegal to make absolutely certain he wanted to be a lawyer. And he does, so he’s applying to law school now.” I winced briefly as I pictured more tuition bills piling up.

“Law school isn’t cheap.”

“Don’t I know it,” I muttered. “That’ll be a big chunk of change.”

She spread her fingers into a frame shape. “The Jake picture is becoming clearer.”

I cocked my head, curious. “How so?”

“That’s the other reason why you’re so driven, isn’t it? Paying for their schools?”

Family was private to me, and I didn’t delve into the details with many people. Same with my job—I preferred to keep it on the down-low. But I didn’t mind sharing this with Ruby. Maybe it was that she was so different from Rosalinda. Ruby seemed to quiz me out of genuine interest, not a hidden agenda to learn my weak spots. Rosalinda had peppered me with questions to unearth my vulnerabilities, find a way to steal from me. Ruby wasn’t working for the enemy. Her motives centered on the case and with me.

“Yep. My family is one hundred percent my reason. They are all my reasons.” I rubbed my hand across my tattoo, tropical leaves, trees, and flowers. It was time to share this with her. “My parents loved the Caribbean. Went there all the time. Took us on vacations there, when it was just Kate and me, before Kylie and Brandt were born. They said it was their happy place,” I said, with both fondness and sadness all at once.

“You got that for them,” she said, understanding immediately.

“I did. Reminds me of them. Of us. As a family.”

She reached for my arm, ran her soft fingers across my ink. “It’s beautiful,” she said, reverently.

“Thank you. I love it too.”

A boisterous family entered the restaurant, pulling my attention away from Ruby for a moment. As I turned my head, I caught a glimpse of someone hanging by the edge of the crowd. The sharp nose, the cut of the jawline—the profile snagged a memory and I studied him, trying to place him in my mental contact list.

Then Ruby spoke, softly, and with a smile in her voice. “Thanks for sharing.”

“You’re a good listener,” I said.

And like smoke in a breeze, everything vanished but her, and I returned my attention to the woman across from me.

She rested her chin in her hand, her soft blue gaze intent on me. “You really are like their father.”

When she said that, my heart pounded against my chest like it was connected to her. Because she not only *got* me, but we were on the same wavelength.

The waitress arrived with our dinners and set down the plates. After she left, Ruby picked up her sandwich and returned to the conversation. “What kind of lawyer does Brandt want to be?”

“Prosecutor. He wants to save the world.”

“Is that because of your parents and what happened to them?” she asked and took a bite of her panini.

“He doesn’t want to see that happen again. He wants to fight back. Find justice.” I bit into my sandwich too. Delicious.

“It’s kind of amazing how you both have the same intense focus and drive. But then it’s not that surprising, either, I suppose. Is he like you in other ways?”

“Meaning is he charming, witty, and good-looking?”

She laughed. “Is he?”

“He is. I can say that about my little brother, right? He’s a handsome guy.” I grabbed my phone and scrolled to my photos. As we ate, I showed Ruby pics of the whole crew—my favorite people in the universe.

While we scrolled, a note flashed on the screen from my little sister.

Kylie: Almost ready for the test. I just have one problem that’s driving me crazy. It’s on frictional forces and I want to CRY.

I showed it to Ruby. “See? This is what I mean about Kylie. Nervous wreck. Poor kid.”

Ruby furrowed her brow. “Is that for her physics test?”

When I nodded, she finished chewing, then set down the sandwich, took a drink, and said, “I won’t pretend I’m a rocket scientist, but I know how to work my way through frictional forces. I could help her.”

I stared at her like she’d dropped a birthday present in my lap. “You could?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I could and I would. Want to call her and I can walk her through how to solve that type of problem?”

“You’re an angel,” I said, and she beamed.

My heart raced with giddy excitement, a surge of joy I hadn’t felt in ages. I blinked, as if I could chase away this foreign feeling, but it had no plans for departure. Happiness had lodged inside me, and that was terrifying and wonderful at the same damn time.

As she talked to Kylie, I told myself this feeling was relief at my little sister getting the help she badly needed. I tried to convince my brain that my heart wasn’t hammering against my rib cage over the caring way she spoke to my sister, or how she’d talked about my siblings over dinner, or the genuine joy she’d shown while spending time in the ocean with me an hour ago.

Nope. No way my heart was fluttering for the woman. And I was too smart to fall for someone I worked with. To prove it, I turned to work. I wouldn’t talk personal lives. I’d talk partnership. So, as Ruby wrapped up the conversation with Kylie and then stepped away to the ladies’ room, I looked something up on my phone.

See? I was doing this for someone I valued as a one-time-only partner, not for the woman inspiring all sorts of crazy feelings about her and for her.

Though as I wrote a few quick lines, I knew—I absolutely knew—that I was lying to myself.

BUTTERFLY RESISTANCE

Ruby

I stared into the mirror in the ladies' room and tried to center myself with one of Mom's yoga mantras. To calm my racing emotions and the fast-forward imagining of future possibilities with Jake.

Meeting his family. Getting to know the people he loved most.

I shook my head. What on earth had gotten into me? We'd agreed to an island tryst. I'd promised myself I wouldn't think too much about the future.

But conversation with Jake was so very easy. Even the massive misunderstanding that had nearly derailed us was a speck in the rearview mirror, and Jake and I seemed to be growing closer.

How had *that* happened? This was supposed to be just business, then it was supposed to be an island fling. And now I was *feeling more*?

Maybe it was the time factor. The steady ticking of the clock as it marched toward the end of this trip surely had tricked me into believing something was brewing between us. As I finished washing my hands and grabbed a paper towel, I reminded myself that this was an arbitrary intimacy, born of island breezes and too much sunshine. None of the factors should lead to a rapidly beating heart; to flushed cheeks; to the

dopey, happy look in the eyes of my reflection as I pictured more days and nights with him.

Stay strong, I lectured my reflection. Don't give in to all those butterflies.

Duke had promised to be good to me, and that had turned out to be a crock.

Now with Jake, our goals were parallel, but not exactly the same. I didn't think he was or would be dishonest with me if he could help it—probably—but he had a job to do. His family relied on him.

And my mom, even if she didn't know it, was relying on me.

The only smart thing to do was to keep focused and let my brain guide me.

When I returned to the table, Jake shot me the sweetest smile. His soft lips curved up, his eyes crinkled at the corners, and they seemed to light up.

Ugh. Resistance is out. Brain, you're at the plate.

“What are you smiling about?” I asked, tilting my head and trying to read him. A waitress skirted around us, balancing a loaded tray. I barely noticed her as Jake held my gaze captive.

He gestured to the chair. “Sit down. I have something to show you.”

I sat, and he showed me his phone screen.

It was open to a TripAdvisor page about Ariel's Island Eco-Adventure Tours, where a new review had appeared on my listing. As I read the words on the post, a smile took over my face, too wide to contain. Words like *great customer service, incredible dive leader, brilliant knowledge of marine life, super-nice woman running the business.*

They were simple words but thrilling ones.

They meant the world to me. Not because I was jonesing for one more review. But because he'd done it knowing it

mattered to me. He understood *why* it mattered so much.

Jake couldn't be more different than my ex. I set down the phone, leaned across the table, cupped his cheeks in my hands, and kissed him. It was soft at first, but in seconds it climbed higher and turned feverish. My skin sizzled as the kiss consumed me. He groaned as our tongues tangled in a furious duet of longing. I was vaguely aware of the diners and my own sense of propriety—or decency, even. So I sealed my lips tightly to his, kissed him hard one final time, then let go.

“Thank you,” I said as I sat back down. “Even though you’ve never done one of my tours, that was very sweet.”

“I beg to differ. I have done one of your tours,” he said with a playful rise in his eyebrow. “Tonight.”

“Was that an official or unofficial tour?”

“Unofficial, unpaid, who cares? I had the time of my life, and I want everyone to know Ariel’s Island Eco-Adventure Tours is the best in the business.”

“You know what you deserve for that amazing review?”

“An epic blow job? A chance to put you on all fours and sink into you?” he asked.

Okay, fine. Ripping off clothes was quite fun, and I wasn't going to take that possibility off the table. I laughed. “You are such a dirty man.”

“I am, and you love it.”

“I do, and you'll get all of that, but I was thinking of ice cream right now.”

“That works too.”

He tossed the napkin and some bills on the table in a rush, held out his hand, and eagerly walked with me to the nearest ice cream stand.

Holding hands the entire way. Squeezing my fingers. Running the pad of his thumb absently over the top of my hand.

Kissing was good, and sex was fantastic. But holding hands?

That was magical. And it brought a return of those damn butterflies and all the future possibilities.

They were dangerous things, those butterflies. Scarier than jewel thieves.

THE ART OF MISDIRECTION

Jake

The mint chip was delicious. The company was even better. The taste of mint and sweetness on her lips as I kissed her while we walked along the street, music playing from bars, the island breeze floating by, was the best.

Spotting the sign for The Pink Pelican flickering neon in the night, I nodded to the bar where we'd met. "Quick game of darts before we call it a night?"

"You're a glutton for punishment," she said, then fixed on her best game face. "Get ready to be destroyed, Hawkins."

"You're on."

Maris worked the bar, just like she had the night we met, but we didn't interrupt her as she scurried from one end to the other, tending to customers. Ruby and I held our rematch, but this time I won.

I raised my arms in victory while Ruby exaggerated a frown. "No fair. Another round?"

"Not until you admit I beat the dart shark fair and square," I said.

She scowled. "Never. I will never admit defeat."

I grabbed her waist and slammed her close. Her breath caught. I nipped her earlobe. "Admit it," I growled. "Admit I

am masterful at darts. Then, and only then, will I accept your rematch offer.”

She shook her head and made a move toward the dart in my hand like she was trying to subtly snatch it away. I clamped it tight in my fingers and raised an eyebrow. “You trying to pickpocket me?”

“If pickpocketing from your hand counts, then yes. I was.”

“If that’s the case, you need a lesson in technique, woman. You’re too obvious.”

“Oh, of course, you *would* know how to pick pockets too?” She narrowed her eyes skeptically as she grabbed her iced tea from the nearby counter and took a drink.

I laughed and admitted, “I do. I don’t do it often, but it’s a useful skill.”

She put down the glass, resettled her purse on her shoulder, and demanded, “Teach me.”

“Can’t really teach you everything in one night, but it’s all about the art of misdirection.” I led her back to the dartboard, and grabbing a dart from the green felt, I raised it and took aim at the bull’s-eye. Her gaze followed the dart. “The trick is to get the person to look at one thing while you’re busy with another.”

“Got it,” she said. She stared at the dartboard for one second...two seconds...three...until she realized nothing else was going to happen there. She snapped her focus back to me, and I brandished her wallet.

Laughing, she snatched it back. “Did you have to use my purse as a demo?” she asked, faux outraged.

“I sure did. But that was the point. To show you how it’s done.”

“Okay,” she said with a bring-it-on wiggle of her fingers. “Let me try.”

I taught her a few basic distraction tricks, and she practiced on me, dipping her fingers into my pockets and trying to lift

my watch. She was no pro, and I was aware of her moves every time. But her technique improved with the brief lesson.

The repeated gliding of her hand into my pocket, though, pulled my focus away from teaching and on to the next phase of tonight.

“That’s all for today’s lesson,” I said. “Need to get you alone now.”

Her eyes told me she wanted that too.

As we headed for the door, I paused to acknowledge Maris, who’d been busy all evening pulling the tap and pouring drinks. I caught her eye and gave her a farewell tilt of the head, but she beckoned us over.

“Hey, you found your sexy fisherman,” she said to Ruby, flicking her long braid off her shoulder so it hung down her back. She turned to me next. “And you found my favorite mermaid.”

“We did find each other,” Ruby said in a sweet voice that nailed me right in the heart.

We found each other.

Those words pulsed with double meaning.

The way my heart skipped at the sound of them almost distracted me from a nagging realization, poking me with an obvious oversight. It was a cliché, but bartenders noticed things. At least, Maris did, and had shown as much the day I first came into The Pink Pelican. And the bar was only a few shops away from Willow’s gallery.

I gestured her closer so I wouldn’t have to shout. “Did you see much traffic from the reception at Willow’s Island Gallery last night?”

“You still trying to sell that Renoir?” she asked with a wink and a grin.

“Yeah, I have a confession: I don’t actually own a Renoir.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Next you’re going to tell me you’re not really a fisherman.”

“No, I really am a fisherman,” I assured her in the same bantering tone.

“Oh, then you’re *not* trying to find out who was at the gallery that night?” Maris asked, as she replaced customers’ empty beer bottles with full ones. “You don’t want to know if any of those snooty art lovers deigned to stop in The Pink Pelican after their wine and aperitifs?”

I spread my hands in a *you got me* shrug. “You see right through me, Maris.”

“I’m guessing this is because the gallery owner’s pendant got stolen?”

“Is there talk about it on the street?” Ruby asked, chiming in.

I perked up too, leaned forward, hungry for rumors going around the shops and clubs near Willow’s gallery.

“All I know is after the party, a couple of people came over for something stronger than rosé, and they were talking about how the diamond had disappeared from around the woman’s neck in the middle of the reception.”

“Who were they?” I asked.

“The manager of the gallery, a waitress from the nightclub down the street, and,” she said, taking a beat to give a sly grin—I wasn’t sure why she did that, but then she added— “A *very* sexy guy with a snake tattoo.”

A new customer sidled up to the bar and raised a few fingers, eager to order.

“Need to run,” Maris said, and blew us a kiss as she returned to work. “Come back soon.” Then she stopped, backed up a few steps, and leaned across the counter toward us. “You two make an adorable couple. You know that, right?”

Ruby blushed, and I put on a stoic face to hide the grin I felt inside.

As we left, Ruby squeezed my arm. “Snake tattoo,” she whispered when we reached the sidewalk. “The manager at the nightclub.”

That jogged my memory. I'd seen the guy in Eli's office at the nightclub the other night. Had he been there legitimately? Or had he been poking around? "Think he's our Mr. Smith?"

Ruby's eyes sparkled with mystery-solving excitement as she connected clues. "He knows Eli. He'd probably know Eli had some diamonds. He certainly knew Willow had one. What if he took it last night at the party? Maybe he has a bone to pick with Eli." She grabbed my arm, clutching me tightly. "Jake," she whispered. "I saw him at Happy Turtle a few days ago. He was sunbathing and looked like he was asleep. But what if he was..."

"Following you?"

Her face turned whiter than it had been the moment before.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll keep you safe, sweetheart," I said, meaning it with every fiber of my being. "And we'll keep our eyes peeled for him. You're seeing Eli tomorrow, right?"

She nodded as a night breeze drifted by, swirling the hem of her skirt. "I am. I'll see what I can find out. I have an idea for how to pull off the next phase of our plan."

On the way back to the hotel, we plotted the next day, and everything, *every damn thing*, about this walk and this talk felt right. We were in this together, chasing the same prize, working as a team. As we headed through the front doors of the hotel, I dropped a kiss onto her cheek. "So much better to work with you than against you," I said.

"I can think of other things you can do against me though," she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

I groaned, tightening my arm around her shoulders. My hotel was bigger than hers, with an open, airy lobby and sleek floors. Music drifted from the busy bar. Ruby glanced toward the live band playing there. Her gaze paused on a woman with jet-black hair, perched on a barstool.

"Oh my god, that's Monica from the sex-toy party," Ruby said in a choked whisper.

Wait. I stopped in my tracks. “Did you say Monica?” I asked, but I was already glancing her way. Holy shit. That was her at the bar, holding a drink, chatting with another woman, laughing.

That was the same woman from the diamond shop.

This island was seriously small.

“Do you know her?” Ruby asked.

“She works at a diamond shop,” I said.

“And sells sex toys,” Ruby said with a crease in her brow. Then she shrugged. “But who doesn’t have a side hustle these days?”

“Fair point,” I said, and peered one more time at her. But the woman was simply having a good time with a friend. Nothing more.

Ruby quickly grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the elevators. “I don’t want her to see me and start a conversation about ten-carat butt plugs.”

I laughed as Ruby stabbed repeatedly at the elevator button. And since I was eager to get upstairs too, I whisked her into the lift as soon as the doors opened, primed to get her to my room and naked as soon as possible. There, she’d be safe from Monica the diamond sex-toy woman and snake-tattoo man. The only danger she’d face would be the sweet torture I had in mind for her when we were alone.

OTHER USES FOR BLINDFOLDS

Ruby

Sharing a hotel room could be awkward. An impromptu sleepover was different. There was no will-we-or-won't-we tension. No wondering if we were sleeping together or *sleeping together*.

There was no question in my mind, at least. I wanted to make the most of these three nights with Jake. To wring every last drop of passion from this fling.

"I'm glad I'm staying the night," I said as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

Jake pretended to yawn, big and loud. "What did you say? I'm tired. I think I'm going to call it a night."

"Oh no, you're not." I grabbed his shirt collar, holding him close.

"Why not?" he challenged with a smirk.

"You were all frisky in the elevator, and I have plans for you."

He arched an *oh-really* brow, then said, "I'm wide awake."

Good. Earlier I'd entertained wild ideas about blindfolding him, and the notion had stuck with me. I wanted to experiment with my own limits, my own trust.

Walking to my suitcase, I rummaged through it to locate the wrap I'd used that afternoon. Then I returned to Jake and placed it in his hands.

“Do what you want to me with that. Maybe blindfold me.” Nerves thrummed through me. I'd never trusted someone enough to try that, but I was eager to explore new terrain with Jake. I felt like I was offering him something important. “I trust you.”

“You should.”

He stepped closer and ran his finger along my cheek, his signature touch. He tossed the wrap behind him on the bed. In a flash, he'd tugged my dress over my head and dropped it in a navy-and-white puddle on the floor.

“But, see, Ruby...I'm not going to blindfold you.” He bent his head to my neck and pressed a hot kiss to my collarbone. I trembled, loving his kisses and sought more of them. He blazed a path up my throat, making me squirm in his arms. He ran his hands from my shoulders to my wrists to my waist, then unhooked my bra, letting the white silk fall to the ground.

“You're not?”

He shook his head as he cupped my breasts in his big hands, running the pads of his thumbs over my nipples. “Nope. Not gonna use it to cover your eyes.”

The anticipation thrilled me as he dropped his mouth to one breast, drew in a nipple, and sucked gently. I murmured and sighed, my hands seeking the back of his head, my fingers finding his hair.

When he let go, his eyes shined with mischief. He wasted no time stripping off his own clothes. He flopped down on the bed, then scooted up to a pillow, propping himself on it, and raking his gaze over me from head to toe.

“Like what you see?”

“Very much,” he said roughly. “I'd like it more if you'd take off that last little item and give me an unobstructed view.”

I dipped a thumb into the waistband of my panties, teasing, taking it slow. Lowering one side an inch. Then the other. Just a little farther now. The waves lapped the shore with a soft, steady *shush* as I toyed with my underwear...and him.

“Take them off. All the way off,” he growled.

I sashayed my hips in a final tease then stepped out of the panties at last, adding them to the rest of my clothes on the floor.

“Fuck,” he rasped out as he blinked and stared—just fucking stared, eating me up with his hungry gaze. “Get over here and sit on my face.”

My skin sizzled everywhere. I was overcome with desire, thrilling at his commands.

He grabbed the wrap from the bed then dangled it as I climbed over him. “Higher now.”

My breath came hard and fast before I even reached his shoulders. He grabbed my hips and held me in place, kneeling over his face. He gripped my wrists in one hand and tugged them behind my back. “I don’t want to blindfold you. Know why?”

“Why?” I asked, a pulse beating insistently between my legs.

“Because of your eyes,” he said as he gripped my wrists and wrapped the fabric around them.

“What about them?”

“I love looking at you when you come. When you’re close. When you’re getting there,” he said.

A fresh wave of desire crashed over me like a wave slamming the shore. He wasn’t even touching me, and I ached with longing. I straddled his face, but he had all the control as he tightened the knot around my bound wrists, securing my hands behind my back.

“Blindfolding you would be a crime,” he said. Then he lowered my pussy to his mouth, and I moaned obscenely.

My eyes floated closed. As the world behind my lids turned dark, I wobbled for the briefest moment. Not much—maybe an inch. My eyes snapped open, so I wouldn't fall. But he held my hips tight.

“I've got you,” he whispered. I nodded, letting go, giving in.

He worked his tongue in a frenzied circle across me. I didn't hold back either. I went wild on his wicked tongue, his magic mouth, his stubbled chin. He was my launchpad to pleasure, and I was taking off.

With my hands tied, I couldn't hold on to anything for balance. But I didn't need to. Because he had me in his grip. And I gave in, surrendering as I came.

Soon, he lifted me off, unbound me and placed me on my back.

“Stay like that,” he commanded.

I wanted to stay. Here with him was exactly where I wanted to be.

DO BETTER

Jake

She was so beautiful, her hair fanning out on the bed, her skin flushed, her eyes glossy with pleasure.

“Spread your legs for me,” I said, rolling on a condom.

As she parted her thighs, I nearly came right then. The sight of her so aroused stoked the flames inside me. I wanted more of her pleasure. I loved driving her wild and hearing her noises. She was so free in bed in a way I hadn't known I needed until I had it with her. I wanted a lover who had no inhibitions, who trusted, who took and who gave, and who opened herself up.

I eased inside her, cursing in pleasure as I filled her.

She looked stunning with her back bowed, her red lips falling open in an *O*. I moved inside her, building a slow, steady rhythm, wanting to experience every single rapturous moment of being inside her. She was warm and pliant, with a sex-drunk look in her blue eyes.

“You are so beautiful,” I rasped out.

“You make me feel that way.”

This time was different as our bodies tangled together and we chased the edge. I felt closer to her, more connected, as she wrapped her arms around me, her nails digging into my skin.

Like that, we moved together till she cried out, and I followed her there.

* * *

I held her in my arms, planting kisses on her neck, her hair, her shoulders. I was sure now. I was certain. I didn't want this affair with her to end. I was crazy for Ruby, and I wanted this thing to go on and on. Like Maris had said—we were so damn good together. Fine, Maris said *adorable*, but to me that meant this—*good*.

Sleepy and sated, she unhooked her necklace, and set it on the nightstand. As she fell asleep in my arms, with the stars winking through the windows, this moment had the potential to be endless. I could imagine it stretching on and on, this pure connection with another person.

I wanted to savor it until I fell asleep, but something nagged at me. Two moments from tonight kept looping through my mind. One was at the restaurant, when I'd glimpsed that sharp profile at the edge of the crowd and didn't follow my instinct to look closer. To try and place that look. But then, here at the hotel, I had followed through when Ruby had recognized Monica. Was her appearance here as coincidental as it looked? Sure, paths overlapped all the time. But they'd been overlapping a lot, and the coincidences were piling up.

I stroked Ruby's hair, hoping that these feelings I had for her weren't threatening my focus on work. I'd thought the danger of getting involved with a woman on a job was that she'd use our connection to double-cross me. But what if the danger was that I'd lose my edge?

As I dragged my fingers through the soft blonde strands of her hair, I promised myself, and promised Ruby, to do better tomorrow.

* * *

My focus on the case was razor sharp in the morning. Just me and the mission. No distractions.

The bell above the door at Uncut jingled as I entered the shop and looked for Montez, the man who'd helped me out a few days ago. I spotted him behind the glass display counter, showing a diamond tennis bracelet to a woman in a white skirt and visor.

The customer decided against it—clearly missing how well it matched her outfit—and I ambled over as Montez returned the jewelry to the case. The man glanced up with an automatic smile that widened to genuine when he recognized me.

“Hey, you came back. You decided to get the diamond for your...sister, wasn't it? New job?”

“Graduation.” At least, I had my fingers crossed. “Hopefully. But that's not actually why I'm here.”

The salesman looked wary and intrigued at the same time. “Oh, really? Lay it on me, then.”

I took off my sunglasses and met his eyes. I was going out on a limb, but Montez had been a decent guy when I'd been in here. He was the only one who'd given me a tip, even though it had sent me to another shop. That was one reason I trusted him.

The other? My gut.

“A woman I know—a woman I'm close with,” I added, because it was true, “had her diamond stolen from her hotel room here on the island. One of those blue-tinted ones we talked about.”

Montez tsked and shook his head. “That makes me sad to hear. Hope your lady friend won't hate the island now. But how can I help?”

“You could take a look at this...” I already had my phone out, opened to a photo of the guy with the snake tattoo. I'd found the snap and the guy's name—Nigel—from the Sapphire website. He wasn't the only candidate for Mr. Smith, but if Ruby had spotted him possibly following her, I was starting my search with the club's manager. “Have you seen

this guy? He's also got a snake tattoo on his arm. Might have been trying to turn that blue diamond back into money."

Montez tensed, nodded to the screen. "Yeah, I've seen him around. He was at a café nearby yesterday with the man who runs International Diamonds."

Yes! First time lucky.

Glancing around the empty shop, Montez lowered his voice. "Everyone here knows International Diamonds turns the blue diamonds. If he stole your friend's gem, he would have gone straight to them."

"Yeah, he probably did," I said, and this new intel placed the man with the snake tattoo at the head of the line of suspects. "Anything else you saw at the café? Did you hear anything?"

Montez shook his head, his eyes etched with worry. "No. I was just walking by on my way back from lunch. But I thought maybe he was there on behalf of Mr. Thompson, since he works for him at Sapphire."

Shit.

I hadn't considered that. It didn't rule him out as the thief, but he could have been there as Eli's middleman rather than peddling his own stolen gem.

I was right where I'd started a few minutes ago—circling suspects. "Thanks, man," I said, and held out a hand to shake.

When I left the shop, I took a minute to recalibrate, weighing my next steps as I breathed out some of my frustrations. But I needed more information most of all, so I called Kate and gave her three names.

"I'll have intel for you in an hour," she said in her crisp, businesslike tone.

"Excellent," I said. "Tell Mason I'm bringing him back a new snorkel mask, and we're going to dive for buried treasure off the coast of Key Largo."

Kate laughed. "He'll be excited." She downshifted to a softer voice. "He misses you."

“I miss the little guy too.”

I headed out of the diamond district down Wayboard Street toward Tristan's, passing International Diamonds along the way. Monica had helped me the other day and had told me about the watermark—and she'd said they'd had other diamonds like it lately. Would she tell me if they'd had more in the last few days? Hard to say but I could duck in and ask if they'd had any others brought in since the other day. But it would have to be after my eleven-thirty appointment. She'd seemed suspicious of me. I didn't think it was just the tight bun and strict-schoolmarm glasses.

I stopped suddenly on the steps to the restaurant, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. Dark hair. Tight bun.

I'd just seen that.

I spun around, searching the busy street. There—

But by the time I'd descended the stairs, she'd disappeared. Ducked into a shop, maybe.

Holy shit. Was the sex-toy diamond saleswoman following me?

SHOWTIME

Ruby

At eleven-fifteen, I walked to Eli's club from Jake's hotel. It wasn't far, and there was a crystal-blue sky and a cooling breeze. Just another day in this island paradise.

My lunch with Eli wasn't for another forty-five minutes, but I thought I'd find him at one of his favorite spots first. He'd told me he spent time at Sapphire most days. I'd donned a pink sundress, flip-flop sandals, and a pair of delicate mermaid earrings—quirky but pretty. I'd dressed to appear approachable. *Tell me all your secrets, Eli.*

The club looked different without flashing lights and cool blue neon signs. Just a gray front door with one security guard manning it. I climbed the steps and told him, "Hi. I'm Ruby Ashley. I'm here to see Eli."

The guard's blank expression disappeared and he smiled. "Welcome back, Ms. Ashley. Mr. Thompson is in his office," the man said, pushing open the heavy steel door. He gestured for me to head inside. "Go right in."

Sapphire during the day was like a Halloween haunted house with the lights on, exposing all its secrets. Overhead fluorescents unmasked the bar, the floor, the stage, and the balcony, chasing away the slinky, sexy, sultry mood of after-hours. There was no pulse of techno-heavy music. No hum of crowds, no clink of glasses. Just the echo of my sandals as

they slapped across the tiles when I crossed the dance floor. As I neared the winding staircase on the other side, I heard my name shouted from above.

“Ruby!”

I craned my neck and saw Clarissa, the club’s assistant manager, coming down the steps to intercept me. Her chestnut hair and banana-yellow dress made the empty club seem even more drab.

“Cal told me you were here,” Clarissa said as she reached the bottom step. “Eli’s in his office working,” the assistant manager continued, “but he’s looking forward to your lunch together.”

“I’m excited to see him too.”

And his artwork. I’m incredibly excited to see that.

“He told me you had a scuba tour next week,” she said as she turned around and climbed the steps with me.

“Do you dive? I’ve got room if you want to join us.” I made the offer casually, not expecting her to accept. But I wouldn’t mind filling a slot on the tour either. I told her what day we were diving.

“Must be fate. I have that day off.” We neared the top of the steps as she said, “Are you enjoying your extra time?”

Enjoying didn’t cover it. I was intrigued, frustrated, and anxious about the mystery. I was *savoring* the time with Jake.

“It’s been the experience of a lifetime,” I said honestly, with a private little grin. “Have you lived on the island long?”

“A while. Circumstances were making work difficult in the mainland, but I came down here to get away from it all for a bit and ended up staying.” The corner of her mouth twitched in private amusement. Maybe there was a special someone behind that secret smile for her too.

“Anyway,” she said as we turned into the hall that led toward the office, passing the three Lynx artworks. I tried not to stare at them, to bide my time. “This is a great job, and I

love working for Eli,” Clarissa finished, her permanent smile fixed in place.

With impressive timing, we’d reached the office, and I heard Eli’s voice through the open door. “Perfect. So glad the deal is working out.” He was on the phone from the sound of it. “She’ll simply be thrilled.”

Clarissa pushed the door farther open and I went in. Eli’s back was to me, and I took the chance to inventory the walls. There was only one piece of framed artwork, and the frame didn’t look too heavy. I stifled a quiet sigh of relief. I could do this.

I patted my purse absently as Eli turned around in his chair. His blue eyes twinkled when he spotted me, and he waved, his lips curved in a broad grin.

I should feel guilty for smiling to his face and then hoodwinking him. But, oh, wait, that was what he’d done to Mom.

So I didn’t feel so bad about it after all.

Eli hung up and then raised his wrist to look at the face of his Rolex. “Am I late for lunch? Did I get the time wrong?”

I waved off his concern with a bright smile. “Nope. I’m just early. I was doing some shopping in the neighborhood and thought I would pop in to see you in your element.”

Eli strode across the plum-colored carpet of his office and wrapped me in a big embrace. “Sit,” he said when he’d released me, and he patted a plush black leather couch. “It’s good to see you regularly like this. How was shopping?”

“I went with my friend Tommy,” I improvised. I didn’t think I’d need more of a cover story than “shopping,” but this worked out fine since “Tommy” would be calling in a matter of minutes. “He’s helping me on my tour in a few days.”

“You should have invited him along for lunch!” Eli said. “I’d love to meet your friend.”

Somehow, I managed not to choke at the thought. Jake, AKA Tommy, would love that.

“He’s checking on some of the equipment we need for the tour. He’s very particular. A little high-strung.” I leaned over and clasped Eli’s hand, giving it a squeeze. I had my own smoke-and-mirror show, and the clock was ticking slowly to eleven-thirty. “So that gives us plenty of time together to catch up.”

“Why don’t we head to the restaurant?” he suggested. “I’ll drive, and we can see if Tristan can seat us a few minutes early.”

“Oh no!” I exclaimed, and at Eli’s surprised stare, I laughed airily, hiding the way my heart skittered. “I couldn’t possibly leave without seeing the Lynx paintings.”

Or, more accurately, I couldn’t leave until eleven-thirty.

I pointed to a design on the wall, about twelve inches square. “Is this one?”

“Yes.” He smiled proudly as if he’d painted it himself. “I heard you stopped by the gallery the other day but couldn’t stay. Willow told you what happened, right?” he asked, dropping his voice to a whisper, and he pointed to his neck as if gesturing to an invisible piece of jewelry.

“Yes. She did,” I said. “That’s just awful. I can’t believe they took it right off her neck.” I gave a convincing shudder. “Do you have any idea who could have taken it?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been on nonstop calls with the insurance company since it happened.”

“You reported it to them already?”

“Of course,” he said, dropping his hand to the leather in a slap for emphasis. “You can’t let thieves get away with anything.”

For someone who loved drama, he had no sense of irony.

“No, you can’t,” I said, more seriously than he could know. “You definitely can’t.” I had no intention of letting the thieves get away with snagging my diamond either.

The office phone rang, saving me from more playacting. I glanced at my watch. Eleven-thirty on the dot.

A few seconds later, Clarissa rapped gently on the door. “I have a phone call for Ruby. It’s Tommy. He sounds... distraught.”

I adopted a look of utter surprise and confusion. “Why isn’t he calling me on my cell...” I fished around in my purse as if hunting for the phone, which was silenced at the very bottom.

Leaving it there, I turned to my stepfather. “I forgot my cell. Is there any chance I could just...” I nodded to the landline on his desk.

Eli rose and gestured grandly. “Of course. Take as long as you need. Let me know when you’re done.”

“Just hit line nine,” Clarissa added, and they left the room and closed the door behind them to give me privacy with my friend. I’d told Jake to act like it was a crisis, and apparently, he’d nailed it.

As soon as the door clicked, I raced over to lock it, then marched to the desk and picked up line nine.

“Hello?”

Melodramatic sobs greeted me. “I’m so sad. I’m all alone and I’m having a snorkel-gear crisis I can’t possibly resolve without your advice.”

“Hold, please,” I told Jake, then set the receiver on the desk. I was alone in Eli’s office with the artwork. I was within reach of solving the mystery. My fingers tingled with excitement, and I all but skipped over to that wall.

The frame was about eighteen inches square—big enough to hide something but not so big I couldn’t handle it. Literally. I stood on the couch and lifted the art off the hook. As I moved it, something rattled.

A focused thrill pinged through me. I wondered if this was what Jake felt when he recovered what he was after. No wonder he loved his job.

Stepping down, I put the frame on the couch, the back turned toward me, and examined the sturdy paper backing.

With the pocketknife from my purse, I carefully sliced the paper along the bottom so that I could turn back the corner.

My heart nearly rocketed to the moon. There it was. A black plastic cylinder the size of a travel toothbrush taped to the inside of the frame.

Wow.

Carefully, I reached in and peeled off the tape to take out the tube. Something rattled inside.

I pulled off the cap, held my breath, and tipped the contents into my palm. A whole handful of...nuts.

DOUBLES MATCH

Jake

“What did you find out?” I asked my sister, as I sat on a bench at the edge of Seven Mile Beach, getting her report over the phone and trying not to grind my teeth.

“Nuts.”

“Nuts?”

I didn’t know how Ruby was managing to keep it together over lunch with her stepfather.

My first reaction had been bafflement as to why anyone would smuggle ordinary cocktail mix inside framed art. Then I realized they must have been a decoy. Somebody wanted people to assume what Ruby had—that there were diamonds hidden safely away.

On my first visit to Sapphire, I’d spotted Nigel crunching on cashews as he left Eli’s office. Had he planted the nuts for Eli, or had he found the nuts the way Ruby had? Was the snake tattoo guy working for Eli or against him?

No idea, so I homed in on my sister as she began her debrief. “Nigel Harris has worked in the nightclub business for eight years. He managed that property under its previous owner, and when Eli bought the club and renamed it, he kept Nigel on to run things. He helped with the renovation, with hiring, and with lining up security.”

“Is he local?”

“No. Born in the UK. Oldest of six siblings. Looks like he sends money to support his widowed mom.”

I sympathized with the guy, but that was powerful motivation for supplementing his income with opportunistic theft. “What about the tattoo? Any significance there?”

“Apparently, he has pet snakes.”

My stomach curdled at the thought, and I moved to the next name I’d given Kate to check out. “What about Tristan O’Doole?” I asked. “Tell me about the restaurant guy.”

“Ah, Tristan. He’s from Boston, been on the island over fifteen years. His Boston restaurant had a big opening and early success, but failed due to debt. He started Tristan’s fifteen years ago and it’s been moderately successful. From my research, he’s considered a solid chef, but his Boston restaurant failed because he put his money in a house brand of coffee and liquor drinks that didn’t work out. Looks like a pattern. A year ago, he tried out some strange chocolate drinks at Tristan’s that didn’t quite win any fans.”

Interesting. Eli’s investment flop had been in cocoa beans. Maybe he could set Tristan up with whoever made the chocolate in his stash.

“How’s the restaurant doing now?” I asked Kate. “Any debt trouble?”

“None that I could find. Looks like he hit his stride with this one,” she said.

“So money troubles wouldn’t give him motivation.” Why would he do it then? I tapped my fingers on my thigh and watched the kiteboarders skim the small waves by the shore, searching for an answer. Farther out were Jet Ski riders, cutting through the blue water, and beyond them, fishing boats bobbed patiently, their occupants no doubt waiting for a catch.

Yeah, I was waiting too. For answers.

“What about International Diamonds?” I asked Kate. “Were you able to find an employee named Monica?”

While there was nothing wrong with a side hustle, nothing at all, running into Monica no longer seemed like a small island coincidence. Something was up with her.

“I called International Diamonds and asked for Monica, and they said she wasn’t in. Then I used my wits and wiles to get a last name to go with the first. Smith. Which doesn’t sound fake at all.”

I straightened up on alert. “The guy who broke into Ruby’s room gave the name Smith at the front desk.”

“Um...Jake, those don’t even need to be aliases to be within the realm of coincidence.” Kate sounded like she was trying to break bad news to me. “Especially since I could find zero info about a Monica Smith in Flamingo Key.”

But leaving the last name aside, Monica was one of the few people I could think of who knew I had a blue-tinted diamond worth ten grand, and she’d likely seen me with Ruby while she was skulking around the bar, no matter how real Monica’s laughter with her friend had seemed last night.

Just like I sensed danger, just like I knew how to find the stolen Strad, I was sure that Monica was onto us. Mr. Smith had to be her partner.

Monica and Nigel?

Monica and Tristan?

I wasn’t sure, but I did know there was another pair in this doubles match of stolen diamonds.

SAFE COMBOS

Ruby

“I’ll have the lobster bisque with a Tiki salad. Hold the nuts.” I handed my menu to the waiter and faced my stepfather with a fixed and phony smile.

“And the niçoise salad for me,” Eli said, clueless to my needling dig.

I’d replaced the nuts in the tube and the tube in the frame, returning everything to its place. I shouldn’t have been surprised that Eli was so wily. I’d grown up with his big-hearted softy routine while he’d sneakily had everything ready to yank the rug out from under Mom.

He was always one step ahead. It wasn’t enough to hide his diamonds. He had to turn it into a gag.

Planting false clues to keep his enemies running after his nuts?

Yeah. Just his style.

Now I had to sit across from him, eat lunch, and listen to how business was great, the shop was expanding, and the sky rained gold coins and rainbows in the wonderful old land of Eli.

Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. I wasn’t getting anywhere as a sleuth and I was frustrated and disheartened at the thought that I’d have nothing for Mom at the end of this.

Time for a direct approach.

“So, Eli,” I said, snapping open my napkin and spreading it over my lap. “There’s something I want to talk to you about.” Was I really going to dive straight in with questions about his hedge fund? Ask point-blank if he’d skimmed money off the top?

Yes, I was. I was so done dancing around the topic.

But before I could say anything, Eli held up a hand to stop me. “No, my dear. I need to talk to you. I’ve been thinking about what you said the other day at brunch.”

“You have?” I asked, taken aback.

“Indeed. I’ve done some soul searching and you’re right. I wasn’t fair to Shelly.”

I was so shocked that I sat back in my chair and just stared at him, my jaw hanging open. This was front-page news. Eli didn’t apologize for *anything*. “You weren’t fair in the divorce you mean?” I asked, needing to be specific.

He shrugged an admission. “That, and when we were married. I could have done a few things differently.”

“A *few*?” I echoed, my pitch climbing.

His shoulders sank with his heavy sigh. “Willow has helped me see that. I’m trying to become a better man.”

“Are you going to apologize to Mom now? How about paying her back what she gave you to start your business?”

“Let’s not spend our limited time together talking credits and debits. I’d rather invite you to a small party we’re hosting at Willow’s gallery on Wednesday night. It’s a fundraiser for a charity we support to help children. I hope you’ll come if you’re still in town.”

“I’ll try,” I said, burning inside, but taking the opportunity in case it was helpful.

“Now, what did you want to talk to me about?” he asked.

But I was rethinking the “ask point blank” strategy. His “new leaf” strategy had thrown me. My brain whirled, trying

to land on how to play the angles with him—this man who'd once taken such good care of me. It was disarming to try to figure him out.

“Eli...” I began, then I glanced left then right, leaned closer, and lowered my voice. “I’ve heard rumors online about why you left your company.”

I hadn’t, but they were undoubtedly out there. One of them might even be true.

“They say all kinds of things about me on the Internet,” Eli said, waving a hand in the air as if dismissing any concern.

My voice dipped even lower as I tried harder to get him to listen. “They say you maybe, you know, skimmed a little off the top.”

“Ridiculous.” He sounded incredulous and outraged. “I loved that company. It’s called the Eli Fund. I’d never do anything to undermine it.” He leaned forward, mirroring me, and lowered his voice as well. “If anyone was funneling off funds, it was Andrew.”

Now it was my turn to furrow my brow. “Andrew?” The floor dropped out from under me like a roller-coaster car. Could that be true?

“He stole money from the shareholders,” Eli whispered. “I didn’t want to be associated with that, so I left.”

My mind spun with new twists and turns. Andrew had always seemed like a good guy, but what if he had stolen the funds and the diamonds were just Eli’s diamonds? Andrew could have given Jake doctored evidence. But then why hire him in the first place? Except to have a fall guy in Eli.

“Why would he do that?” I asked, speaking my biggest question aloud.

Eli shot me a look that said *you can’t be serious*. “Ruby. You really can’t guess?”

“Guess what?”

“Andrew has been carrying a torch for Shelly for years. I guess once she was single again, he thought he could buy her

love.”

I stared at him, gobsmacked. “You’re saying he skimmed money off the company to impress my mom?”

He gave an *it could be true* shrug. “I’m saying that *if* there was money missing from the Eli Fund, fingers should be pointed at him, not at yours truly,” he said, then shook his head almost sadly.

“But he’s married and has children,” I said, then cringed when I realized how naïve that was. Especially considering the company.

But Eli just nodded. “All the more reason why I got out. I don’t want to do business with someone I can’t trust.”

That pinged in my brain, even after the waiter set down the salads and Eli dug into his and pronounced it delicious. My stepfather had unknowingly tipped me off on how to deal with this info bomb. Even if he’d given me doubts about Andrew, I’d be a fool to give up my doubts about Eli.

I was so involved in my thoughts, I didn’t remember much of lunch. When the chocolate lava cake arrived, Eli seemed to savor the first bite. Then he wrinkled his nose. “Nuts,” he said in disgust.

“There are nuts in it?”

“Mm-hmm. And I hate nuts,” he said.

“Funny,” I said dryly. “We have that in common.”

* * *

The day had heated up while we were at lunch. I tugged at the cotton of my sundress as we walked to Eli’s car in the sweltering sun. When we got in and he cranked up the air-conditioning, I sighed in appreciation. “Ah, heaven,” I said as I relaxed in the beige leather seat. “The AC in my rental hasn’t worked properly since I picked it up.”

“That’s miserable.” He stopped at a light and looked at me. “You should take this one.”

I laughed, but his serious gaze said he wasn't joking. "Eli, I can't take your car."

He tutted. "I have another one. There's no sense in you being miserable." The light changed and we cruised along, the ocean hugging the road on one side.

I thought about driving in these temps with no air-conditioning and yielded without much of a fight. "Thanks. I'll take good care of it."

At the club, Eli parked out front and went to the office for his extra keys. I leaned against the passenger door and didn't have to wait for long. The security guy opened the door for Eli, who came out, accompanied by Nigel—snake tattoo guy. He'd been at Willow's gallery party too.

My spine shivered and I stepped away from the car.

"Ruby," said Eli, "I want you to meet Nigel Harris. He manages this club like a pro." He clapped the inked-up man on the back. "I would have introduced you earlier, but he was running some errands for me."

Nigel offered a closed-mouthed smile and a hand to shake. Nerves storming through me, I took it, searching his brown eyes for any clue that he might be Mr. Smith.

"Good to meet you," he said, clasping my hand longer than needed. "Heard a lot about you. Dive tours, right?"

"That's right," Eli said, stepping next to me and squeezing my shoulder.

"What are your favorite spots?" Nigel asked with a warm grin. "Turquoise Rock? Happy Turtle Cove?"

He lingered on that last one.

The little hairs on my arms stood on end. Happy Turtle was where I'd seen him the other day.

It was also the combination to my safe.

PIÑA COLADA THERAPY

Jake

When I returned to the hotel after a fruitless attempt at finding Monica at her store, Ruby was pulling into the parking lot in a gleaming black Audi rather than her Jeep.

“Nice wheels,” I said, arching an eyebrow. “Is this a replacement rental?”

“Eli loaned it to me,” she answered in a flat voice. She seemed tired and sad.

I’d seen her happy, and I’d seen her feisty. But I’d never seen Ruby Ashley listless. Energy and passion had always unfurled from her.

Until now.

I didn’t know what had happened—if her day had continued to frustrate her the way mine had frustrated me or if it was something else. So I gripped her shoulders and dropped a quick kiss onto her lips. “You need a piña colada and you need it stat.”

* * *

A hammock beckoned us, strung between two palm trees at the edge of the hotel pool, canopied by wide fronds that shaded the spot from the afternoon sun. The waves gently

painted the shore, and the teenagers splashing in the hotel pool made a cheerful background.

“I amend my earlier prescription,” I said. “You need a drink and a hammock, and this has your name written all over it,” I said, holding a matching glass in each hand. When your woman was in a funk, sometimes you had to go all in on the tropical-drink therapy, complete with red paper umbrellas and swirly straws in each cup.

Ruby flopped into the rope hammock and held out one hand. “Drink. Now. Please.”

“One fruity, over-the-top drink at your service. The best medicine for a crappy day,” I said, handing her the beverage. She took a long, thirsty gulp, and I warned, “Careful of the brain freeze.”

“I honestly wouldn’t mind my brain being frozen right now. Then I could stop thinking.”

I joined her on the hammock so we were facing each other. “Talk to me. Tell me what happened. I know you’re bummed about the nuts,” I said.

Her scoff turned into a deep, incredulous laugh. “It felt like I’d gotten a pie in my face at a carnival. But then Eli told me at lunch that he wants to do right by my mom and make up for how unfair he was in the divorce.” She sighed and sipped her drink. “I don’t know what to think.”

I nodded, taking time to process. I wanted to be supportive, but I was wary she was having second thoughts about our partnership in non-crime. So, I kept my response simple. “I get it. You feel torn.”

Stretching my arm, I set my drink on the grass under the hammock and then reached for Ruby’s leg. I rubbed her calf, enjoying the warmth of her skin before speaking again. “I know you feel pulled, and I know you’re frustrated, too, that we’re coming up empty. But we’re close, so close. The diamonds are somewhere here on this island. I know we can set things right.”

She shot me a helpless stare. “But they could be anywhere. *Anywhere*. We’ve turned over every stone, and all we’ve gotten was a handful of nuts.”

“I’m not ready to give up.” While she was low, I could stay upbeat for the both of us. It wasn’t just Andrew’s incentive leading me to soldier on. I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel. Sure, some cases went cold, but this one felt crackable, and I didn’t want to lose my partner.

Ruby stirred her drink with the swirly straw as if sorting through her thoughts. “What if Eli didn’t take the money from his company? Is there a possibility we haven’t considered?”

“Like what?” I asked, careful not to shoot down an idea I hadn’t even heard.

She paused, like she needed to be careful with her next words. “What if it’s Andrew?” Her voice was thready with doubt.

“What makes you say that?” I asked, calmly. I had a feeling I knew the answer.

“Eli,” she admitted with a slightly guilty look, like she felt bad for even thinking it. “He said some things at lunch suggesting it might be him.”

Yup, I was right. Eli had cast blame on his former business partner, and well, in my mind, there was nothing more suspicious than that. “Did Eli have a reason for thinking Andrew might have skimmed the money?” I asked evenly.

“He told me that Andrew has been in love with my mother for years.” Ruby added a *what’s the deal with that* look. “What a thing to say out of nowhere.”

I frowned, thinking over past conversations with my client. “Actually, Andrew gave your mom an offhand kind of compliment yesterday. He said you take after her.”

Ruby gave a short but genuine laugh. “That’s not necessarily a compliment.”

Running my hand over her calf, I assured her, “It is if she’s as tenacious and strong as her daughter.”

Crinkling her freckled nose, she set her empty glass on the ground and pushed up onto her elbows. “Jake,” she said softly, “do you trust Andrew? How do we know for sure what he’s told you is legit?”

“Kate vetted everything beforehand. I wouldn’t have taken the job if I didn’t believe his info was solid and checked out,” I said, feeling enough certainty for both of us. Maybe I could impart some of my own to her.

“What if Kate made a mistake though?”

I blinked at this unexpected turn. “Excuse me?”

“What if those documents and emails were doctored?”

“No. I saw them myself.” Where was she going? I thought we were past this distrust. Also, it was one thing to doubt my character when she barely knew me and another to doubt actual evidence. “Kate specializes in document analysis. She doesn’t make mistakes.”

Ruby hummed thoughtfully, like she was accepting my answer. “Maybe I’d feel differently if I weren’t so personally involved.” Her voice was threaded with frustration as much as suspicion. “I just feel like I’ve had to take people’s word for everything, and it’s led to nothing but dead ends and, oh yeah, the theft of the one thing I *did* have,” she said, so clearly disappointed. “I don’t want to take Eli’s word for things either. I’m just tired of being in the dark.”

I paused, soaking that in. I’d said I understood that she felt torn, but I could only imagine. It was personal for Ruby in a different way.

“Ruby,” I said softly, and running my fingertips down her arm. She tensed. Selfishly, I couldn’t risk fighting with her like this. There was too much at stake. She might tip off Eli. She might turn her back on me. She might cross me. I didn’t think she would, but she *could*.

But even more than that, I hated to see her hurting.

I skimmed my fingers down her bare skin once more. This time, she softened. “I know it’s hard. I want to solve this too. I get that it’s tough for you because it’s personal,” I whispered.

“Thanks for understanding. I almost wish I’d left it alone. I feel helpless,” she said in a broken whisper, devoid of anger now, laced only with sadness. “I feel like we’re being set up. Everywhere we turn, we hit a snag.”

“That’s the nature of a case like this. Three steps forward. Two steps back.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the diamonds were with the charity. Or with Nigel. He made the strangest comment when I left today that made me think he knew the combo to my safe. Or maybe Tristan has them. He’s trying to make a deal with my stepdad to carry some new drink.”

“Or with the sex-toy diamond saleswoman,” I said, thinking it was more likely Monica had lifted the diamond from Ruby’s room the other night. She knew the value, after all. She knew Ruby too. “It’s entirely possible that she wanted that diamond of yours from the second I showed it to her at the store. She could have followed us to figure out where you were staying.”

“See? This is my point. I’m being followed. People are stealing from me. My stepdad’s manager makes odd comments. I just want to do my job. But there’s still this one big, fat issue for me,” she said, stopping to take a beat and meeting my gaze. “What if Eli is telling me the truth?”

I didn’t trust the guy, but he didn’t raise me, so I carefully asked, “Do you believe him?”

She frowned. “I don’t know what to believe. It’s not even about the jewels anymore, Jake. Or who they should or shouldn’t belong to,” she said, dragging a hand through her hair. “I don’t know what to believe about him.”

I didn’t know how to reassure her or if I even could. I didn’t have to grapple with the same issues she did. Eli had helped raise her, he’d lived with her, he’d taken her to kiss stingrays. That bond wasn’t easily dismissed, despite his sins and omissions on other fronts.

But to me, Eli was simply the target. I didn’t have to divorce my emotions; there were none.

I ran my hands down her legs, reaching for her foot. Her eyes drifted closed, and she moaned softly as I pressed my thumbs against the ball of her foot. A contented sigh fell from her lips as I massaged her heels, her arch, her toes, all the way to her little pinkie. I wiggled it, and she laughed, a sweet sound, like bells.

I rubbed my way up, digging my fingers into the strong muscles of her legs. Her legs had hooked me that first night. I still loved them of course, but that instant attraction had shifted into the kind of something where I wanted her to be happy, where I wanted to bring that sparkle back to her eyes.

I reached her thighs, and she let one knee fall to the side.

Oh, hell. I wasn't strong enough. I didn't possess enough restraint to rub her legs in a hammock in public. I wanted her too much.

"Let me take you to our room and make you feel better," I offered.

A soft, sensual smile was her yes.

Inside the room, I lifted her dress over her shoulders, then slid off her panties. She took off my clothes, with neither one of us saying anything. Only sighs. Only murmurs. Only touches. Words weren't needed. I wanted to comfort her with touch.

After walking backward to the bed, I pulled her on top of me, cupped her cheeks, and brushed her hair from her face. I stopped to look at her, to memorize her. Her lips parted, and there it was. That hazy, sexy, vulnerable look that I adored. It was a look of longing that matched my own.

She whispered my name, then said, "Take me. I want you to take me."

"All I want is to have you," I said, desperate for her, but even in my desperation I heard the promise in my own words, and felt it too, as I reached for a condom on the nightstand, covered my length, then pulled her on top of me. Lust and desire stormed in me as she lowered herself, then rolled her hips.

It felt so damn good. This closeness. This connection. This moment with her. All the moments with her. “*This*,” she murmured. “This is my favorite part.”

I knew what she meant. She didn’t mean the position or this particular second. She meant the two of us and all we’d shared.

“You,” she added. “You’re my favorite part.”

I grabbed her waist, held her gaze as she rode me. “I swear you’re mine too.”

Her throaty, sexy moan made me crave her even more. I wanted to do this again and again, over and over, every goddamn night. The heat spread, turning to wildfire. I was dangerously close, and her shuddery sighs told me she was too.

I grasped her hips and flipped her to her back. “Need to have you. Need to take you hard now,” I rasped out, parting her legs wider, hooking them up on my shoulders. Then I drove into her. She threw her head back, her long neck exposed, her hair spread across the pillow. “Don’t wait,” she moaned. “Don’t wait this time. Just come with me.”

So much for my promise to give her three before I took one. I couldn’t hold back if I tried. In seconds, she was trembling in bliss as shudders racked through me.

Shaking with lust and surging emotions, I collapsed on her, folding her in my arms, not wanting to let go. I breathed in the coconut scent of her hair and sighed in pleasure as she snuggled up against me, taking everything I had to give.

I was so tempted to ask what would happen when the trip was over. Neither one of us had voiced it. We hadn’t acknowledged that we didn’t live that far from each other. Maybe now was the time to do that. A relationship was a scary beast, but maybe we could find a way to try.

“Ruby,” I said tentatively.

“Yes?” Her voice sounded hopeful.

I felt all that hope too. “We don’t live that far apart,” I said, broaching the topic at last—whether we could be more than an island tryst.

“I know,” she said, softly, sounding happy, like she’d wanted me to say this too. “I like that we’re close.”

“Same here,” I said.

She sighed contentedly. I kissed her neck. She’d had a helluva day, so I wasn’t going to press for more or for plans. This was enough for now.

We’d opened the door.

The problem was when she wriggled against me, she murmured. “I kind of don’t care about the diamonds anymore.”

I tensed. I didn’t have that same luxury. I couldn’t walk away. The more I got lost in her, the more I risked what I loved most—even if I was dangerously close to feeling something I hadn’t dared experience in ages.

TOWEL THROWN

Ruby

I daubed bright red polish on my toenail, chatting with my mom on speakerphone from my perch on the end of the hotel bed. Finally, I felt relaxed. Thanks to Jake's therapy—cocktails and cock.

Mom told me about meeting with my friend Lance and his mom. "She's the landlord who handles the rent for that yoga studio. She also has space to lease inside a boutique in South Beach where she thinks I might be able to sell my jewelry."

I sat up straight, sliding the brush into the nail polish container. "That's fantastic, Mom. You could sell your jewelry from a permanent location without having to rely on craft fairs."

"It's not cheap." She sounded nervous but hopeful. "But I think I should be able to pull together the money for this."

"I'm so excited for you to have your own shop. That's what you've always wanted."

"I know," Mom said, full of breathless joy. This could be a big step for Mom's business. If Eli carried through with his newfound generosity, it would help with the cost. I hesitated to mention the possibility to Mom though. Eli had talked about paying her alimony, but who knew if he'd actually do it.

"Eli and I had lunch today," I began. "He said something about Andrew having a thing for you, Mom." I fanned my toes

to dry them faster. “Do you think it’s true?”

My mother scoffed. “Eli has a jealous streak. Andrew and I have always and only just been friends, and Eli could never accept that. Which makes sense now. If you’re a cheater, you assume everyone else cheats.”

That was that. Mom had shut down the idea, and I trusted her. Andrew might have some other reason to embezzle from the company though.

“Now, tell me all about the man you mentioned the last time we spoke,” Mom said. “How is it going?”

I sighed happily, putting thoughts of nefarious deeds behind me. There were so many ways I could answer.

Better than expected.

Absolutely wonderful.

I’m falling for him, big time.

I think we could be a real couple when the trip ends.

But before I could choose what to tell my mom, the hotel phone rang on the nightstand.

“I’d better answer that, Mom. Chat with you later.”

“You’d better! I want details!”

I chuckled as I hung up one phone and lifted the receiver of the other. It was the front desk calling to inform me a package had been delivered to reception. Who knew that I was staying at this hotel?

I told the clerk I’d be right down. All the way to the lobby, I wondered if this was a repeat of the other night when the delivery had come with a side of robbery. The weight of my cell phone was heavy in the pocket of my pajama pants. Should I call Jake?

No. He was staking out Sapphire. What if my call came at an inopportune time and gave his presence away?

At the front desk, I gave my name and received a small white box—a jewelry-size box. “Who delivered it?” I asked

the clerk. “Did they leave a name?”

The woman checked the notes on the computer. “It says here ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith.’”

Grabbing onto the reception desk for balance, I managed to keep my feet under me. With the other hand, I popped the box open with trembling fingers. Inside was a ring with a candy gem, and a note.

Here’s your cut of the diamonds.

I was so done.

Where was my towel? Because I was chucking it in.

I flung the candy ring into the lobby trash can. What purpose did this serve? The prank was disturbingly mean-spirited. They’d dragged me out of the room just for this?

Craaaaap.

My stomach hit the floor. My heart dived-bombed next. Then my butt dropped into a chair. What if the whole point was to lure me out of the room? Maybe to search it. Maybe to ambush me.

Maybe I watched too many movies.

When Jake returned from staking out Sapphire, I still sat in the lobby in my pajamas and flip-flops, sporting my new pedicure. In an instant, he was at my side, checking to see if I was all right. I was not all right at all.

“They won,” I said with tears in my eyes, then told him what happened. “I’m sorry, Jake. I give up.”

“It’s okay. I get it.” He rubbed my arms with his warm hands. My vision blurred and my eyes stung because the thieves were cruel, but Jake was...so caring. The way he’d taken care of me that afternoon. The way he was treating me now.

“Let me see what I can find out,” he said, then headed to the front desk to grill them.

That was another point in his favor. The capable way he handled the situation now, even though he returned a few

minutes later with no useful info. Still, I'd never been more grateful for a partner when we headed back to the room together. Inside, he took the lead, peering in all the closets and behind the shower curtain. I didn't know I'd needed that until he'd done it. But hell, did I ever need a protector tonight. I started to relax again. "Thank you," I said, so grateful.

"Happy to do it," he said.

"What happened at Sapphire?" I asked, sitting on the comfy king-size mattress while Jake headed to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Spoiler alert—sharing a room with him was easy, especially since he peeled off his polo, and leaned against the doorway, toothbrush in hand, shirtless. The view was better than the ocean. I loved his carved abs and strong muscles, but his scar and tattoo were my favorite parts of him—they said who he was. They said what mattered to him.

He regarded me curiously. "You want to know about Sapphire? I thought you gave up. Retired from the field?"

"I didn't give up on being curious," I said with a playful pout, but then I erased it, turning a bit more serious. "And I'm still invested in your success."

I wanted him to have all the victories he'd worked so hard for.

"Monica the sex-toy diamond woman was there," he said. "At first I thought she was tailing me again, but then she met up with Tristan. And then Nigel joined their cabal. I had a good view of them up on the balcony, but there was no way to hear over the dance music."

That was a surprising trio. "Do you think all three of them are in cahoots with each other?"

"Why not? If you can have a team of two, why not a team of three?"

Why not, indeed?

I noodled on the question while Jake brushed his teeth. After he rinsed and spat, I asked, "What time did you see them there?"

“Maybe eight o’clock?” He reappeared. “What are you thinking?”

I tapped my chin, adding up the details. “That none of them can be Mr. or Mrs. Smith. They were at the club when the note was delivered.”

He gazed at the ceiling as if he were contemplating that. “Unless there’s *another* member of the team.”

I flopped back on the bed, exasperated. “I’m beginning to wonder who *isn’t* on the team.”

Jake settled on the mattress next to me, brushing my hair back over my shoulder. “Are you regretting working so hard to bring Ariel’s Tours back?”

I heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Probably not.”

“Well, I’ll take that ‘probably,’” he said softly, brushing the back of his fingers across my cheek. “Besides, I’m sure enough for both of us that *this* is the only place I want to be right now.”

* * *

When I woke the next morning, in the back of my mind—okay, not even that far back—I worried that stepping back from the diamond hunt meant stepping back from Jake and me. That he’d see it as an end to both partnerships, which was the opposite of what I wanted.

Tomorrow, my tour began. While I shepherded my group through their dive, he’d still be working the case, looking for defrauded funds, however they were hidden. He would make things right for the investors who had lost their money. And I would hold Eli to what he’d said at lunch about making things right with my mom.

Yes, stepping back was the best, safest choice. I’d have to leave everything to Jake when I started my tour, and this way I didn’t have to spend my last free day pulling my hair in frustration or looking over my shoulder to see who was

following us. I could spend it with the guy I was coming to see as a big part of my future.

We waded out of the surf and flopped beside each other on the blanket I'd spread on the white, sugary sand. Jake and I had claimed our space early this morning, but the beach was filling up with towels, buckets, shovels, and more, all staking out people's territory. Jake laid on his side, tracing his fingers from my starfish belly ring to my neck. It was bare today. I'd left the treasure chest necklace on the nightstand when I'd taken it off the night before. "You know what would look good in your necklace?"

"What?"

"A topaz," he declared, then shook his head. "Wait. No. A peridot."

"My, my. Don't you know your birthstones?"

"Have I mentioned I have two sisters?"

"And they were into birthstones?"

"Of course. Kylie is August and Kate November. What are you?"

"July," I said with a challenging lift of my eyebrow.

"I know what July is."

"And I like that it's not a diamond at all," I said, then I sighed happily. "You're right. My necklace would look good with my birthstone."

"It'd be perfect. How happy are you to be done with diamonds?"

"I'm happy to be done with diamonds, but not with you," I said. It was time to share the truth I'd been holding onto since talking to my mother last night. Since he'd said such sweet and sexy words when we cuddled together on the hotel bed, wrapped up in each other's arms. "I'm going to miss you, Jake Hawkins."

He smiled like he had a secret. "Yeah, about that..."

THE REAL PRIZE

Jake

If you'd asked me seven days ago if I could have imagined falling for a woman this quickly, I'd have scoffed.

But everything about this job had surprised me—Ruby most of all. I'd tried to fight against this attraction, against my feelings, against everything about her that was irresistible. I didn't let anything get in the way of work, especially romance. But I was no longer working with her, so I was free to proceed.

No, that was a lie. I'd been game to move forward with Ruby regardless, hunting treasure together or not. I wanted her, and I didn't want to fight that desire any longer.

“So, about this elephant in the room,” I said, brushing my fingers across her soft thigh.

Ruby scanned the beach. “I don't believe elephants are native to Flamingo Key.”

“No. The elephant is the rest of Florida.”

“Ah, I see.” She smirked. “And what exactly about Florida is elephantine?”

I laughed, loving her sense of humor. “This. Us. The fact you and I just fit.”

A smile spread across her face as she shifted closer to me. “How do we fit?”

I pulled her snug against my side. “I like to think we fit in Florida.”

The look in her eyes said, *Go on*.

I counted off on my fingers. “One, we live close to each other. Two, it would be a damn shame if this,” I said, gesturing from her to me, “had to end with this trip. Three, what would you think about seeing each other when we’re back home?”

She roped her arms around my neck with a big, *best idea ever* grin. “I only have one reply: yes.”

I sealed our promise with a kiss under the rising morning sun as gentle waves lapped the shore. This brief affair had started in a tropical paradise, but it wouldn’t end there. No matter what happened next with the diamonds, I had already won.

I had the girl. She was the real prize.

SAND AND STONES

Ruby

All good things came to an end, like our beach escape. But sand? That clung.

When we climbed into the Audi, the floor mats were covered in sand after our morning beach excursion. “I can’t return the car to Eli looking like this,” I said.

“There’s a car wash down the road. Looked it up. Opened recently,” Jake said as he buckled the seat belt. I started the ignition and followed his directions, turning right as we pulled away from the beach. At the light, I glanced in the rearview mirror. It had become a habit, checking to see if we were being followed.

“Tell me more about your tour tomorrow,” Jake said as I drove. “How many people?”

“I’m fully booked,” I said with a grin as the light turned and I stepped on the gas. “Sapphire’s assistant manager, Clarissa, joined the tour. She seems nice, and she adores Eli.”

“He seems to inspire that in women,” Jake said in the kind of neutral tone that wasn’t neutral at all.

“As his many affairs would attest,” I said. I glanced at Jake then back at the road. “I’m not blind to his faults, Jake. I questioned whether he was a thief. I didn’t say he was a trustworthy guy.”

He sighed hard enough to ruffle his hair. “That’s fair enough.”

Fortunately, we arrived at the car wash before awkwardness had a chance to settle in.

We went inside and I handed over the keys and ordered the full deluxe, and the attendant gave us a twenty-minute ETA. Chairs were arranged outside under an awning, and inside, a gift shop offered a long window for customers to watch their car’s progress.

Jake gestured gallantly in that direction. “Shall we avail ourselves of the gift shop opportunity?”

“Yes, let’s,” I said in the same *Downton Abbey* tone.

He held open the glass door, ushering me through with a hand gently on my back. “This is our first official date, so you just better get used to this kind of fancy treatment.”

I arched an eyebrow. “First date? What about the panini shop?”

He leaned in to whisper, “First date now that you’ve finally come to terms with your elephantine desire to have more of me.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are such a cocky bastard.”

He answered by pinching my butt as we walked to the display of car air fresheners. *Choose from 170 different and delicious scents!* the sign boasted.

“How could anyone choose just one?” I asked dramatically, picking up one of the cardboard shapes.

“I think it’s a party game where you have to guess the scent based on the card.” He reached for an air freshener shaped like a coconut. “Three guesses and the first two don’t count.”

“You would go for that one,” I teased. At his confused frown, I laughed, then explained. “You have a thing for coconut.”

“How did you know that?” He seemed genuinely impressed, so I gave a smug shimmy of my shoulders. “Because of the noise you make when you smell my hair.”

“I don’t do that.” He paused as if reconsidering, quirking a brow. “Do I?”

“Yep,” I said, my skin warming as I imagined that sound. “It’s kinda hot.”

“Only kinda?” Jake grabbed me by my waist and sniffed behind my ear until I giggle-snorted and pulled away, rubbing where my skin still tingled. Our gazes connected and I felt fizzy and flushed as if it really was our first date. He smiled like he was reading my mind.

We wandered around till we found ourselves in the final aisle, with candy on one side, cold treats on the other. “Ghirardelli or Godiva?” Jake asked as we strolled to the end.

“Ghirardelli,” I answered, then added with a wink, “Hold the nuts.”

He chuckled. “Duly noted.”

“What about you?”

“Any and all. I am at the mercy of my sweet tooth.” Once again, he wrapped me in a tight embrace, but when he brushed kisses across my cheek, they were feather-soft and delicate. “No wonder I love your kisses so much. They’re so sweet.” He kissed me delicately, deliciously, deliriously. I was ready to get lost in that kiss but something caught Jake’s attention, and he lifted his head to look over my shoulder.

“Something’s wrong with Eli’s car,” he said, pointing with his chin.

I turned to see what he meant. The movement of the car wash flaps and brushes had stopped, and the whirring of the machine ceased entirely. A pair of car wash attendants stepped gingerly through the machinery, inspecting the gleaming black Audi.

“I should go see.” I spun for the door, Jake following close behind.

As we pushed open the door, I shielded my eyes from the bright sun and walked toward the car wash exit. One of the attendants had slid a long iron hook underneath Eli's car, working it around until it attached to the chassis. With a grunt, he yanked on the end of the hook, his muscles straining.

"A little more," the other guy called from the end of the conveyor belt.

"Hey there," Jake called. "That's our car. Is it stuck?"

The attendant looked up and flashed us a smile. "Yes. Please don't worry. Happens once in a while, but we're getting it out."

"How did it happen?" I asked curiously but also a little concerned. That was odd.

"It got caught on the rails while it was going through. Sometimes it happens when the trunk is heavy. This one's riding low to the ground."

He returned to helping his co-worker, but I wasn't thinking about the machines anymore. And that concern transformed. A kernel of optimism had resurfaced in me, rolling through my hopes, picking up speed. I looked at Jake, and he looked back at me, a matching twinkle of "what if" in his eyes.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he whispered.

My face split in a wide, *never say quit* grin. "I'm thinking *what the heck is in the trunk of Eli's car.*"

Somehow I managed not to explode with anxious anticipation as the attendants finished pulling the Audi free of the mechanism and parked it at the back of the car wash lot where they vacuumed the mats. Jake and I stood shoulder to shoulder while I popped the trunk with the key fob I'd kept and he pulled back the bottom liner.

Holy shit.

There was a safe installed where a spare tire would normally be. Maybe there were legit reasons Eli might need to drive around with a safe, but I couldn't think of any that would apply.

But what if this was another *gotcha* gift?

“What do you think?” Jake asked, then looked my way. I was afraid to speak, even though he was clearly waiting for me to say something, maybe give the go-ahead.

“I’m afraid to get my hopes up,” I said, voicing the scope of my new concerns at last. “If this is a trunk full of nuts, I might drive this car off a pier.”

“Only one way to find out.” He gestured to the keypad. “Want to do the honors?”

Deep breath. More nerves. Another breath. Even more. “Me? You’re the expert,” I said, and he was, but I also needed him to do this deed. I needed his steady compass.

“But you know how to do this too,” he coaxed gently. “Start with the obvious.”

He was right. I could try to crack this safe. He’d taught me.

With a wall behind us and the trunk wide open, we were hidden from prying eyes. I reached into the cargo space and pressed Eli’s birthdate into the pad, but the door wiggled before I finished. It wasn’t even locked. What the hell?

I grabbed the handle and yanked it open.

Holy mother of jewels.

Diamonds. Everywhere. Handfuls of them. Gobs of them. My throat went dry and my pulse hammered. There they were, glittering in the sun. I stood frozen, gawking at the glorious sight.

“Gorgeous,” Jake whispered in a stunned voice. He was staring with the same awe I felt. It had been right under our noses for the last twenty-four hours. This was wild. After all this time, all these wild chases, all these dead ends, all these tricks, here they were.

I lifted a hand to reach for some, needing to feel the shape of them, the weight of them, but the slam of a car door startled me out of my trance.

Not just any car door.

This car's door.

The engine turned over and the Audi roared to life. I jerked my head out of the trunk and saw a chestnut-haired woman in the car wash's uniform, grinning at me through the window.

"Thanks for your help, babe!" Clarissa called. "You're the best."

My jaw dropped. No way. No way was she doing this.

But she was.

With one hand on the wheel, she peeled out of the parking lot with the car, the stash, and the keys that had been left in the ignition as the attendants cleaned.

Jake tore off after her, running like a track star, sprinting on a mad dash for the car. He ran like a bullet, powered by adrenaline, out of the lot, down the street, chasing the black automobile.

But Clarissa and the Audi were far faster. She sped through the light by the car wash, leaving Jake in the dust. He bent over, panting, his hands braced on his thighs.

A green Honda drove by next, following the Audi. Tristan was at the wheel.

SLIPPED THROUGH MY FINGERS

Jake

I swallowed my scream of frustration. Pressing my clenched fists to my forehead, I cursed everything and everyone, ready to bang my head against the concrete and yank out my hair.

Because...fuck.

The diamonds had been in my grasp, inches away. I'd been reaching to run my fingers through them when Clarissa had torn off in Ruby's stepfather's car.

It was Venice all over again. I'd had the goddamn prize in my hands only to have it snatched away.

By Clarissa. Who was joining Ruby's tour. Who Ruby said was super nice. Followed by Tristan, whose restaurant Ruby had dined in twice.

Déjà vu descended and gripped me hard. My chest burned. My head pounded.

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

I knew better and I'd gone in anyway. I'd taken the risk for the woman, letting my stupid heart lead, and look where it had landed me.

Straight into *My Terrible Romantic Decisions—the Sequel*.

"Did you know?" I asked, not sure where the words came from or what I was trying to say.

“What?” She looked at me like she didn’t know me. I felt wild, frustrated, annoyed, and mad as fucking hell.

Not at Ruby.

Not at all.

But still...those diamonds had slipped through my fingers.

I pointed in Clarissa’s direction, though she was long gone, and so was her accomplice. “Did she know you were going to be here? Did you tell her?”

Ruby parked her hands on her hips, her brow knitting tightly. “Why would I tell her?”

“How else would she know to be here?”

“She was following us,” she said, as if it were obvious.

“You said she was joining your dive tour. You said she was nice. You said you liked her. You trust so easily, Ruby. You get too close to people.” I was grasping at straws, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

“And that means what, Jake?” she asked, her tone cool and even.

Meeting her gaze, I asked, “How can you be so casual about her taking the diamonds?” Ruby had said she was done with the diamond hunt. It was too personal. She’d leave it to me. When she’d stepped back from the mission, had that distance made her too open with Clarissa or Eli? Had she let down her guard so much that she’d inadvertently let some hint slip while she’d been in Sapphire or at lunch?

Ruby held up a hand. “Think real hard before you say whatever is on your mind, Jake. You can’t take these next words back.”

I clenched my fists. Drew a tight breath. “Did you say anything that might have tipped them off?”

She scoffed. “Seriously? You really just asked me that?”

“Ruby,” I said, at my wits end and the end of my rope as well. After so many false leads, to have the diamonds snatched literally from my fingers...I couldn’t think straight. “We were

so close, so damn close. Clarissa was right here in seconds, or maybe she'd been waiting for us. I'm just trying to logic this out. Is there anything you might have said, inadvertently—"

"How could you think I'd be so careless?" she demanded. "Never mind that I didn't know we were coming here until we, you know, *came here*. But I care about this too."

She did. Or she had. But not like I did.

"I don't know what the hell to think," I spat out, frustration eating away my common sense. I mimed holding something precious. "I had them. *We* had them. And then she just took off in your stepfather's car. I've been there before, Ruby, and you knew it. I told you what happened in Venice."

"Just because something happened once doesn't mean it has to happen again, Jake. And it for sure doesn't mean I'm the same as the woman in your past."

"Of course you're not." The way I felt about Ruby was different. But watching the Audi speed down the street, all I knew was that this was happening *again* and the only common denominator was me falling too hard and too fast when I should have known better.

"That's all? Not 'You're right, Ruby,' or 'I trust you, Ruby'?"

I groaned and rubbed my hands over my face. Why couldn't I just say that? But I didn't trust my instincts anymore. "This whole case has felt like someone is playing a game. None of the clues add up. Even if you are totally uninvolved, the only thing that connects all the pieces is you."

"Even *if*?" Ruby seemed to wrestle with saying something else, her mouth open and closing but nothing coming out.

When she finally spoke again, her words were measured, icy, and sharp as a blade. "Here are three clues for you, Jake. One, you know me, but you're too gun-shy to trust yourself. Two, this is not a game to me. Because I'm falling for you. Three, this hurts me more than you can know. And when I put those all together, they tell me it's best if we take a break. Goodbye."

She turned to leave, and though I wouldn't have thought it possible, the horrible moment became even worse.

And it was all my fault.

HIT CAT

Ruby

Great. Just great. After all that, I still had to see Eli and tell him that his car—and, oh yeah, his diamonds—had been stolen. The thirty-minute wait and ensuing cab ride hadn't been long enough to figure out what I was going to say to my stepfather. It hadn't been enough time to wrap my head around everything that Jake had said.

He was right about one thing though. I felt like a pawn in someone's game.

A heartbroken pawn.

The cab pulled up in front of Eli's house, and I paid and headed to the door, my feet weighted down with dread. I'd called ahead and told Eli and Willow something had happened to the car, but before I could break the news, Eli told me to come to the house. Like a guy worried about what had happened to his car with the millions of dollars' worth of diamonds in it.

Groan.

Before I could knock, the door swung open to reveal Eli holding up a bottle of Cristal, wagging it in...celebration?

"Come in," he invited, sweeping out his arm in a grand gesture of welcome. "Let's celebrate."

Confused, I walked into the house where Willow pounced and pummeled me with a hug. “You’re a superstar.”

These two. I swear. They operated by rules of their own. “How am I a superstar? What are you celebrating?”

Willow poured and handed me a flute of effervescent wine. “We’ve been saving this bottle for when we caught the thief,” Eli said, lifting his own glass.

“What thief?” Up was down; left was right. Any moment now, a white rabbit in a vest would run by with a diamond-studded Rolex and I wouldn’t bat an eye.

Willow’s eyes glimmered with glee. “The one trying to steal the diamonds.”

Making a time-out sign was awkward while holding a champagne glass. “Somebody needs to explain to me what’s going on.”

Eli walked to the kitchen. Willow followed, and I did too.

“A few weeks ago,” he said, leaning against the marble kitchen counter, draping an arm around his fiancée, “we realized someone was sniffing around for our precious gems. We’ve tried everything to catch the would-be thief, and now we have.” He beamed proudly at me. “Seconds after you called, I contacted my friends on the police force about the stolen car and the stolen gems, and Clarissa is already under arrest.”

Willow squeezed his arm. “Don’t forget Tristan,” she said.

“Yes, Tristan is locked up too.”

I remembered him zipping by in his green Honda, and the smug look on his face. Mr. Smith, I presumed.

“You’re telling me that Clarissa and Tristan were working together to steal your diamonds?”

“I had a hunch it was her,” Eli said, stopping to sip his champagne. “I’ve been setting traps, trying to catch her. That’s why Nigel hid nuts in the back of the painting in my office, and then dropped hints to all the club employees that the gems were in the frame.” He laughed like a king, above the world’s

cares on his throne. “I wish I could have seen Clarissa’s face when she sliced open the frame the other day and found nothing but nuts.”

Willow joined in the laughter, queen to his king.

Of course he would think his trick was hilarious. I let them continue to think it was Clarissa who peeked into the frame after slitting the backing. Served them right with their mighty attitudes.

The sunlight streamed through the kitchen window and splashed its rays across Willow, catching on the pendant at her throat. The gem flashed with a glint of blue. “Your necklace,” I exclaimed. “How did you get it back?”

Willow placed her hand on it, leaning in slightly to stage-whisper. “It was never missing in the first place. I just pretended it was stolen by wearing a fake during the gallery party. I popped it out of the setting and dropped it into my drink.”

She laughed at her cleverness.

I didn’t laugh.

“So you never suspected Nigel of stealing anything? Maris said—” I broke off, not wanting to get Maris in trouble for telling me something she shouldn’t have.

Eli waved a careless hand. “Oh, Maris and Nigel are dating. She spread the word that we suspected Nigel. But we just wanted the thief to feel secure, like we were looking in another direction, so they’d finally take action. And they did!”

Willow shrieked and pointed frantically to the countertop. She covered her mouth with her hand and choked in terror, “Spider.”

Eli grabbed a paper towel as if he planned to squash the trespassing insect, but out of nowhere, the silver tabby leapt onto the counter, all *hold-my-beer* attitude, and swiped the offender into next week.

Cats.

“Aww, Jade,” Willow cooed, as the cat groomed its murderous paw. “What a good kitty you are, getting rid of that nasty spider for Mommy.” Jade accepted her due adulation then sauntered off, pausing only to eye me as if I might be another trespasser who needed taking out.

I shuddered and got back to business. “So who stole the diamond from my hotel room? Was that part of this ruse?”

Eli banged a fist against his counter. “Bastard! Tristan must have seen me give it to you at the restaurant that day. All because I didn’t want to invest in his terrible business idea. I wish that hadn’t happened to you.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said, dryly.

“I feel so betrayed by Clarissa though. I gave her a job when she couldn’t find one. Then I found out she couldn’t get a job because she was wanted for burglary. That was when I suspected she was the one trying to steal the jewels.” He shook his head sadly. “Maybe now that she’s been arrested, you’ll get it back.”

“What about the diamonds from your car?”

Eli and Willow laughed in tandem, and Eli answered, “Those are fake, of course. The real ones are safe and sound and so well hidden that no one will figure it out. I wouldn’t put real diamonds in a car trunk. But I had to make it easy for Clarissa to steal them. I had a feeling she was following you, and I’d been dropping hints that the diamonds were in the Audi.”

“You loaned me the car to use me as bait?” Another gut punch. He’d used me. Some tiny part of me had thought that, no matter what his crimes, he still felt a little bit of affection after he’d helped raise me. “You didn’t care about my safety at all?”

But he waved off my implied worry and Willow cut in to reassure me, “Darling, you needed good AC, and of course we knew Clarissa wouldn’t hurt you. She’s a nice girl who just needed money.”

“She’s a nice girl who’s wanted for a felony!”

“Now, now,” tutted Eli. “Don’t get hysterical, honey.”

The pair swilled champagne and basked in their happy outcome while my world had been turned inside out. I hadn’t even made it to Wonderland yet. I was still falling down the rabbit hole.

One thing was clear—Eli was capable of anything.

“Were you really planning to offer Mom alimony?” I demanded.

“Hmm. When did I say that?” he asked, ignoring the frown that Willow cut his way.

“At lunch!” I said, my voice rising as I sensed him erecting his Teflon wall. “It was only yesterday. You said you wanted to be more fair to her. You told me that.”

“I’m sure I never mentioned alimony.”

I opened my mouth to protest that yes, he had, but immediately realized that he hadn’t—he was too slippery for that. Of course, he’d curved around commitment like a snake. Danced out of danger that he might have to do the right thing.

Willow made a showy little grimace of distaste. “Eli wouldn’t have discussed money matters in public. That would be tacky.”

This from the woman who went into raptures about sex-toy party favors.

Eli just nodded in agreement. “We keep our financial affairs private.”

That. Was. It.

I’d lost millions of dollars in fake diamonds, broken up with my almost boyfriend, and shattered my last illusion that the man who’d raised me cared about me in the depths of the slimeball he had in place of a heart.

“*Private?*” I asked, stretching the word with sarcasm. “You mean like defrauding your investors—that kind of private? Skimming the Eli Fund accounts? Private like that?”

Willow's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates and whipped over to Eli. Then, like that move wasn't a neon "we are guilty" sign, she mouthed silently to her fiancée, *You told her?*

He'd fucking done it. He'd done the thing. He'd never deserved my reasonable doubt.

Worse, he'd get away with it. I had no evidence. Mr. and Mrs. Smith had stolen the only real diamond I'd had in my possession.

And, I realized, the only chance I had to come away from this with money for Mom.

Later, I was sure the disappointment would hit me. The disillusionment. The dejection. Right then, I was livid and hurt.

Eli, oblivious to my riot of emotion, simply patted Willow's hand and said, "Don't worry yourself. Ruby is family." Refilling both their champagne glasses, he pointed to my untouched one then raised his in a toast. "Let's celebrate. The diamonds are safe, the thieves have been caught, and you helped us. And don't worry about your diamond. If the police don't recover it, I'll buy you another one."

"I don't want another diamond. I don't want a diamond at all. That's the last thing I want." My head felt stuffed with cotton. I had to get out of there, far away from him.

I stumbled out the door. Jake was right—I was too open and trusting. My instincts were totally off.

MY LONE WOLF THING

Jake

I walked.

Did I ever walk. I covered the entire length of Seven Mile Beach that evening. Fine, that wasn't some huge feat of physical fitness, but I needed to burn off some frustration. I was mad about the case. Mad about the way everything had come up empty.

Most of all, I was angry with myself.

As I neared the end of the beach, my phone buzzed with a reminder to call Kylie back and find out how the test went. At least that was one relationship I couldn't fuck up.

I didn't even have a chance to ask my question. As soon as we connected, her joyful voice blasted out of the phone.

"I got an A on my test! Can you believe it?"

God, I needed this happy news. I beamed, even with no one to see it. "Yes, I can believe it. I'm so proud of you. I knew you could do it."

"It was all thanks to your friend. That convo with Ruby the other night helped me a ton."

I flinched at her name. Tried to keep it out of my voice as I stopped to watch the ocean crashing against the shore. "I'm glad to hear that."

Kylie's enthusiasm was like electricity over the phone. "Yes, half the test wound up being on the topic she helped me with. But the way she explained it just clicked. Is she there so I can thank her?"

I'd stuck the knife in with the stupid way I'd handled things, but Kylie's question twisted it. "She's not here right now."

"Okay!" my sister said cheerfully. "Will you tell her thanks for me, then?"

I mumbled something noncommittal.

"Uh-oh," she said. "What did you do?"

"Who says I did anything?" Wow, that wasn't defensive or anything.

"Oh, I don't know...your past?" she teased. "I bet you pushed her away because of your whole lone wolf thing." She dropped her pitch like she was mocking me. "*The job is everything. I can't trust anyone. I can't trust my girly love emotions.* Which is kind of misogynistic, FYI But you're my brother and I love you anyway."

Wow. That felt like ten years of therapy in a few choice sentences. "Um...that's a lot."

"So, what did you do?"

"Nothing," I lied. "We had a misunderstanding."

Kylie's silence was condemning.

I relented. "Okay, maybe I pushed her away because I didn't trust my emotions. But I don't think love is girly," I grumbled.

"Well, did she cheat on you? Betray you?"

I heaved a sigh. "No," I said unequivocally.

"Then I'm guessing it can be fixed. And she's really awesome, so you need to try to fix things."

"I'll take that under advisement," I said, then I stopped, realizing where my feet had taken me. The Pink Pelican. My

therapy, I suppose. Not the liquor, but the drown-your-sorrows vibe intrinsic to a good dive bar. “Hey, congrats on the A. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Love you, Jake.”

“Love you too.”

It was nine at night, so the place was busy, but Maris headed my way and slapped down a napkin. “What’ll it be?” When she raised her face, she grinned. “Jake the fisherman! How are you?”

“I’ve had better days.”

“Pale ale, then?”

“That’ll help,” I said.

She poured a beer from the tap, then set it down and parked her hands on the counter. “Fish not biting today?”

“Nope. Not a one.” I took a drink. Ah, this cool beer was the one bright spot in my shitty day.

“Bummer. Such a shame,” she said. She frowned in sympathy, but her smile didn’t stay away for long. I guessed it was an occupational hazard of being a bartender. You wanted to commiserate, but what if you were having a good day?

She sure seemed to be and since mine was a lost cause, I focused on hers. “But looks like fish are biting for you.”

That smile widened into a grin. “My boyfriend got a promotion and a raise,” she said, like she’d been bursting to share the good news. She probably didn’t get many customers asking about her day.

I lifted my glass in a toast to Maris’s man. “Congrats. That’s always nice to hear.”

“It’s not every day when you can help catch a thief.”

The glass nearly slipped from my hands. “Sorry. What did you say?”

She dropped her voice, sounding eager to share. “Remember that robbery we talked about the other night?”

“Of course,” I said quickly, eager to get to the news.

“It was all a setup to catch the real thief. Turns out that the assistant manager at Sapphire tried to steal some diamonds today from Ruby’s stepfather. But they were fake. Too bad for her. Going to jail for a lot of nothing.” She didn’t even pretend to sympathize with Clarissa’s incarceration.

I gripped the edge of the bar, shaken by this revelation. “Who’s your guy?”

“Oh, just this *very* sexy Brit. Nigel Harris,” she said proudly. Holy shit. The other night she said *a very sexy guy with a snake tattoo*. I had no idea, of course, that Nigel was her guy. She never said as much, not that it would have made a difference in the investigation then. “He did everything he could to help catch Clarissa and Tristan. They’re both behind bars now. The police move fast in this town when it comes to helping Eli Thompson.”

Is there anything you might have said, inadvertently.

I was a world class jackass.

I’d all but suggested it was Ruby’s fault Clarissa knew when all along Eli, fucking Eli, had been orchestrating a game of diamond-encrusted chess. And none of that mattered—the jewel thieves, the embezzlement...I’d been callous, hurtful, and the real tragedy wasn’t letting the diamonds slip through my fingers, but Ruby—the best thing that had ever happened to me.

As Maris hustled over to a new customer, that celebratory smile on her face, I picked up my phone, ready to call Ruby. To say *I’m sorry, I fucked up, forgive me*.

But I stopped.

Was that enough?

Just to apologize?

No way. I had to do more than say I was sorry.

I had to get down on my knees and grovel. I’d flown off the handle all because of my past, my wounds, my own

prideful emotional scars. That was no way to start a new relationship.

And I really wanted to start a new relationship.

I returned to my hotel room, devastated by the silence. She had a key, of course, so she'd already come by and taken her things. No more scarves, no more bikinis, no more lotions and potions.

No more Ruby.

She was gone. The room was empty. Like how I felt without her.

MIDNIGHT WAVES

Ruby

I spent the night at Devon's, where he ordered a pizza and we watched a Webflix dark comedy together, taking guesses at who the culprit behind a teenage revenge plot was. He picked the gal in skinny jeans.

"Nope. It's definitely the one with the flare pants," I said, pointing at the screen.

"Because fashionable people are the bad guys?" he asked.

I eyed his ultra-casual clothes. Basic black shorts and a T-shirt. "Is that your way of saying you're always the good guy?"

His jaw dropped open comically. "Burn," he said.

I bumped his shoulder, savoring this camaraderie with my long-time friend. We hadn't talked about Jake, and that was a welcome break. *Mostly*. "Well, if the shirt fits," I added.

He sighed, over the top. "What I lack in fashion I make up for in...*personality*," he said, then he cleared his throat. "But please tell me you don't still wear skinny jeans."

I gestured to my sundress. "I'm bikinis and sundresses all the time."

"I guess you're not a villain either," he teased.

"Ouch!"

A few minutes later, the credits rolled and we realized we weren't getting the answer to the mystery tonight. "We'll just have to do a Zoom watch when you're back next week," he offered.

On the mainland.

Where I was supposed to be with Jake.

Devon must have noticed my frown, as he gently said, "Ah, and maybe you do want to talk, after all?"

I turned back to him, my heart still heavy. No point hiding it. I didn't want to dive into the details, but I could use some comfort. "It's just this guy," I began. I didn't give details about the diamonds or my stepfather, but I told him more about my feelings. My big, messy feelings.

He patted my shoulder. "Sometimes a good night's sleep is all anyone needs to sort out a mess," Devon said.

I let that sink in with a yawn, then I fell asleep on my friend's couch, curled up under a blanket. Sometime in the middle of the night, I kicked it off. The sliding glass door to his deck had been left open, and a breeze drifted in, warm and tropical. I rolled over and sat up on the couch, hooking my arm over the side of it and staring out the open doors into the night.

When the beaches were quiet like this and the sounds of the day were folded up into sleep, the ocean was at its most constant state. A steady drumbeat against the shore. The ceaseless *whoosh* of midnight waves crashing into the sand. The pull of the tides.

I breathed the salty air, letting it soothe me. Once I'd cooled off, the realization that Eli had treated me as badly as he'd treated everyone else—well, everyone but Willow, and that was probably just a matter of time—brought absolute relief. I was free from doubt and free to think the worst of him without feeling guilty about it.

But when it came to Jake, I had no answers. Even after the fiasco at the car wash, I didn't regret anything about our time together. I was glad I'd shared my heart with him.

As I resettled on the pillows of the couch, I spotted a notification on my phone. Grabbing it, I checked quickly for messages. A few sales alerts from Etsy. A note from Lance about a sunset tour in a week. An email from the moms who'd taken their kids on the stingray trip on the weekend. The silver lining was that my business seemed to be back on track or headed in the right direction.

A star winked in the night sky.

Maybe my luck was turning.

* * *

In the morning, Devon handed me a steaming cup of coffee. "You need fuel," he said.

"I do."

I downed the coffee, crunched into some toast, then showered and dressed. "I'm ready. Thanks again for letting me stay here."

"You are welcome anytime," he said, then patted my back as I left to meet my group on the dock, along with the crew for the tour. I'd shoved all thoughts of Jake, diamonds, and larcenous stepfathers out of my head. I was doing what I loved in a place I loved.

I was a woman who appreciated what I had.

And what I had was a good life and a promising future. Mom was doing okay—she would be fine without my stepdad's stolen money. And I'd find something, eventually, to fill the space Jake had carved out for himself in my heart.

BURIED TREASURE

Jake

I woke the next morning with a killer headache.

I wasn't hungover. I'd only had one beer at the bar. If this was a breakup hangover, it sucked.

Everything sucked.

The case I hadn't cracked.

The diamonds I hadn't found.

The bonus I hadn't earned.

The woman I'd lost. And, like the gems, I hadn't figured out how to win her back.

I needed coffee. I needed to hit the gym, go for a run. Time to move and think. Then, I'd come up with a plan to say I was sorry and convince her how desperately I meant it.

Swinging my legs over to sit on the edge of the bed, I groaned and dragged a hand through my hair. A glint of silver on the nightstand caught my eye, and I looked closer through bleary eyes.

Was that...?

I picked up the delicate necklace by the chain and let it catch the pale morning light. The hint of a smile tugged at my lips.

Yes, that was exactly what I'd thought it might be.

And more—it was an answer.

I might not have solved the case, I might still need to eat crow with Andrew, but I no longer cared.

I knew what to do about the *only* thing that mattered.

I checked the time. Ruby would be busy with her tour most of the day.

Perfect. That gave me enough time. And I needed time to do this right. I wasn't going to let her slip away.

I was up and out of bed in seconds. A quick shower, some coffee, and a full-formed plan later, and my headache was gone.

Fuck that breakup hangover.

I had a true treasure to retrieve.

* * *

My day was packed. Mostly with waiting. But I needed to get back to Stingray Town by four. Ruby's tour would end at that time, according to the website. She'd be busy finishing and packing up, but I'd try to catch her a few minutes after the customers left. Interrupting her as she said goodbye would be a bad idea.

I finished my mission at a quarter to—right on time—and headed across the beach to the snorkel shop where Ruby's tired but happy tourists were saying their farewells. From the sound of things, they'd loved the dive. And, no surprise to me, they loved their guide.

“This was my second dive there,” a man told her. “And today was particularly good. A great guide makes a big difference.”

“Aw, thank you, Hugh,” said Ruby, glowing with pleasure. I was so damn happy for her, I felt like I was glowing too.

“So. Many. Pictures,” said a young woman from Jamaica while flipping through the viewscreen on her camera.

“Would you tag me on social so I can see?” Ruby asked. “My brother is a photographer and he’ll be so jealous.”

“Of course,” said the woman. “I’ll link to my review, as well.”

Then there was the best remark of all: “We’ll have to do this again next year.”

I smiled, already picturing the well-earned positive reviews, pushing the spiteful ones down the queue and into oblivion.

I hung back by a souvenir shop near the snorkel store, waiting until the customers fanned out, catching shuttle buses or hopping on bikes. When the last one left, I closed the distance to her, wishing I could approach her with the same certainty I felt on other jobs. Finding a stolen Stradivarius was simple compared to this.

I was flying blind, on nothing but hope, carrying only a small canvas bag. Ruby would be well-justified to shoot me down.

But I was taking the chance.

She was on the dock, hauling a mesh bag of snorkels to her friend’s shop. I pushed past the fear that I’d lost her for good, took off my shades, draped them onto the neck of my shirt, and walked toward her.

As I drew nearer, she set down the last bag and turned my way with a *did you forget something* smile that froze when we locked eyes. It seemed an eternity while she processed who stood in front of her.

What was that spark in her blue gaze? I hoped it was the same damn thing I was feeling—a rush of joy and hope.

But then her expression turned neutral. Wary. Guarded. Self-preservation had kicked in.

She brushed one palm across the other and took a few steps closer, meeting me on the sand. I hoped it was a good

sign, but when she crossed her arms and raised her chin, I knew she was done with me.

But I hadn't come here for nothing. Go big or go home.

"Why are you here?" she asked, immediately on the defensive.

"I miss you terribly," I said, stepping closer to the woman I wanted and desperately needed in my life.

"Okay," she said, wary. She wasn't going to make this easy. I wouldn't have expected her to. Nothing worth having was easy.

Saying I missed her wasn't enough, so I said what I should have said yesterday.

"You're right, Ruby," I said, echoing her words from the car wash. "I trust you, Ruby."

Her eyes narrowed, hard as stone. "You're just repeating the lines I gave you, Jake."

"But they're smart words," I said, and she was fierce today, protective. "I did everything wrong yesterday. Every single thing," I said, laying my emotions bare. "I was frustrated and foolish. I reacted to the past instead of the present and said things I regret. Things you didn't deserve."

She tilted her head, her gaze unflinching. "Did someone tell you I wasn't in on it? The car heist or anything else?"

"I told me that. I knew it deep down, but I figured out afterward I was focused on the wrong thing. I was obsessing over the diamonds we'd lost when I should have been listening to you. I'm so sorry I said you get too close to people like it's a bad thing." I gestured to the dock where she'd just said goodbye to her happy tour group. "The way you connected with those people—it's special." This was harder than I'd thought, pouring out my emotions in front of her unyielding gaze. I gripped the handles of the canvas bag more tightly. "It's what I love most about you."

"Yeah, but it can still be a bad thing."

I shook my head. “It’s a good thing, Ruby. A great thing. You have a huge heart—you risked so much to help your mom. You care so deeply, and I love that about you. I was a fool who said stupid things, and I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Something in her expression softened. Her lips parted slightly. Her gaze grew less harsh.

Yes!

Emboldened, I kept going. “I should have told you right then that you’re the best thing to ever happen to me. That I care about you more than ten million in diamonds. That I don’t care if I ever solve this case. None of it is worth a thing if I’ve lost you.” I felt tossed about by the emotions storming inside of me. I was helpless against her.

She’d taken over my heart and mind.

She’d become the center of my world in a mere week.

And I’d let her get away.

“When you left me,” I said, “I realized you’re what’s most precious to me. You’re...everything.”

“Jake,” she said, softly.

Holy hell, was that a glimmer of hope?

I took another gamble, stepping closer to her, still speaking my heart. “I fell in love with you, Ruby. And I want to keep loving you. Please let me love you.”

There. That was all I could do.

Her eyes shone with emotion. “You,” she said, frustrated but affectionate at the same time.

“Me?” I asked, hopefully. Happiness surged through me, but I sternly warned myself that I hadn’t won her yet.

“You make it so hard to be mad at you,” she said, scowling, almost petulant.

“Do you want to be mad at me?” I teased.

“I did,” she muttered. Then she shook her head. “But I don’t. I can’t.” She gave a shuddering sigh. “I missed you.”

Three glorious words, and they felt like sunshine. I drank her in, the golden-blond hair, the ocean-blue gaze, the adorable constellation of freckles on her nose. I wanted to kiss them all.

Most of all, I wanted to earn her.

“Give me another chance,” I urged, gentle but firm.

She closed the remaining few inches between us, uncrossed her arms, and cupped my cheeks in her hands. “I love you too,” she whispered.

Then nothing else mattered in the world but her.

I reached for her, unable to resist touching her warm skin. “I’m so in love with you.”

In seconds, her arms were around my neck, and her lips were on mine, and all the past was erased in a kiss that marked this starting over. Tender and warm, it melted my heart.

She broke the kiss and pressed her forehead to mine, keeping her arms laced around me. “I’m so glad you’re here, and I can’t wait to see you back home in Florida. And maybe to see you again in your room tonight?” She lifted a naughty brow.

“Makeup sex is a promise,” I said.

Then her gaze drifted to my hand holding the bag. Curiosity sparked and spread across her face. Right. Yes. My plan for the day.

I’d realized from the start that if my words didn’t win her back, this gift wouldn’t win her over either. I would have given it to her anyway, but now we could both enjoy it.

I offered it to her. “You left this in my room,” I said. “But I made a small addition.”

Her eyes widened, and she eagerly reached into the bag and pulled out a chocolate bar, laughing. “I left a chocolate bar in the room?”

I shrugged with a sheepish smile. “I’ve heard that chocolate goes well with apologies.”

“And remembered that Ghirardelli is my favorite.”

I grinned at her delight. “The real gift is in the little bag.”

“Oh?” Her tone turned serious as she fished inside the canvas tote and pulled out a blue velvet pouch.

“I had this made for you. Today,” I said, nerves racing, worried I’d overstepped.

Ruby tugged on the bag’s drawstring, dipped two fingers inside, and pulled out a silver necklace with a small charm.

Her charm.

“You said you thought it would look good with your birthstone,” I said.

She held it up to the sun, her lips parting in awe as she gently opened the treasure chest pendant, then gasped. “Jake,” she whispered reverently. “It’s gorgeous.”

Finding the necklace on the nightstand had seemed like the universe handing me an ace that I’d better not waste. I’d hustled over to Wayboard Street and bought a ruby from Montez, my favorite gemstone salesman. He’d set the stone quickly, with expert fingers.

So Ruby had her buried treasure after all.

The brilliant red gem sparkled, lit up from the sun.

“I love it,” she said.

Pride and happiness fought for dominance inside me. “Let me put it on you,” I said, and she lifted her hair. I unhooked the necklace then clasped it around her neck, letting it fall to her chest where I ran my fingers along the charm.

“Beautiful. Like you, sweetheart. Now, what do you say we spend the evening on the water? Charter a boat. Go for a sunset sail.” I lifted my brow suggestively, and she took the bait.

She ran her hand up my chest, grabbing the neck of my shirt. “Makeup sex on the boat?”

“What a brilliant idea,” I said.

“I’m all in,” she said, then came close for another kiss—a hot, deep kiss that sent a bolt of lust through my body, right there on the beach. I broke the kiss. Grinned. “Or maybe makeup sex now in the hotel room?”

In an instant, she was rushing to my car.

Screw diamonds. I had my Ruby.

SWEET DIRTY THINGS

Ruby

The second the hotel room door snicked shut, I backed up to the wall and yanked Jake against me. All the softness of our reunion vanished in this greedy kiss. Twenty-four hours without him was too much. I'd missed him. I'd missed *this* too—this connection I'd only ever felt with him.

Frenzied, desperate, and hungry.

This was the way it should be. The best lovers might hurt each other, but they'd find ways to move past it...together.

I was so glad he'd come back to me because I wanted the chance to explore all we could have. I'd been wary from the start, reluctant to give my heart. Jake wasn't perfect, but I wasn't either. What he was, though, was real, true, and committed. He was trustworthy. He was protective. He fought for what was right.

And he showed up for me.

"Show me," he said as he pushed up the skirt of my sundress and tugged down my bikini bottoms. "Show me how much you've missed me," he rasped in my ear, his fingers sliding between my legs.

I gasped, crying out from his fevered touch, savoring it. I indulged in his wicked fingers for a few delicious minutes.

Then, I couldn't wait.

In a mad rush, I unzipped his shorts, he produced a condom, and then he was sliding into me.

Yes.

This.

I needed this. I needed *him*.

He was deep inside me and pleasure sparked wildly all through my body. I looped my arms around his neck, and he took me like that, against the wall, delivering the best makeup sex ever. Soon, I was digging my nails into his back, biting down on his shoulder, and riding to the other side of bliss with him.

The man I loved.

The man who'd come back for me.

* * *

A few minutes later, we sat on the bed, looking ahead, planning when we'd see each other. Life was good. So damn good.

I might not have accomplished all that I'd come to Flamingo Key for. I hated that I hadn't found a way to help my mom. Maybe slowly, little by little, I could use some of the revenue my business was gaining to assist her with her new shop.

Since my business had improved.

But I'd gained something else too. I'd learned business was better when I had someone I loved and trusted by my side. I rested my head on his shoulder, ran my finger across the bright, shining gem on my necklace.

A symbol of his love.

I loved that it was my birthstone. I loved that the gift was integrated with my mother's jewelry. I loved that he'd remembered which chocolate I liked—

Realization hit me like an anvil dropped from a ten-story building. All at once, I *knew* the answer. I *knew* how to crack the case.

“Jake,” I whispered, afraid to speak too loud and chase this brilliant, crazy idea away.

“Yes?”

“I know where the diamonds are.”

THE PREP

Jake

“Are you sure you want to?” she asked one more time, her voice pitching up with excitement.

My answer remained the same. “Abso-fucking-lutely.” I was as fired up as she was. Hell, I craved this chance, and somehow it was even sweeter because my brilliant woman had connected the dots.

“We’re only going to have a few minutes,” she warned me.

“Well aware of that,” I said, wholly unafraid of the time limit or the dangers.

“And just the one shot,” she added, like we hadn’t gone over the plan and over it again in the last thirty minutes. We were racing around town, rounding up supplies before shops closed. We had a small window to pull this off, and we had to do it tonight. A quick Google search had taken us to a boutique in Georgetown, then another one near Sapphire, and now we were parking outside a little souvenir shop. Her shoulders tightened, perhaps with worry that she wouldn’t find the Trojan horse.

I had faith in her. Completely. “Like a lunar eclipse. Only happens once every few years,” I said as I opened the car door for her.

“But it could come up empty. I don’t even know if I’ll find what I need,” she said.

“Any plan can come up empty,” I said, squeezing her hand, giving her all the reassurance I could. But then, she didn’t need much. She was damn good at detective-ing. “Correction: Anything could come up empty except this,” I said softly, brushing a kiss on her cheek.

She shivered against me.

“Couldn’t resist,” I added.

“Don’t even try.”

In the shop, she made a beeline for the mermaid trinkets and hunted through the shelves for what she wanted.

“What about that little mermaid?” I suggested, pointing to a red-haired one.

“Not sparkly enough,” she said.

Hmm. Fair point. Shiny was key. “How about one that holds more—”

“Got it!” She pumped a fist.

I did the same, and we headed to the counter.

“And you’re going to have to be quiet as a deer,” she told me. It was cute that she thought I needed a reminder to be stealthy. So damn cute.

I scoffed. “Sweetheart, you and me. We’ve got this.” I squared my shoulders, filled with confidence that came from the two of us together. “We do it like our greatest hits. This one-two punch we’ve got going is the perfect ploy.”

“But what if he hears you? Or what if I can’t distract them?”

“Then we improvise,” I said as we left the store. “That’s what we’ve always done.”

“And you’re sure you still want to do this?”

It was sweet that she’d asked. But I was always game. “Ruby, I promise you this. When it comes to adventure, it’s pretty much impossible to twist my arm. I was born to take risks,” I said, patting my backpack, then pointing to the fiery

orange ball dipping toward the horizon. “Now let’s do it. The sun is setting, and the clock is ticking.”

TROJAN MERMAID

Ruby

The last time I'd walked through the orchids and palm trees of Eli's home in this tropical paradise, I'd been contrite and apologetic. I'd let his car and his diamonds be stolen out from under me.

And by "let" I meant that I'd played right into his hands.

Now we'd see who played whom. Time to reclaim everything Eli had taken that didn't belong to him.

I rang the doorbell and checked the time. In ten minutes, Eli would be leaving for the event at Willow's gallery—the one to raise money for their favorite charity. I would have sneaked in while he and his fiancée were away at the party, but he had an alarm, and I didn't know the code. So I needed to be invited inside.

I ignored the flurry of nerves in my chest as I waited on the doorstep and steadied myself for this last mission.

Eli answered the doorbell, looking surprised for a moment. Then he beamed. "Good evening, Ruby."

I beamed back like nothing unusual had happened the last time I was there. "I'm headed home soon, and I didn't want to leave the island without saying goodbye."

"Aren't you sweet?" He opened the door wide, sweeping his arm to invite me inside.

Step one—enter the home.

My stepfather dropped a quick kiss onto one cheek, then the other.

“You look handsome,” I said, gesturing to his tailored suit and crisp button-down shirt.

Step two—butter him up.

“Why, thank you.” He smoothed his shirtfront. “Wait until you see Willow. She’s stunning as always.”

“I have a gift for her,” I told him, holding up the small gift box I carried. Then I looked around and leaned in, lowering my voice. “I think everyone in the house will get enjoyment out of it, actually.”

Eli’s eyes lit up in excitement. The man did love gifts. “Oh, now I’m intrigued.”

His fingers twitched like he wanted to grab it and see, but I pulled the box toward me. “Wait until Willow comes down.”

“Willow, my love,” he called out. “Ruby is here to say goodbye. And she has a gift for you.”

“Be right there.” Willow’s cheery voice came from upstairs.

I turned to Eli as if making small talk. “Are you excited about the fundraiser?”

“Oh, yes. It’s going to be wonderful,” he said. While putting on his cufflinks, he waxed on about how much money they hoped to raise. One cufflink got hung up, so he removed his Rolex and set it on the entryway table.

Wait. That wasn’t a Rolex. That was a different watch. Shinier, sleeker. A Vacheron Constantin.

“Let me help you,” I said, reaching for the cufflink and then sliding it through the buttonhole in the shirt.

“You’re a dear.”

Their silver tabby prowled into the room, tail lashing and nose twitching, and leaped smoothly onto the same marble-top

table, sniffing the box that I'd set there while I helped Eli.

"Be patient, Jade," chided Eli with a chuckle.

Jade blinked at him then at me, as if we were thinking the same thing. *You're one to talk.*

A minute later, Willow descended the staircase like a princess at a cotillion. Her black hair was swept high on her head in a twist, with tendrils curled at her cheeks, and her black dress hugged her perfect body.

"Oh, Willow," I said loudly and clasped my hand to my chest. "You look stunning."

It was the right thing to say, and she was so pleased, no one questioned how loudly I'd said it.

Because what I was really saying was *showtime*. Loud enough for Jake to hear me upstairs.

From then on, I had to try very hard not to think about Jake breaking in upstairs. Of course, the harder you tried not to think about something...

I focused on Willow, who giggled and turned in a catwalk circle. The diamond adorning her throat caught the light.

Everyone had a weakness.

For some, it was food, like Eli and his sweet tooth. As for Willow, the woman adored shiny objects.

Jake might have been the pro at cat burglary, but I knew our targets. I knew what would keep their attention, what quirks would give away their passwords, what habits would make them easier to track. Jake literally couldn't do this without me, and when he'd told me as much, I'd nearly levitated with pride and happiness.

Facing Eli and Willow on their home turf, I was tethered by anxiety—and a little excitement. I used all those things to out-Willow Willow.

"This is just a small thank you," I gushed, laying it on thick as I handed her the gift, "for being so generous with your

time, and taking such good care of Eli, and, gosh, just generally for being you.”

Step three—give the gift.

Willow batted her lashes and gazed lovingly at the white box with the blue bow. She took it and held it to her chest with a lucky-me shimmy, then thanked me effusively for the gift. “That’s so sweet of you!”

“The pleasure is all mine. Though, I have to be honest—it’s not just for you.” She looked even more curious and enticed. That was what I needed. To keep their attention on me and away from what was going on in Eli’s office.

“I can’t wait to see,” Willow squealed as she daintily unwrapped the box.

That’s right. Take your sweet time.

She dropped the bow on the table. Jade had hopped to the floor and was rubbing around her ankles as Willow pulled the top from the box.

“Oh, isn’t this adorable!” She took out a plush mermaid with a green lamé tail and a satin seashell bra. Her hair sparkled with ample pet-safe adornments. “Oh, look, Jade! Auntie Ruby brought something for you.”

She leaned down to offer the mermaid toy to the tabby, who took one whiff of the catnip inside and rubbed against it, giving a give-it-to-me-now yowl.

Yes, that will work. Good noisy kitty.

“The mermaid reminds me of this funny story,” I said cheerfully. “I don’t know if Eli told you, Willow, but my nickname used to be Ariel...” I prattled on a bit about how my tour company got its name, and then got to the real story. “So I tell this guy that my name is Ariel because who doesn’t need a bar name, right, Willow? Anyway, he called me that when we met again, and then the next time, and it wasn’t until days later that he realized Ariel wasn’t actually my name...”

Okay, it hadn’t been *days* later. And Jake had realized it wasn’t my name though he didn’t know my real one. But I had

to make the story last for my audience of two. And as I did, I smiled to myself because our story—Jake’s and my meet-cute—had become the cover for his safe-breaking.

As I talked, I sneaked a look at the timer I’d started when I gave Jake the “go” sign. One minute and thirty-two seconds. He should have the safe open soon, if he didn’t already. Just a minute more...

“That is just the most adorable story ever,” Willow gushed. Eli had listened with a smile, and Jade was blissed out on the floor, the mermaid wrapped in her paws. “But we really should be going.”

“True,” said Eli. “We can’t be late to our own event.”

Willow placed her hand on Eli’s arm as if she would let him escort her to the car that way. But her nose twitched with a dainty sniff, and she turned to her fiancé. “Darling. You forgot your aftershave. You never go to an event without it. It’s your signature scent. Go put some on.”

Alarms blared in my head.

My first thought? She must know Jake was upstairs because...*go put on your signature scent?* I didn’t think they could get any more bougie than “we are throwing a party to help children with our embezzled money.” But Eli thanked her for reminding him and sprinted up the steps.

I clawed the edge of panic to keep it from taking over.

Jake was in the office. Eli was on his way. What had Jake said when I’d worried something would go wrong?

“Then we improvise.”

I had to either somehow lure Eli back down here or warn Jake—or both.

I channeled all my fear, all my terror, that Jake would be discovered, and pointed to the dining room table as if some tentacled Lovecraftian monster was pulling itself into our universe between the chandelier and the mahogany tabletop. With a deep breath, I let out a blood-curdling cry, screaming, “Spider!”

Willow shrieked. Eli doubled back. And I imagined Jake, somewhere upstairs, scrambling for his point of egress while convenient chaos reigned down here. Eli looked high and low for the spider while Willow brushed her hair and shoulders like it was raining arachnids, and then the cat showed up for the excitement, skidding over the floor with her tail bushed out and her eyes like a drug addict.

I dragged my gaze away from this spectacle and turned to make my getaway. As I did, I made a split-second decision and shot my hand out to the marble table like a frog's tongue nabbing a fly.

“Gotta go or I’ll miss my flight!” I called as I sprinted out the door.

Have a nice life, far away from me.

GETAWAY WOMAN

Jake

My woman had some serious lungs on her. I didn't know why she'd screamed "spider," and I didn't stay to find out. I blessed whatever quirk of fate had brought us together and hightailed it out of Eli's office.

I'd already closed the safe and replaced the books in front of it. Now I just needed to hustle out the bathroom window and onto the roof, without the benefit of the cloak of darkness I'd had last time. I crouched low to stay out of view of neighbors and used the trees to shield me from sight from the street. The plan was to lie flat on the roof and wait until Eli and Willow left. But Ruby's scream gave me a clue that we weren't necessarily going to be waiting on them. Seconds later, Ruby tore out of the house at breakneck speed and jumped in her car. With a squeal of tires, she backed up and stopped where we'd planned on a screech. I dropped to the ground while she was still braking, and as soon as I dove into the passenger seat, my getaway driver proceeded to get us the hell away from there.

Hot. That was just hot.

If I wasn't in love already...She had killer getaway driver skills. Hook, line, sinker. I was a goner.

A REALLY EXPENSIVE CHOCOLATE BAR

Ruby

“Spider?” He sounded incredulous but amused, and looked as excited as I felt. As amped up and alive.

“She hates spiders,” I said, laughing as we drove out of Corey’s Landing. Spiders were nothing to laugh at, but the look on Willow’s face had been. “I had to improvise.”

“Look how far you’ve come. Thinking on your feet like a pro,” he said, tossing me a glance like he was turned on.

Well, he probably was. I kind of was too. My nerves tingled with adrenaline and probably would for days. “Did you get them?” I asked. That was the important thing, now that he was safe.

He lifted his backpack and flashed me the world’s most satisfied grin. “Got ’em all.”

“Are the diamonds *inside* them?” I asked, breathless with excitement and worry. This was our last shot. Everything we’d worked for depended on this.

“Well, I wasn’t going to check without my partner,” he said, making me smile again. I had no idea how much I’d wanted to hear those words until he said them. I felt like his partner. One hundred percent.

“Good answer.” We pulled into a parking lot at the nearby beach a comfortable distance from Eli’s place. I cut the engine.

As Jake unzipped his backpack, my shoulders tensed and my chest grew tight. I'd be fine with whatever we found.

Totally fine.

And yet, I wanted those rocks. Badly.

He dug into the pack and pulled out the handful of chocolate bars he'd taken from the safe in Eli's office. They were the same kind as the one he'd taken the first time he'd broken in. But I had no idea, had never even considered, that the diamonds might be hidden in the bars.

But as Jake had pointed out when he'd lifted the lone example—who kept chocolate in their safe?

“The real ones are safe and sound and so well hidden that no one will figure it out.”

No one but someone who knew him. The way Eli loved jewels, collected them like they were candy. The way he stashed sweets to satisfy his sweet tooth. His smarter-than-you jokes with himself.

He loved being smarter than everyone else and pulling off his own heists.

Jake presented the chocolate with a flourish, placing the bars on the center console. “You can do the honors.”

A wild ribbon of hope unfurled inside me, chased by worry that I had it wrong again. I steeled myself, unwrapped the first bar from Ecuador, and snapped it in half, examining the rough ends. My heart sank. “Just chocolate,” I muttered.

“Break it up more,” he encouraged. I broke the bar into tiny pieces in the wrapper.

I'd told myself I'd be fine no matter what we found, but I'd been wrong. I was devastated.

“It's still only chocolate,” I said, and I wished I didn't sound so forlorn.

But it *was* my voice now. Forlorn was all I felt.

“I know,” Jake said, still the glass-all-full guy. “But this bar has the same wrapper as the ones we tasted. We probably

would have noticed diamonds in there. Which means...just because the diamonds aren't in this one doesn't mean they aren't in the others." He squeezed my shoulder. "Look at the others and remember what you learned from working with me."

"Use what you know about the target," I repeated, studying the remaining bars. And there it was. The clue. I grabbed one of the bars with nuts. *Of course*. "Eli hates chocolate with nuts." If I was right, the bar would be nut-free but diamond-full.

I steadied myself and ripped into the shiny paper, held my breath, and broke the chocolate bar into pieces.

Diamonds rained down.

Shiny, glittering gems.

Chocolate-covered jewels.

He'd substituted the nuts for diamonds. Doing the reverse was just like Eli.

Wild exhilaration flooded me—my cells, my bones, my entire being. It was like a summer rainstorm, the kind that made you hold your arms wide and invite the beautiful deluge as we demolished more chocolate bars. Some were chocolate, but some were full of chocolate and riches. When we finished the stack, we had a pile of diamonds in my car and chocolate flakes everywhere.

The rental car place wouldn't be happy.

But Jake and I were ecstatic.

"How do we know if these are fake too?" I asked, afraid it was too good to be true.

Jake's lips curved up in a fantastically cocky grin. "Don't worry. I know just the guy."

BLACK LACE AND PAYBACK

Jake

Damn, my woman looked *good* in that black lace bra. It was the perfect home for millions.

“You’re such a sexy mule,” I said, giving her a salacious wink in the hotel room, as she stuffed her sexy-as-sin lingerie with...two small black pouches full of gems.

She checked her silhouette in the mirror, making sure the additions weren’t obvious, then she turned to me and struck a pose. “You think people will be able to tell they’re fake?”

I choked and then saw the teasing gleam in her eyes. Smirking, I handed her a shirt. “It’s almost a shame to cover them up.”

Ruby laughed, a sound I’d begun to cherish. A few days ago, winning was everything to me. Everything was a prize. Every case was a victory. I was obsessed.

But then I’d lost the thing that mattered most. That’d taught me a big lesson. When it came to work, you could win some, and you could lose some. But when it came to love, you’d better play for keeps.

I would fight for Ruby. I would fight like hell to keep her mine, to keep her happy.

We headed downstairs, where we were meeting Montez in the lobby bar. I saw the bearded man at the end of the counter,

nursing an orange juice. He stood as Ruby and I walked up, and I shook his hand.

“Thanks for meeting me. Especially at the last minute,” I said.

“Yes, you very nearly rustled me from my beauty sleep. I have a strict nine p.m. bedtime,” he said with a wide grin. Then he shifted his attention to Ruby and offered a hand.

“Pleasure to meet you,” he said.

“And you as well. I hear good things.”

Montez’s knowing gaze drifted to Ruby’s treasure chest necklace. “And I hear great things about you.”

Ruby smiled, then touched the necklace and said, “Thank you.”

That smile would make me melt anytime, but I stuck to our reason for being there and gestured to a table in the far corner of the establishment where it was more private. We moved to a spot away from the hubbub of the bar, and I reached into my pocket and took out one loose diamond. The rest of the gems weren’t going anywhere. They were cozying up to Ruby’s breasts, secure from any more thieves or other surprises.

Montez took the jewel between his thumb and forefinger and placed it on a black cloth he removed from his pocket, along with a jeweler’s loupe. I tried to read his expression as he studied the diamond, but only when Montez set down the magnifying glass did the corners of his lips curve up. “Color is good. Clarity is good. Weight is good. You have a very real, very expensive ten-thousand-dollar diamond from the Frayer mine.”

I’d thought I was calm. I’d thought I was cool, but holy hell, my sigh of relief could have powered a wind farm. I grabbed Ruby’s hand and squeezed it, then fuck it, I clasped her face and kissed her. “Thank you,” I said with all my heart.

“Back atcha,” she said with love in her eyes.

Then I turned to Montez and offered him a firm handshake. “And thank *you*. A million times over.”

“It is my pleasure. But you can buy me another orange juice,” he said, holding up his nearly empty glass with a cheeky grin.

This guy was one of the good ones. I’d had a feeling about him from the start and I was glad it had proven to be right.

“Consider it done.” I asked Ruby what she wanted and went to the bar to order. Then I stepped away to call Andrew with the news. He would be on the next flight, he said. We were both very ready for him to take possession of that sparkling fortune.

When I returned to the table, Montez was studying a sleek, obviously expensive watch.

I arched an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“This is a Vacheron Constantin,” Montez said with a smirk.

There was a gleam of triumph in Ruby’s eyes. “Just a little something I got from my stepdad. I was curious what it’s worth.”

I blinked, impressed, but a little shocked. “You took his watch?”

“Well, it was just lying there. The cat almost knocked it off the table. I felt it was calling out to me, asking for a better home,” she said.

“The cat?”

“The watch.” She beamed, thoroughly unremorseful and impossibly sexy.

Montez raised his face. “This watch is quite valuable too,” he said, then gave us a six-figure price that made my jaw drop.

“Thank you,” Ruby said, then deposited the watch in her purse with a satisfied, adorable smile.

Later, as Ruby popped into the restroom near the bar, I pulled Montez aside. “Did you bring it?”

“I did indeed. Is this for your sister?” Montez asked as he reached into his pocket and handed me a small pouch. I

peeked inside, pleased at the contents.

“Nope. This one is not for my sister. But I’m glad we were able to do business together again.”

I shook his hand, then said goodnight.

* * *

Andrew arrived bright and early the next morning. He called as soon as he caught a cab, saying he’d be at the hotel in fifteen minutes.

“Great. Come to room 412,” I told him. “I am ready to hand these things off to you.”

“Can’t wait.”

Ruby smiled from the table where we’d been enjoying breakfast. “Ready to be done?”

“I’m ready for more time with you,” I said, and I walked over and gave her a quick kiss—a promise for more later.

Andrew’s taxi must have been zippy, because ten minutes later there was a knock on the door. I opened it with a smile that vanished instantly.

Monica stood just outside.

THE CIRCUS CAME TO MY ROOM

Jake

I slammed the door shut.

Blood pounded in my ears. Monica was fucking relentless.

“Who is it?” Ruby asked as she joined me in the entryway.

What the hell? What the fucking hell? We’d come this far, were this close to done. I absolutely, unequivocally, could not even with another complication.

I dragged a hand through my hair and blew out a long stream of air. “Monica.”

“Sex-toy Monica?” Ruby rushed to peer through the peephole. “Do you think she’s still after the diamonds?”

A loud rapping boomed through the room, followed by a don’t-fuck-with-me voice.

“This is Monica Potkin. I’m an investigator with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Please open the door.”

Oh.

Oh shit.

Did she think I was the thief?

Okay, I had stolen the diamonds from Eli.

“Is she going to arrest us?” Ruby whispered, eyes wide.

The absurdity of the situation was starting to creep up on me. “The SEC can’t make arrests, can they?” I whispered back.

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to arrest you,” Monica said.

Ruby and I exchanged a wordless glance at the agent’s superhero hearing.

“Please open the door so we can talk.”

“What do we do?” Ruby asked.

“She knows we’re here,” I said. “We’re on the fourth floor, so it’s not like we can escape over the balcony.”

But I was damn tempted.

“I know you’re not going to climb out the balcony, so just save us some time and open the door. Please.” The last word was tacked on at the end but was as no-nonsense as the rest. Bowing to the inevitable, I reached for the knob and opened the door to the woman. She strode into the room with purpose. Her hair was slicked back and her gaze was cool behind those cat-eye glasses.

“You’ve been following me,” I said, taking the offensive. It made me feel just slightly more in control.

“We received a tip that Eli Thompson had stolen money from his hedge fund, turned it into gems with the help of a notorious luxury goods merchant, and skipped town with diamonds lining his pockets. I’ve been here for a few weeks now, working undercover to investigate this case. When you came into the diamond store with the gem, I knew we were getting closer. But it hasn’t been an easy path. Eli Thompson set traps for everyone, and I want to know if he set a trap for you too.”

I looked at Ruby, and Ruby looked at me, and we both kept quiet by silent agreement. Monica might not have been the thief, but she possessed powers we didn’t have. We were outside the law. She was the law.

“Oh, c’mon,” she said, exasperated. “I’m not going to arrest you. I just want to know if you were hired by the Eli

Fund to recover the jewels, and if so, whether you succeeded.”

She knew the Eli Fund had hired its own team? Before I could think how to answer, there was another knock on the door.

My room was officially a clown car, and this was a circus.

“This better be Andrew,” I muttered, and marched to the door, yanked it open, and let Andrew into the room. I’d never been more grateful to see a client in my life. Now it would be *his* circus.

“Andrew, meet Monica Potkin with the SEC,” I said through tight lips. “She’s here for *you*.”

“Ah! So glad you’re here too,” Andrew said, striding over to Monica and pumping her hand.

“Wait!” Ruby interjected. “You know her?”

“We talked on the phone yesterday,” Andrew said, then turned to me. He almost smiled at my wary, bewildered expression. “I’ll back up. Jake, when you told me about the theft of the fake rocks, I contacted the SEC. They informed me they had an investigator already working here. So much for my efforts to do this quietly.” Andrew’s focus shifted to Monica. “If there’s any way we can keep this on the down-low, I’d be most grateful.”

“That’s not really a promise I can make, but I’ll consider it,” she said.

I looked from one of them to the other, sensing a sliver of an escape route. “You know,” I said casually, “I’m kind of feeling like my work here is done. What do you say we hand the gems over to you, and the two of us”—I waved between Ruby and myself—“can get on out of town?”

Monica shook her head. “Not so fast. I need a few details. You’re not in trouble—I meant what I said. I’m not here to arrest you. You may find this hard to believe, Mr. Hawkins, but we’re on the same side of the law in this case. Now, tell me more about the diamonds.”

EPILOGUE

Our Capers

Ruby

The silvery stingray swam right over to me that afternoon. I beamed and brushed a kiss onto its slick body and then smiled as Jake took my picture with a disposable waterproof camera. He went next, dropping a lip-lock on the creature. Then, the hat trick, where we snapped a selfie of a joint stingray smooch.

We'd left Monica and Andrew to sort out the paperwork and red tape a few hours ago. That was just one reason I told Jake, "I already feel pretty lucky."

"Me too. But just in case, I'd better kiss you."

"You'd better."

We kissed in the shallow blue waters, in no hurry to go anywhere.

Later that afternoon, we snagged a beer with Devon at The Pink Pelican.

"Good to see you again," Devon said, shaking Jake's hand. "I'm glad you two sorted things out between you."

"You told him about me?" Jake asked, a cheeky light in his eyes.

I laughed. Devon had heard the good and the bad, the job of a good friend.

He clapped Jake on the shoulder. “She did, and let me just say this. I love her like a sister and you better treat her well.”

Jake nodded, as starkly serious as if he’d been given an order from a commanding officer. “You have my promise.”

My heart somersaulted.

I loved sarcastic Jake, protective Jake, dirty Jake, clever Jake, rugged Jake, but I think I loved serious Jake most of all.

Because that was when he spoke from the heart. From the soul. From the place that had called to a matching place inside me from the moment we’d met. It hadn’t seemed possible, so we’d doubted our instincts. But not anymore.

Even after only ten days, I believed Jake’s promise completely.

I believed in him.

And I believed in us.

* * *

Jake left before I did and I stayed to do the new tours I’d picked up from referrals. Monica had been true to her word—she only wanted information, which, along with other evidence, would be used to file charges against Eli Thompson. That made me sad, but he’d made his choice.

In the days that followed, the SEC investigator worked with Andrew to convert the diamonds back into cash and then return the money to the rightful owners.

A most successful recovery of stolen assets, she’d deemed it.

The SEC moved quickly and Eli’s string of luck finally ran out. He was sentenced to ten years in prison for securities fraud, and Willow received a shorter sentence.

I regretted that he'd chosen that path and never turned around, but I'd realized there'd never been a thing I could do to change it.

Once I'd returned home to Miami, I promptly found a buyer for the Vacheron. A small morsel of guilt had stuck in my craw—for about five seconds. Mostly, I felt satisfaction and then utter delight when I paid the lease on Mom's new jewelry shop.

"You didn't have to do that," Mom said as we settled in for mocktails on South Beach one fine afternoon one month after that fateful trip.

"I didn't have to, but I wanted to. Now, let's people watch."

We made up stories about a *Miami Vice*-style man in a white suit and a pink shirt, then two women in fluorescent green bikinis riding skateboards, and then a handsome man wearing trim shorts that hugged his strong thighs and a T-shirt that showed off his firm biceps, plus a grin just for me as he walked in my direction.

"That guy is heading our way to find the love of his life," Mom declared.

I beamed, my heart somersaulting at the sight of the man who'd become my big love.

A mere month ago I'd simply wanted him to do bad things to me in bed. Well, that hadn't changed. Every night I saw him, and he did very bad things to me indeed.

I guessed that made him a real good bad thing.

He whipped off his shades, and I smiled.

My mom did too. "Have I ever mentioned your boyfriend is the best?"

"You have," I said, "but say it again."

"You two are such a cute couple."

Jake joined us in time to hear that and grinned. "You're not the only one who's said that, Shelly."

He told her about Maris and her prediction way back when, and Mom nodded sagely and said, “Smart woman.”

This was our new thing. I still joined Mom for mocktails, just the two of us, but Jake joined us occasionally. He was part of my life, and he got along swimmingly with Mom and Cole. I’d met his family too. I’d taken Mason snorkeling in Key Largo many times. Occasionally, Brandt would come along too.

Kylie wasn’t keen on diving, but I’d helped her with her studies whenever I could. As for Kate, we teamed up to tease Jake mercilessly whenever we got together for family dinners.

Family.

It was so wonderful to be a part of his family now and to see him as part of mine. I was still amazed that a chance encounter over darts, a few hot nights under the tropical sun, and a twisty-turny diamond hunt had turned into this big romance.

My big, happy romance with the man I trusted to the ends of the earth.

That night when we left South Beach, Jake came home with me. Someone was there to greet him at the door.

Jade.

The second we came in, she sauntered over to him, swishing her tail and murmuring sweet meows. With my stepfather and his fiancée behind bars, I hadn’t been able to leave The Hit Cat alone. I’d offered her a home. Eli and Willow had agreed, so she was mine now.

Jade seemed to like Miami—the tropical breezes, the warm sun, the salty air. But she really liked my guy. She rubbed up against Jake, purring thunderously.

I looked up at him and cupped his cheek. “She knows a good thing when she sees it.”

“So do I.” He smiled at me, a little dirty, a lot loving, and ran a finger across the glittering ruby in my necklace. Then he kissed me.

And I knew we'd be kissing like this, passionately, deeply, and full of love for a very long time.

Which was convenient, because we worked together now. I still ran Ariel's Island Eco-Adventure Tours, and I still booked a lot of business. But sometimes I *appeared* busier than I was. I'd book a tour for Vienna. Or Milan. Or Rio de Janeiro. Well, there was a lot of action in those places. Jake had clients around the world. And he occasionally needed a partner.

As he broke the kiss, his green eyes sparked with a familiar glint—the glint of adventure. My breath caught in excitement before he said the next words. “By the way, funny thing about rubies,” he said.

“What’s the funny thing about rubies?”

“Got a tip that a guy in Barcelona had some rubies stolen from him. I’m talking to him about getting them back.”

I arched an eyebrow. “I take it that means you’ll be in Spain for a while?”

“I might be.” He tapped his chin playfully. “Think you might have a *tour* in Barcelona?”

I grinned. “I just might.”

“There’s nothing like treasure hunting with my partner,” he said.

I had to agree. “Let’s do this. The ruby caper.”

“Sounds like my kind of adventure.”

Mine too—as long as I had this man by my side.

Want more of Jake and Ruby’s life together after their epic adventure? Find out what happens next in [this bonus scene](#)! Or scan the QR code!



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