

MAN OF
THE MONTH

September



Bearcats
& BABIES

CANDY  CANE KEY

HEATHER LAUREN

BEARDS AND BABIES

MAN OF THE MONTH CLUB 2023 SEPTEMBER:
CANDY CANE KEY

HEATHER LAUREN

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Beards and Babies

A brother's best friend, surprise baby bump romance

By Heather Lauren

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Thank you again to our amazing leader Kara Kendrick. I'm so happy I came on board back in Starlight Bay.

Want to join the fun?

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/392211678552658/>

For Ronnie my bearded love

CHAPTER ONE

Robin

The rain continued to beat down on my car, but the wipers were doing a great job of clearing my view. Not to mention, this audio book was getting really hot.

I stroked Dominic's thick cock until his desire dripped from the tip of his crown.

"Incoming call. Milo loser-face. Would you like to answer?" rings through my car speakers.

Groaning, I agree to my brother's intrusive call. I'm sure he wants to man-splain something else about this road trip.

"Dude, this better be good, cuz you're holding up my man Dominic, and he's going to be pissed."

"Where are you? Who the hell is Dominic? Tell me right now you're fucking with me, Robin. You did not pick anyone up from the side of the road, right?"

"No, no, of course not. But you are interrupting. My book boyfriend's about to come hard all over his beloved Bethany's big titties. Claiming her for eternity."

"There's something wrong with you."

I laugh at his obvious statement and almost say duh.

Taking a leap like this was never part of my plan. I was comfortable. Sitting pretty, owning my own bar in a touristy small town. The problem was Sycamore Mountain is my home town, and therefore, the dating pool is zero.

Starting anew made sense hundreds of miles ago. Now, I'm tired as fuck and questioning my sanity.

"You need to pull over," he continues.

"What for? I'm so close."

"The storm is getting worse. They're even sayin' it might turn into a hurricane."

"Okay, okay. I'll pull into the next hotel," I whine. My big brother is just looking out for me, and I'm excited to see him, so I'll just push back a little. I'm not usually one for risks, so I actually plan to keep my word on this one.

"Thanks. Call me when you're parked. Stay off your phone."

"Blah blah blah," I mutter, but I'll listen. Giving my older sibling a hard time is my one true callings in life.

After hanging up the phone, my audio book comes back on, and Dominic and Bethany have a very, very happy ending. It's so good, in fact, I find myself on the last long stretch to Candy Cane Key. At this point on the highway, there's no way to safely turn around to find a hotel, so I start a new book and chug the last of my old, stale coffee.

The rain starts to beat harder, and my heart races with fear. I hold tight to the steering wheel and luckily make it to my family's vacation home, safe and sound. It's getting late, and Milo is an early bird. He's probably in bed by now, so I decide not to call him until tomorrow.

Opening my car door is like opening the gates to a dam. The sky pours down on me. Grabbing just my large weekend bag, packed with the bare essentials, I make a run for the front door. I quickly punch in the code we all have then push inside.

The place is quiet and never fails to bring a strong sense of comfort every time I walk through the doors. I kick out of my shoes and peel off my wet sweater then make my way for the master shower. The house is huge and technically has four master bedrooms and three smaller bedrooms. My family bought it back in the nineties with their best friends, Bonnie and Dennis Mathews, and our two families have vacationed

here ever since. The place is more than enough for me to find my fresh start and luckily rent free as long as I take care of any maintenance.

Happy memories from the house flood in as I pass photos on the wall, and all I focus on is Soren. The Mathews have exactly one son and his memory still haunts my dreams to this day. The man can't be more off limits and yet my heart pulls at even the mention of his name. After a terribly embarrassing incident when I was eighteen, I've completely avoided my childhood crush successfully, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss him.

With the raining pouring down I don't notice the shower is already running until I walk into the steaming bathroom...

I think a squeak comes out of my mouth or maybe, it's a moan. Either way, my feet are firmly fused to the floor as I stare in shock and honestly, awe at the gorgeous man in front of me.

"Robin!" Soren shouts in obvious surprise.

Suddenly, I regret avoiding this moment for so long. Seeing him. Holy hell, the man was chiseled. But it's not just his amazing body. No, seeing him instantly feels like a balm to my ever-spiraling anxiety. After a fast sweep down to where my eye absolutely do not belong, I lock gaze with his deep brown one.

"Hey," I say like an idiot. It's just so good to see him.

I nervous laugh but turn around quickly, closing the door behind me.

Oh holy hell, Bateman.

That man is cut. Muscles on every inch of him. Decorated in black ink, he has the sexy V thing I thought only existed in magazines.

And that cock! Is it normal to swoon over a man's cock? No, but I'm the weird girl leave it to me to make it a thing.

I melt against the back of the bathroom door, sighing with a heavy breath at the thought of that monster. It's thick and

long, and it looks so inviting. His body has changed so much since I last saw him, and I try to imagine what the details in black ink, look like on his hips. Does the tribal ink span his thighs? His ass?

As I'm daydreaming against the door, soaked to the bone and starting to feel the chill, I'm startled by the water turning off. It hasn't been more than a minute...right?

I push off the door and hurry down the hall to my room. The lights are all on and I'm surprised to find a bag already on the bed. Walking in, I see the Star Wars pins I got him the Christmas before we stopped talking. The sight makes me smile, and I wonder again why his bags in here. This is my room. It's always my room.

"Hey, sorry, I wasn't expecting you."

"You don't need to be. I'm sorry for barging in. I couldn't hear the shower over the pelting rain," I say, pointing up at the ceiling, trying my best to look at his face as he stands in the doorway, a crisp white towel hanging loose on his hips. Tattoo-covered hips.

"I'll just grab my bag."

"Okay," I say, but the question burns, and after fifteen years, why hold back anything? "Did you want to sleep in here?"

He stops and pauses, with bag in hand, almost in the clear but not out of the room.

"No. This is your room. I crash here whenever I blow through. Your sheets looked clean." He leaves after a casual shrug. Still, something about it doesn't feel one hundred percent truthful.

I remind myself this crush will go nowhere, but a nagging voice whispers that I'm not eighteen anymore. A lot has changed over the years, and just like that, a treacherous spark of hope ignites. Still, I heave a sigh, knowing it'll only land me brokenhearted, if I followed it.

Soren is off-limits. My brother's best friend. Hell, a fuckin' celebrity who probably dates supermodels, and his

parents are my parents' best friends. We're like family, and my crush would only muddy the water between everyone. It's better this way.

Avoid. Avoid. Avoid.

If he's staying, I'll go, but hopefully, he moves on soon, and I can move in without the temptation that would only lead to more embarrassment. A montage of my teenage fantasies floods my head as I unpack my bag and take a shower. The hot water and lingering, musky smell of him only fuels my fires, and I do unspeakable things with his name on my lips.

CHAPTER TWO

Soren

*M*y feet can't move fast enough, yet they don't seem to want to move at all. Tossing my shit on my bed in my room, I close the door a little too hard and start pacing.

Fuck.

My throat fucking hurts, and my skin is crawling. I pull at my hair for relief, but I can still see the image of her face as she stood there taking me in. And there's no mistaking her appreciation for what she saw.

I feel as if Father Time smacked me across the back of the head. Seeing Robin again was inevitable, but it's been a really long time.

Slapped in the face with something, or someone in this case, who I haven't laid eyes on in fifteen years. And the last time I saw her... Shit.

We need to talk. Funny thing about four words, especially those in connection to a woman; they usually send me running. With Robin, I won't lie. I'd love any excuse to talk to her. To listen to any detail of her new life she might feel like sharing.

Milo's face drifts into my mind. It's a bucket of disappointment, setting my head right. I made an oath to always look out for her and most importantly, never touch her.

When we were little, it was easy. She called me her prince, and I called her Peach because Mario was and still is the greatest game of all time. Of course, she's Princess Peach.

But when we hit puberty, things went apeshit. I got lots of attention from girls growing up, and Robin started acting bratty. That's when the three of us stopped hanging out together, and I got yearly reminders from Milo not to get any ideas. He made it clear her crush on me would pass, and the two of us would never be long term, so it wasn't worth the risk. Can't lie, hearing my best friend tell me I wouldn't be able to make his sister happy stung like a bitch.

The last reminder was on her eighteenth birthday. Since then, the two of us have successfully avoided each other. Even if I've hated ever minute.

Thinkin' back on the last time I saw her makes my heart beat faster and my palms sweaty. Fuck, if I could go back in time to that night, that moment...

What? No matter what I might wish could have happened, it doesn't change our circumstances. Robin is my best friend's little sister. The night of her party, I definitely saw her as all woman, but unfortunately, it didn't change our circumstances.

So I took off for the sea and never looked back. If I couldn't have her, I certainly couldn't sit by and watch some other lucky bastard win her affections.

Then I successfully built a wall around my heart no woman has ever stood a chance against. Not that there's a lot of women in the middle of the ocean where I spend sixty percent of the year, but I've had little interest in anything other than a night of fun. That's been my way since high school when my girlfriend told me she only dated me because I was on the football team. That felt gross, so I just stuck to dating. Taking girls to the movies and mastering my make-out skills. That's as far as I've ever taken it, yet everyone says otherwise. The problem with nasty rumors is, sometimes, people you care about believe them. Milo did.

I guess, it's not all bad. Robin's here now, and we can finally talk. I'm confident I can talk her into being friends, so I quickly get dressed and head back out of my room to find her.

Hopefully, she won't ask me why I was going to sleep in her room. I can't exactly tell her it's because it's the only room

in this house I can sleep in, that being surrounded by her things eases the pain that still haunts me whenever my mind settles.

When I'm out on a ship, it's easy to fill sleepless nights with work, but here, it's impossible. At least, it was until one night I was so fucking reckless I tried all the beds in the house. I tried real damn hard to avoid hers; I swear I did. I knew I was playing with fire to let myself indulge when it couldn't lead to anything but more longing, but I'll be damned if I don't have the best night's sleep whenever I stay in her bed.

Making my way to family room, I see her sitting in the kitchen, going through the takeout menus.

"Hey. You hungry?" she asks.

"Starving, but I grabbed groceries. Let me cook."

"You cook? Like food?" she jokes.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm pretty good at it, too." I throw out a playful wink, hoping to keep it light. "How do you feel about seafood pasta? Or I could do a white pizza."

"Wow, I'm impressed, and either sounds great. Thanks."

Robin proceeds to help me bring out the ingredients and even throws on a pot of water to boil.

"Okay, I think that's about all the help I can be."

I laugh. "So when you teased me about knowing how to cook, you, yourself, don't cook?"

"Basically," she replies with an easy smile.

"Okay, I see how it is. Still a brat," I tease, but she scoffs.

"I am not a brat. I can order takeout like no other."

Without permission my body leans too close to her, and without thought, I tickle her sides.

"I call brat."

She reels back laughing hard, all while slapping me. I instantly stop and hold my poor battered arms.

“Is that all you got? Feels like a mild wind. It’s mildly windy in here.”

“Oh, very funny. I see you’ve grown up very little in the last... How long has it been now?”

My jaw locks as her sweet floral scent fills my nose. I shouldn’t be this close.

We’re just talking.

“Fifteen years. I think you and I both know that.”

Her cheeks redden, and she steps around me. “Oh yeah, how could I forget the most embarrassing night of my life?”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you were going to come over or I would have...” I stop dead in my tracks as I realize I’m being too honest. Her eyes pin me in place, and I really want to ignore the hope on her face.

“You would have what?” she asks cautiously.

“I don’t know.”

Her shy smile continues to creep up, so I keep it light.

“Anyway, that was a long time ago, and I’ve always felt like I owed you an apology, but you’ve been great at avoiding me. I can only assume you’ve blocked my number, but to be honest I never called. Didn’t even send a nice text to check in, although I thought about it. I’ve been a coward, and I’m sorry, Robin. You deserve better.”

“Well, damn. Thank you, but I was the one who snuck into your room unannounced, so it really is my own fault.” She laughs lightly, seemingly in jest, but the tension still crackles between us.

My cock is already sprouting a semi at the memory of her, but now, she’s turned with her backside to me, reaching up for the pasta noodles. My heart stops beating for a full minute.

Her fuckin’ ass is incredible and currently being eaten by a pair of tiny black shorts.

I’m rendered speechless and stare like a weirdo.

“Here, I’ll help,” she says then turns back around, doing just that.

She gets the cutting board our moms have shared for holidays. Then the veggies, dicing up the green pepper and onion.

I do the simplest task of browning the ground beef. I season it and throw the garlic bread into the oven.

It’s all strangely comfortable as if the two of us cook together all the time.

At one point, she pulls out her phone, hooks it to the surround-sound speakers throughout the house, and light jazz drifts through the air.

“I remember you being more of a metal head? This is a surprising choice,” I tease.

“I’m a mood listener,” she tells me with a shrug, a sly smile tugging her lips as she takes another sip her wine.

“Italian and wine inspires Sinatra? Gotcha.”

“Mmm,” Robin moans, smelling the air. “Yes, and it smells like that Italian is finally done.”

We set the table for two then enjoy our pasta with a salad and a lot of wine.

Two hours after that, we’re sitting together on the couch, laughing over our third bottle.

“Damn, it’s midnight,” I say with a yawn.

“Want to watch a movie?”

Her question surprises me, but the wine has me forgetting why I shouldn’t spend more time with her.

I internally scold myself, even while nodding. This isn’t a good idea. I need to make an excuse and leave, but instead, I finish my glass of Merlot and search for a movie.

“What about a romantic comedy?”

“Or a horror?”

I chuckle at her suggestion but end up choosing a slasher in the end. Setting down the remote, I grab a blanket. She's spread out, lying on the couch, and I just smile.

Without a second thought, I take the chance to lie with her. Jokingly, I fumble over her and tease her for taking up all of the couch.

"Did you double in size since I last saw you? I'm falling off."

She laughs, but I take the chance to wrap my arm around her soft waist and pull her close. My dick jumps on contact, and again, I curse myself.

"Is this okay?" I ask. If she's not comfortable, I'll jump up.

"Uh, yeah," she says, her voice low and breathy.

Metal blares from the big screen TV in the large living room as the movie starts. There are two other long couches, and yet, here we are. What was I thinking? Fuck, this feels too good. She smells too good.

Animal Shelters. Grandmas. Fuck, calm down, big man.

My cock swells with each movement she makes. I do my damndest to stifle the groan that's threatening to spill out.

I'm sure she feels me. That thick, lush ass of hers is pressed so tight to my jeans I can feel her heat. So warm and inviting.

Robin doesn't fight our tight embrace, and for once in my life, I don't do the right thing. I forget my duty, and my heart calls her mine. One, because I must be delusion. Two, because she feels like mine. We fit so perfectly.

A long time passes as the movie plays, and I think she must have fallen asleep. Moving my face up, my beard skims her neck. I see her eyes roll back, but she shoots up off the couch.

"You know what? It is late...and I'm very tired. Goodnight."

“Goodnight,” I say, feeling as if I missed something, but respecting whatever space she needs. “I might be up early. Can I knock and say goodbye?”

“You’re leaving already?”

I hate how much I love the disappointment in her question.

“Yeah. Quick turn around with the ever-growing, plastic-island issue.”

She nods but looks down at her feet. “Okay then. What time? I’ll set my alarm.”

“Six.”

“Ew, gross.”

Her morphed face makes me laugh. She’s so fucking adorable I could stay up all night, looking at her.

“Okay. I’ll set like five alarms, and you’ll still have to knock really loud.”

“I can do that.”

Her sad smile cuts me. Then she nods and leaves to her room.

I don’t want to leave tomorrow. The thought creeps in as I make my way to my own bed. It has perfectly clean sheets but isn’t at all as comforting as Robin’s room.

Staring at the ceiling, the wine pulls my eyelids. I’m drifting off when I think I hear something. At first, it’s soft, but then Robin pounds her knuckles ungracefully on my door. Without a single thought, I sit up and call for her to come in.

CHAPTER THREE

Robin

Pacing my old room, I list all the reasons I shouldn't risk this. If he rejects me again, it will sting like a mother trucker, but I think it would feel worse if I hole up in my bed wishing I took this chance. He was fully hard against me for the part of the movie I watched. The heat from his body, the protective way he held me close, it was all too much. I couldn't hold still anymore, so I bolted.

Now, I'm wet and worked up, and my vibrator is packed in my big suitcase, currently in the trunk of my car, under the pouring rain. Not accessible. So I'm pacing.

At least, I was. Now, I'm stripping out of my clothes. It's too hot. I'm too worked up. I should go take a cold shower and call it a night.

Instead, I grab an extra sheet from my closet, touch up my makeup and tell myself I got this. I'm not that young girl anymore. I'm older, wiser, and I won't fall in love with him after one night. This scenario only has the potential for tonight, and I can handle that.

Taking a deep breath, I slip out of my room, walk the short hall to his room and knock three times.

"Come in!"

I push inside but lean back against the door to close it lazily. It's obvious why I'm here, but I need to know I'm wanted.

“At the risk of being rejected again, I was wondering...” I say shyly, letting it hang.

Soren’s brow furrows. “I never rejected you. It didn’t go as either one of us might have wanted, but know with certainty, Robin, I didn’t reject you.”

My lungs squeeze tight with emotion I don’t like, choking me. He is too perfect. Can I really do this without feelings?

“What about now?”

The bedroom is dark, lit only from the small side table lamp and Soren’s large frame casts a shadow over the room when he stands. For a long moment, he seems to wrestle with the decision. Those big, thick fists tighten with what little restraint he’s holding onto. Will he or won’t he?

“No pressure. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” I say, and I mean it.

Behind me, I feel for the doorknob, ready to make my escape.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Soren’s deep voice rumbles. It’s deep and demanding, a tone I’ve never heard from him.

He finally stalks toward me, his large frame pounding the floor with each step.

Someone pinch me. Is my dream coming true?

I’m a panting mess, clenching the sheet in nervous excitement, and using the bedroom door for balance, too afraid to move or breathe. Just as he reaches me, his palm finds my face, and in an act far too intimate for a one-night stand, he kisses me.

It’s deep and sensual. Almost as if Soren has spent time thinking about this kiss. Our first kiss. The kiss I’ve longed for since adolescence.

My legs weaken, and I grab onto his torso and pull him close. He towers over me, and I’m so lost in his lips.

I yelp when he scoops me up off my feet. A stupid schoolgirl giggle escapes, and my cheeks heat. I’m trying for

seductress here and failing hard.

Soren's eyes bore into me as he takes me to the bed. Again, it's too intimate, and it makes me want to read way too much into it.

"You deserve better than me, but if I'm lucky enough to have this moment, I'm taking it."

"Take me," I whisper against his lips and slowly open the sheet.

His eyes follow my movements, and he groans at the sight of my pussy.

Soren's huge body encases me in a protective embrace while he hovers just above me. I feel his heat, and I know he feels mine. We're both vibrating with need.

I stare at his tongue as he wets his lips, but instead of kissing me as I expect, he lowers to my chest, placing a wet, hot kiss there. Unintelligible sounds fall from my mouth as I squirm below him, overheating from the inside out. With each kiss he places on my sensitive skin, a small bomb of pure intense need washes over me like a tidal wave. It builds to new heights until my body is so strung up a rough wind might make me come.

When he reaches my center, I hold my breath, trying to brace myself. It's like the grand finale at the Fourth of July. Fireworks explode behind my eyes as he licks me. Soren eats me like his last meal, slow and gentle at first, as if savoring my taste. The thought, accompanied by how good he feels, has me moaning and pulling his hair. I'm loud and unapologetic. My hips buck, needing more, but also not wanting to stop or change a single thing.

He hums against me, sending my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

Then he pushes a finger inside me. I yell and grip the sheets as my back arches off the mattress. Grabbing his hair again, I lift my legs high and wide for him. He rewards me with another finger. Now, the two pump inside me.

“Yes,” I mutter, so enthralled in the touch of this man I can’t form another thought.

He laps at my clit while thrusting his fingers in, over and again, and each one brings me closer to the peak.

When he moves his mouth to mine, I don’t think twice about kissing him. My taste on his lips, feeling empowering instead of gross. I have the night with Soren, and I’m not going to waste a minute second guessing myself. A groan rips from his throat, breaking our kiss. He’s only in boxers, and I easily find my way in. When I do, I stroke him with the same eager vigor he’s using on me. He pumps, and I pull. The room is quiet, but I feel his eyes on my face while I watch the filthy scene taking place between us. Those big fingers disappearing inside me. Soren’s thick length sliding along my palm.

It’s so erotic I’m right back on that orgasm cliff, shouting for release. With a growl, he fucks my hand and pumps harder, and when he sinks his teeth into my shoulder, I’m done. I shake coming hard on his hand.

His fingers slow until they leave me. That’s when our kiss deepens, and I instantly need him back. A whine escapes my mouth, but instead of being embarrassed, I push against his chest to lay him back. Now on top, I take a second to look down at him. His straining control is clear. Soren is a big man, and I imagine letting a woman take the lead is new for him. By the look on his face, he likes it, though. He’s staring at me as if I’m the sun.

I flatten my tongue and lick him from base to tip, staying on his crown and drawing circles until he’s literally sweating. It’s heady to tame a beast as big as Soren, and I soak in the glory...for about a minute. I don’t even get his length into my mouth before he’s scooping me up and tossing me back down to the bed. I land on my belly. It’s all so thrilling, and I can’t help the eager excitement that escapes as giggles—that is, until he lines up and drives that massive cock inside me.

I scream out in pleasure, and it spurs him on faster. With each sound I make, he pumps harder than the last. My longtime crush is somehow hyper-focused on me. When he

grips my hips, using them as leverage to drill deeper inside me, I lose control completely. Physically, I'm much smaller than Soren, and yet as he fucks me fiercely, I feel safe and coveted.

Hot breath whispers across my neck as his grip grows punishing. The feeling of him taking me this roughly short circuits my brain. I'm all feels, vibrating with pleasure.

I'm there again. At the brink of orgasm and yelling his name.

“Please! Yes!”

My words are muffled in the sheets, too blissed out with each hard thrust.

Sweat beads on my skin, and his fingertips burn at my hips. I need to come.

“Soren!”

As fast as lightning striking, my orgasm rips out of me at the touch of his fingers on my ultrasensitive clit. He rubs it out of me while I reach back to grab his hair, pulling his face to the side of mine. Those titan hips buck faster, and when I scream his name, his body seizes, then he pours his release inside me.

My name is the last thing to fall from his lips, and we collapse onto the mattress and pass out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Soren

“*I*s there any way to postpone the voyage? Maybe, leave on Monday?”

“Somethin’ wrong? This is National Geographic. They’re not going to wait.”

“Everyone needs time off. We just pulled in yesterday.”

“The film crew alone cost hundreds of thousands of dollars a day, Soren. This trip is a national project you’ve been a part of for over a year. Why would you want to take the weekend off? Yesterday, you didn’t want to port? What’s with the whiplash man?”

Connor, my assistant and apprentice of sorts, has a valid point. The problem is leaving Robin...and I really don’t want to.

If my beard wasn’t so bushy after her ass riding it, she’d see me pouting right now.

“Good morning.”

“Mornin’.”

Her coy smile as she comes out of her room makes me smile.

“Alright, man. I got to go. See you soon,” I tell Connor and hang up, wanting to give every second of my attention to her.

Last night blew my mind. Hell, it's still blowing my mind and will forever be my favorite memory.

I don't want to leave. My feet weigh a hundred pounds each.

Instead of hurrying out the door as I should, I'm holding up the boat for the first time in my career. All morning, I pondered a way to stay, but Connor isn't ready for a job like this, and the entire project will fall through without me. I've never felt bitterness toward my job before now...but as Robin tucks her brown hair behind her ear, showing me her beautiful face, I swear I'm in love.

I hand her a cup of coffee and move closer, needing to feel her. To reassure myself last night really happened. We were both drinking, and I need her to tell me we're okay, that we didn't ruin anything and still have a chance. Somehow.

"I have to leave. Ocean's calling," I say to her forehead, too scared to look her in the eye. Last night wasn't just fucking. I've never felt such an intense connection to someone before.

"Lame. When will you be back?"

"A few months, unless we run into trouble. We're filming a documentary, and something usually goes batshit crazy. Or someone," I try to joke, ignoring the tight pain in my chest.

"Sounds like a grand adventure. Just what the Indiana Jones of the Sea needs."

"I've had a million adventures. I'd rather stay here."

Her smile is sweet but restrained. I get it. I live a completely unstable life. Take right now, for instance. I'm leaving for an uncertain amount of time, unable to promise anything.

"If only, the ocean didn't call."

"Can I see you again? Will you unblock me?"

That makes her laugh, but her eyes remain sad.

"I'll be here whenever you roll through."

“You’ll never date?” I ask but mentally, beg her not to answer.

Tapping her chin, she makes a nice show of thinking about it. “If I’m seeing someone, we would have to talk. I’m not a cheater.”

“Of course. The dreaded we ‘need to talk’ talk.”

“Exactly.” She nods.

Without another word, I kiss her forehead and turn to leave. At the door, I second guess leaving when I see tears in her eyes, I almost throw down my bags and say fuck it. Call the whole thing off.

“I’ll be coming back for you, Robin.”

She shrugs a sad shoulder, and something tells me she can’t speak. I know it’s become harder for me, so I know I can’t stay. Turning back, I reluctantly walk out the door, already anxious to return.

Robin

One week later

“THERE IT IS,” I say to no one as I move around the house.

I’ve opened all the windows, and the cool ocean breeze blows in as my Taylor Swift beats drift out. Over the last few days, I’ve done my best to keep busy. You know, not hyper-focus on missing a certain someone. So that’s why I’m dancing around, singing offkey and unpacking.

Truth be told, I don’t have a whole lot and the place is furnished, but I’ve been searching for this bag. It has my Kindle in it, and I’m tired of reading my smut on my phone because it drains my battery so fast, and it always falls on that last bar just when things start getting spicy.

After the incredible night with Soren, I’m in dire need of a good book boyfriend to help me get over him.

My happiness climbs when I spot my sticker-covered Paperwhite kindle. Funny how books do that, instantly put you in a good mood, but they do. And romance is my perfect escape since I've never actually had any in real life. That makes me think back to the other night again, and for a second, I almost retract the thought, but Soren wasn't being romantic. He fucked me like a bull.

Grabbing it, I search through the rest of the backpack's contents.

Lip gloss, a bottle opener, a sweatband from when I wrongly wore a Richard Simmons Halloween costume, and my birth control. Wait... What?

Grabbing the small blue compact, I try to remember the last time I took one. It had to be last week before I loaded the car and drove down here.

Suddenly, the room spins and my hand flies to my stomach. I feel fine, but we'd been drinking wine, and I'm almost positive Soren never put on a condom.

Oh shit fuck. No. Holy complication, Batman.

If it's only been a week, I can't take a test and get an accurate result. My knees begin to jump with anxiety. The realization I might be pregnant with my brother's best friend slowly sets in. I shouldn't even think about it. I'll just wait it out and take a test...but that's easier to say than do.

Already, my mind is spinning. How can I get ahold of Soren? What will he say?

As much as it sends acid to my stomach, I don't think he'd be happy. Milo definitely won't be, and he'll probably declare war when he finds out it's Soren, who isn't even here to defend himself.

My big brother will go apeshit. Tell me how disappointed he is in me. Ouch, it burns already. This little town is more gossipy than Sycamore Mountain. I'll have all the tongues wagging when they find out I'm knocked up with no baby daddy. Will they all label me a harlot? Does the older generation still do that? I hope not, but I can handle it.

This was suppose to be my do-over. I escaped the small town for beach life. I'm jobless, living at my folks' vacation house, living off the money I got after selling Pour Decisions. I am far from mom material, and yet with the spark of a possibilities, I realize I really want it.

That's crazy. I can't. I'm not even good at taking care of myself. Truth is, I only sustain my own life with fast food and ramen noodles. I didn't go to college, and I'm not really talented or particularly good at anything.

With that thought, my anxiety is back, banging on the door.

"Hey, girl, hey, you can't do this."

Turns out my inner self is a real cunt-waffle.

Okay, new life plan. Find out if I'm growing a tiny human...then deal with the aftermath.

I spend the next few days avoiding my family's calls, including Milo, who's blowing up my texts, wanting to know if I want to hang out. Gosh, he's just the greatest big brother. How am I going to lie to his face and tell him I don't know who the baby daddy is? He's going to think I'm a big hoe when really, I've only been with three dudes my whole life.

On a deep sigh, I tip up my chin and tell myself I'm a fucking queen and the world will just get over it.

If I'm pregnant, I'm having a baby. I'll tell Soren when he comes home, and let him make his own choices.

Until then, I need a job. No more taking time to find myself. If nothing else, this is a huge wake-up call.

It's time to pull up my big girl panties and take on the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Robin

Eight Months Later

Before my eyes even open, I'm running for the bathroom...again.

The bigger this kid gets the smaller my bladder is. I piss every hour now, I've gained something like fifty pounds, and it's hot as fuck in the Florida Keys in September.

Physically, I'm miserable, but mentally, I've never been better.

When I finally got the nerve to take a prego test—well, ten actually—they all said the same thing, a glaring positive.

I was lost—okay, I'm still lost—but I've got a plan.

Today is a new day, a great day, and after I wrestle myself into a big flower dress and flipflops, I head out. I'm meeting my friend, Daphne. She's helping to plan my baby shower, and well, being the greatest friend of all time, she's also helping to plan my life.

Daphne Meadows has quickly joined the small list of my besties. With kind blue eyes and curly black hair that literally reaches her buttocks, you'd think she would be married or at least, dating all the local bachelors, but somehow, I get to monopolize all her time, which has been a saving grace to my sanity.

“Hey, love bug, got your coffee for you.”

“Shh. Someone will hear you and tell me I’m being a bad mom already.”

“Robin.”

“I mean thank you,” I say as she gives me the mom deadpan look. She always calls me out when I predict someone will shame me. It’s already happened. I’m just trying to get used to it. My own brother looks at me with worry, instead of as an equal. To him, I’m burden, but I love him. I might kill him after this is all said and done, especially if he keeps making remarks about him taking care of my child.

Milo says he’ll help out, and I hear nails on a chalkboard. Although I appreciate him, this is my responsibility, and I’ve more than come to terms with it.

“Mmm. Carmel frappe. My favorite.”

“Of course, Mama, and I also got a bag of assorted pastries for ya.”

My hormones decide this is a great time to get choked up.

“Aw, don’t cry. I’ll take them back,” Daphne teases.

“You wouldn’t!”

“No, I wouldn’t.” She laughs.

For the next couple of hours, we feast on delicate pastries and beloved liquid gold, though I will only enjoy one and then switch to water.

We pay the bill and decide to walk home. Daphne conveniently lives next door in an temporary rental. Much like me, she moved from a small town. Hers being in South Carolina; mine Sycamore Mountain.

But unlike me, she had a goal and went for it. My current dream is to survive the tornado of single motherhood. I just need a good-paying job.

As if she can hear my thoughts, that or she just remembered to remind me about it, Daphne stops walking. “Have you thought any more about what I said?”

Reluctantly, I nod.

“I still can’t believe you think I’m good enough, Daph,” I tell her honestly.

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t have to believe me. I have millions of followers who agree with me.”

Since finding out about my baby, I’ve been looking for work. I’m not going back to the bars and working those hours, especially pregnant. Selling my bar was the most freeing decision of my life. I’m a new Robin, and apparently, my custom clothes have become an Instagram favorite.

A very big part of me was reluctant to consider Daphne’s offer to share storefront space at her retail store, currently Whimsical Wedding Gown Boutique, and help me start my own brand on social media.

“How many pieces do you have ready, right now?”

“For sale or pictures?”

“I think people would love seeing every step of your creative process. The video platforms want to see you creating these masterpieces,” she says, gesturing to my homemade maternity dress. It’s purple and teal tie-dye and has pockets. Simple, functional and fun.

“Okay, I can do that. I took some pictures for reference, but I can get a lot better footage.”

Inspiration starts coming to me, and I’m excited to see the sunny yellow door of the big vacation house ahead. Walking is good for me, but currently, I just waddle as sweat drips down my legs. I swear it’s just sweat. I’ve never pissed myself. I did come close when Milo was telling jokes the other night, though.

“Cool, shoot them over, and I’ll edit them all pretty for you.”

“Aw, you’re so sweet. I need to figure out how to do all that, though.”

“True. I could come over later with Ben and Jerry and show you how.”

“I’ll take notes!” I exclaim, loving the idea.

She laughs. “Deal. I’ll text you. I have a shit ton to do first.”

“No problem. Let me know if you want to bail.” I wink, genuinely meaning it.

“I won’t bail!” she yells as she gets farther away.

Waving, I slowly hit the four large steps to get inside and soak in the air conditioning. I waste no time with the keys and hurry inside. Feeling exhausted from growing a tiny human, I head upstairs for a nap.

I’m really looking forward to girl’s night tonight. I should invite Meno. Without hesitation, I shoot her a text. Then plug in my phone to charge.

Tomorrow, on the other hand, is my baby shower, where lots of people will come to tell me how happy they are for me and still ask me who the father is.

Do you really not know? I can already hear the judgmental whispers.

Still, I’m grateful, and it will be a day to remember for the rest of my life. And soon, my child will be born.

Holy shit, I’m going to have to give birth. The thought is so truly terrifying I would normally go into a depression where I binge Netflix and order DoorDash until I feel like taking a shower.

But I can’t do that. I love my baby already, and no matter what happens, I’m always going to do my best by him or her.

The thought of my sweet child brings memories of Soren as I drift to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Soren

*M*y stomach groans with hunger, but I was so fucking eager to get off the boat that I didn't eat. It's been a gruesome eight months and five days.

I'm confident the film will resonate with viewers and naturally get the exposure it needs to make a difference. Therefore, I still feel good about my decision to clear my calendar. I don't have any other obligations, and I'm hoping Robin will help me fill my free time.

Milo. Fuck. My phone rings with an incoming call, but I'm too chicken shit to pick up. I've come up with a few different speeches, but each one ends in fists. I'll take my beating and hopefully earn his permission. Part of me still holds onto hope it won't come to that. Maybe, just maybe, after all these years, he can me settling down with Robin and living a great life with her. She's a strong, stubborn-ass woman who will never settle for less. I will be the man she deserves. My resolve is strong and sticks with me all the way through the Uber ride to her front door.

It looks like a party. Streamers and black silhouettes of beards drape across the large wraparound deck. Did Milo set this up? It is World Beard day, plus he's the only one who knew I was docking today. Maybe, telling him about Robin and me will be easier than we thought.

Grabbing my bags, I take the stairs two at a time and reach the yellow door, still filled with all the hope in the world.

Walking inside, I scan the crowd, my excitement building to a point I'm nervous I'll be too obvious in my feelings for Robin in front of everyone before we can be alone.

I can't wait to kiss her.

Ignoring every other face, I lock on hers immediately. Those beautiful, dark eyes shine with...worry?

She doesn't look happy to see me. Hope deflates and chokes my throat. My gaze moves lower to her large pregnant belly. She's glowing. I can see it now. She's even more radiant with her stomach round with a growing child.

My lungs threaten to collapse. What's going on? How long was I gone? She's moved on? But she said if she was seeing someone when I came back, we would have to talk. Otherwise, we were good.

As she approaches, I hold onto hope. At the same time, my mind reels at her belly. She's moved on so quickly.

"Hey, Soren. Long time no see. I, um, I guess we should talk," she says so softly I can barely hear her over the pounding in my ears. My vision blurs. I grind my molars, feeling shattered and unfairly betrayed. I know it's not fair. She didn't make me any promises, and I don't want to say anything to hurt her, so I turn and leave, storming out, bags still in hand.

I walk for a few miles before the adrenaline finally wears off, leaving me feeling rundown and heartbroken. My mind is still a tornado.

Robin is pregnant.

Very pregnant. Like due any day pregnant.

I've been gone almost nine months.

The last time I saw her, I came like a fucking freight train...without a condom on.

I stop walking and fall to my knees. *Wait.* I could be the father of her baby.

But when she used that phrase, I thought she was trying to communicate that she was with someone new.

Or, and I don't know how to process this yet, I'm the father of her baby, and she hasn't been able to contact me. That's definitely a reason to use that tone and want to talk privately.

And I left. Shit. Jumping up, I run back. Still unsure of what I'll say, but on the off-chance Robin needs me and will forgive me for jumping to conclusions, I'll risk it. Being honest is always good, right? This will get messy.

Sneaking around back, I take the emergency ladder up to the second floor and jimmy open the first window and slip in ungracefully. A woman screams.

“Wait!”

She's hitting me.

“Soren.”

“Robin, listen, I'm sorry I left. I want to talk. Hell, I *need* to talk to you.” I'm on my knees after falling inside her window, but I don't move to get up. If this is my doing and I've left her alone this whole time, I have a shitload to make up for.

Please, say it's mine.

She stutters unsure of her words.

“There's so much to say I don't know what to say.”

“You don't have to say anything right now, if you don't want to, but can I ask you a question...or two?”

Her eyes shoot down, and my heart squeezes with worry. She's not mine.

“Yes,” Robin says, finally looking at me. I see tears in her eyes.

“First, can I hug you, right now? Just a hug?”

Her smile lifts the twenty-ton boulder on my chest, and I spring to my feet to meet her. When my arms take her, that

soft floral scent fills my nose and my heart finally calms after months on the stormy sea.

It's several moments before either of us move. Her small arms are unable to reach around me, but I eclipse her. The feel of her hair takes me back to our night together. Before my body starts to react, I pull back and finally step away.

"Hey."

"Hi." She laughs at my attempt at casual.

"So you're pregnant."

"Yep."

"I was wondering if I might be lucky enough to be the father?"

Those tears from earlier fall as she nods. The confirmation fills me with a million different emotions. Pride, adrenaline, fear, excitement. Without warning, I bend down and sweep her off her feet, completely caught up in the moment.

"I'm going to be a dad!" I say, twirling around in a circle with my forehead pressed to hers. The moment is calm, when everything goes dead silent. All is right and good in the world and nothing can touch my moment.

Wrong.

"What the actual fuck!"

Our heads snap to the door to find a steaming Milo. His face is beet red, and he looks at me with absolute rage.

Reluctantly, I set Robin back on her feet.

As happy as I felt just a second ago, I feel equally terrible now. I'm not sorry for being with Robin. How could I be? She's going to make me a father.

All happiness aside, betrayal sits heavy on my gut.

"Milo, calm down. We can all talk about this. He didn't know," Robin pleads, standing in front of me, acting as a shield from the damage her brother will most definitely inflict. The man's not going to physically remove his pregnant baby

sister, but I have no doubt I've got a knuckle sandwich coming.

"But you did know, Robin. Then proceeded to tell me you didn't."

My mind scrambles to think of a way to take the heat off of her. Her tears are back as her brother turns away.

"I'm so fucking mad at the both of you."

"Milo, come on."

I fully planned to launch into my speech, but my best friend seethes with anger as he yells again.

"You shut your fucking mouth. I can't stand the damn sight of you, right now."

Then we watch as he turns and stomps away, slamming a bedroom door.

"That could have gone better," Robin whispers in the wake of his departure.

"I don't think that could have gone any better, but I am surprised my face is intact, to be honest."

"He's going to be okay, right? He'll forgive us?"

"Of course, he will. We just have a lot of trust to earn back. We knew his feelings were involved when we let things, um, escalate. I should have handled it differently. You both deserve better than that."

She smiles softly up at me with far more respect than I deserve.

"Not that I regret it. If I had my way, I would flip you around right now and lift that skirt of yours."

"Well, this is certainly a surprise."

My stomach completely drops at the words behind me.

Embarrassment. Regret. Panic. Fear swirls like a tornado inside me as I turn to face Robin's father, Carl.

I still don't regret it, and I know we will both laugh about it eventually.

However, Carl isn't laughing as his stout frame fills the doorway. Milo got his width from his dad and height from his mom. Robin got neither, all cute and petite and squishy. So fucking soft.

"Are you even listening to me?" he asks, and I honestly wasn't. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Sorry, sir. A lot of surprising news today. Still processing." I choose my words wisely because I have nothing but respect for the man and truly want his blessing. Other than my own father, this man has had the leading male role in my life. Still to this day.

Carl's expression softens, but he repeats himself.

"I'm callin' a family meeting. Now. So you two get your shit straight."

He glares at Robin with clear disappointment, and her eyes cast down to her shoes instantly. She's taking a shit ton more heat than I expected. Was she warned not to date me? Has her family been telling her not to date me all these years while Milo had been threatening me? The thought twists my already upset stomach, and nausea rolls through me. I'm far from a stable partner, but I've got a plan. I just need them trust me.

"Hey, you alright?" she asks me, her warm hand coming to my cheek.

I take a deep breath before replying. "Processing."

She nods. "I wish I could have told you sooner."

"I'm so sorry you couldn't. This mess is my fault. I should have asked their permission, should have fought for a regular date before just taking what I wanted."

"Hey. I took what I wanted, too, and I also don't regret it."

Her sassy tone lifts my mood marginally.

"Plus, sometimes, with overprotective brothers, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to ask for permission."

"You don't think he would have given me permission to ask you out?"

I hold my breath, waiting for her response. If my best friend, a man who knows me and my worth better than anyone, doesn't find me to be enough, it will absolutely break me.

If he doesn't think I'll be a good father, how can I be?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Robin

*W*hat have I done.

As the guests start arriving for the baby shower, Meno and Daphne keep everyone occupied, so we can have a family meeting, as dad called it.

So far, we're all in Milo's room as he burns daggers at me from across the room while he sits on his bed, pouting against the headboard.

Dad hasn't stopped pacing or pulling on his long gray beard.

Finally, Mom walks in.

"Okay, I'm back. What did I miss?" she says, having returned from picking up the baked goods.

But before anyone answers, her eyes catch on me and Soren, practically cuddling on the couch. His large arm is protectively slung over my lap as he holds my hand.

"Mom, um, Soren is the father of my baby." I take a breath wishing, for some courage but only feeling as if I somehow failed. Granted, the whole circumstance, especially today, could have been handled better.

"Surprise," I awkwardly add, making Soren's mouth twitch, but he hides it with hand, faking a cough.

"Y'all think this is so funny, don't you?" Milo roars from his pouting post.

No one replies. Everyone's waiting for Mom's reaction.

A high-pitched scream fills the air, and the big, burly guy next to me, the one who's been acting so protective since finding out I'm having his baby, jumps like a scaredy cat.

I laugh as Mom runs over and throws herself into his arms for a big hug. She's practically vibrating with excitement, but it's Soren's face that makes us all start laughing. Well, everyone but my brother, of course.

Total shock leaves him with a dumbfounded expression, his arms defensive instead of embracing. As if he'd assumed my mother would have hit him.

My dad finds it so funny he takes out his phone to record as Mom breaks down crying.

"I'm so happy it's you. Oh my gosh, does your mother know?"

Then her eyes snap to me, and I get hit with it a third time. Utter disappointment. I know I let them down by lying, but how could I announce the father without telling the man himself?

The fallout will be worth it, though. So far, Soren seems to want this just as much as I do. I can't wait to actually be alone and talk about it.

"How did I not know?" she scolds me, pushing back off Soren, whose face makes her laugh now.

"What were you expecting, son?"

But Soren doesn't respond. By the look on his face, he expected the worst, and the best case scenario has him choked up. I take his hand again and squeeze it.

"Not sure, ma'am. I am sorry for the way it's all coming out, but..."

I hold my breath, scared to know what he's going to say.

"Truth be told, I've wanted a chance with your wonderful daughter for a long time, and I won't take anything about this situation for granted."

“Why couldn’t you just ask her out like a normal person?” dad sighs from where he’s sitting on Milo’s bed.

Without saying it, Soren looks to Milo for the answer. My brother grows uncomfortable as everyone’s gaze falls to him.

“I don’t know why everyone’s looking to me. You were the fucker who broke your word. That you’re not on the ground, taking a beating, is a testament to my own willpower.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mom beats me to it.

Although I am glad she asked because I hate when my brother is mad at me, and right now is the maddest I’ve ever seen him. He won’t even look at me. Usually he’s cussin’ and fussin’, making an effort to get us back to good. Even though he’s my big smelly brother, he’s also my bestie and I need us to get back to that place. I want to tell him I’m sorry again, and explain why I had to keep it from him.

“Nothin’,” Milo says and pushes up from the bed. “If we’re all done here, I’d sure as hell like to leave.”

“No, we’re far from done, but we also have a lot of people arriving for a baby shower. Shall we announce the good news?” Mom asks cautiously.

Milo makes no attempt to stay or even glance back as he leaves the room. Mom and Dad wait expectantly.

“Now, for the record, I’m happy for the both of you. It’s a shock, and Milo clearly isn’t taking it well, but we’re family. All of us. We’re gonna be just fine,” Dad says, coming to give Soren a big hug. They both pat each other’s back so violently Mom and I lock eyes in confusion.

The two, seemingly fine, lean back and my dad adds, “Let’s clean up that mouth of yours, though.”

Soren’s eyes blow wide, and his face turns as red as a tomato. It’s adorable and causes my dad and I to erupt in laughter.

“What did I miss?” Mom asks as we start making our way downstairs.

“Don’t ask,” Dad says, shaking his head.

We all follow downstairs to the party that’s in full swing.

I take a deep breath, possibly more afraid of everyone’s reaction now. Will they think I’m lying? Tell people I’m just saying it’s Soren because he’s a good man, and I don’t know who the real baby daddy is.

As my mind spirals, and my anxiety spikes, Soren looks back at me then takes my hand. His look asks if it’s okay, and it makes me smile.

“Thank you.”

He nods, still confused, but the fact he knew I needed something and simply let me know he was here for me... Well, it means everything. I’m still scared of when he has to ship back out for months at a time without communication, but that’s a hurdle I’ll deal with after the gossip queens are gone.

“Hey, Doris, how are you?” I greet one of our longtime neighbors.

“Hello, dear. So this is the father?”

Here we go.

“Yes, ma’am. Proud father,” Soren says, taking the pressure off of me to come up with the right words, for which I am so grateful.

As a matter of fact, he takes the lead on all the awkward questions. His natural charm makes the old ladies swoon and forget all about me. They’re clearly uninterested in the upcoming baby and more invested in each retelling of tales of Soren’s heroics out at sea. He names drops the movie, and I make a mental note, so I can ask more questions later.

The event goes off without a hitch, and as everyone leaves, my family stays to clean up. Milo takes the kitchen with Meno, Dad and Mom take the back porch, and Soren and I slowly clean up random cups, confetti beards and busted balloons.

“So, that was fun. Think you got everything you wanted?” Soren says, trying for casual.

“I think we have more than enough clothes but still need a few things.”

“Do you think I can get those things for you?”

I smile, thinking about his question.

“It’s not just for me, at least not anymore. It’s also for you and our child.”

That gets his attention, and he smiles, finally looking at me.

“Thanks for that,” he says, rubbing at his chest. “I, um, noticed you haven’t found out if it’s a boy or girl.”

“Well, I do actually know. I’ve just been waiting for you.”

There’s that smile.

“It’s written on a small card upstairs. I thought we could look at it together. Then you can buy all the shit you want.”

I get a big bear hug for that, and he holds me for several beats. His whole body seems to vibrate as he works through his emotions, letting me hold him. Which is really awkward at his height, but I’m happy to do it after the way he helped me get through this damn party.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I hear my mom’s voice, and we break apart. “I was just going to let you both know we’re heading out. The grill is all clean, and Milo and Meno are just about done, too.”

“Can we open it with them?” Soren whispers in my ear.

“Wait, before you guys go, we’re calling one last family meeting.”

“Okay, I’ll, um, go round up everyone,” Mom says, looking fearful.

“Great idea,” I tell Soren as she leaves. “It’ll take a million years for me to waddle up those stairs. Would you mind going to grab the white envelope on my desk?”

“I’d be honored,” he says, kisses me on the forehead then bounds up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“You better not sneak a peek!” I yell after him.

When he comes back, we get comfortable on the couch, and slowly and reluctantly, everyone gathers around.

“Again, I’m really sorry for lying to you all about the father, but as you can imagine, it wasn’t a decision I felt was solely mine.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Milo barks, but Meno takes his hand, which calms him ever so slightly.

I send her a smile of thanks, hoping she’s not mad at me, too. Her wink tells me we’re okay, and she’ll continue to work on my stubborn brother.

“I mean I don’t know how much Soren will want to be involved or can be with his busy schedule, but he deserved to know first.”

“Wait, you’re leaving?” Milo turns his anger to Soren now.

“No, I didn’t mean—” I try to butt in, but the man beside me doesn’t look to happy at my response.

“No, I’m not. I—”

“Fuck you, man! How can you leave now? You’re gonna be so fuckin’ sorry when I get my hands on you, motherfucker.”

“I’m not leaving!”

“Can we keep this calm and civil, please, gentlemen,” Dad speaks up, cutting off Milo’s rants, so Soren can actually be heard.

He clears his throat, but he still can’t look at Milo. My heart hurts at the damage I’ve caused them both.

“After the night Robin and I had, I’ve spent months just constantly thinking about her and how I can be good enough, alright? I should have come to you, and I had planned on it. Got a stupid fucking speech you’re going to hate, and I cleared all my commitments... And I just fucking got here!” Soren’s

loud words ring through the room, stunning Milo and the rest of us silent.

Then he calmly leans back on the couch and puts his hand back on top of mine.

“What do you mean you cleared your commitments?”

“I talked to Braxton, the owner of Grand Rapids, and asked if I could get stationed here. I professionally bowed out of a Netflix docu-series, but I still have a few book deals. It’s not going to hurt my career at all, so stop looking guilty.”

“But—” My words come out with a sob, and he wipes a stray tear from my cheek. “You didn’t know about the baby.”

He just shakes his head at me as if it’s so obvious. Soren wants me, not just the chance to be the father of my child, but he wants to really give us a shot. My hormones rage, and I can’t stop crying as he holds me tight.

“You don’t owe us anything, Son,” I hear my mom say. “Just take care of our girl.”

No one says anything, and I hear everyone start to move.

“Wait,” I say. Getting my shit together, I wipe my face the best I can, noticing the splotches on Soren’s T-shirt. “Sorry,” I tell him, but he only shrugs unbothered. “If you guys want, we’d like you to stay for our gender reveal.”

Meno squeaks with excitement but slaps a hand over her mouth in an attempt not to draw attention.

I laugh lightly, and when Soren tries to hand it to me, I push it back to him. “You open it.”

His eyes mist, but he plays it off with a cough into his hand. Then puts his big, tattooed arm around me and opens the envelope in front of my face.

“It’s a boy,” he croaks and turns to me, tucking into my neck, and I place my hand on his face to block it from the men in the room. I will never understand men not wanting to show emotion, but I’ll respect it. He takes a minute, and the room erupts. Even Milo jumps around with pride, hugging our parents and his lady love.

My heart fills with the idea of having a boy. My mind fills with baseballs, vans, and stick figure family stickers. The realization of getting both my son and his father still grips me with so much emotion.

But here in Soren's arms, with my family's clear blessing, I feel more confident than I have since the morning I took that first pregnancy test. Suddenly, my world doesn't seem upside down, but right side up for a change.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Soren

This feels like a glitch in the matrix. I've gone out to sea and been completely unreachable for longer periods of time, but this time, I come home and so much has changed. I feel as if I'm in an episode of the Twilight Zone. After pulling into port, a man walks in on his own baby shower. I sure as hell didn't see that coming.

It's been a blissful week of tension.

Blissful because I'm going to be a dad. The father to a tiny human who'll need me to teach him everything about life. Well, at least, to cover the dad basics, which I'm confident I can do. Also because of the sexy woman who's carrying him, her stomach round and her skin glowing. She's my own personal erotic sight.

But my balls are so blue I want to punch Milo just to start this fucking fight, so I can move into his sister's room. Robin and I agreed to take it slow, and I've been sleeping in my room, but after a week, we're stealing kisses and ripping at each other's clothes. I think she was worried about my attraction to her new body. If possible, I'm more hot for her than ever.

Unfortunately for our growing chemistry, her brother remains ever-present and forever scrawling his disapproval. Until their house gets built, the fucker is staying here with Meno, who's a doll I might add, but it's sure makin shit tense.

Another shocker. Milo is a multi-millionaire now that he and his lady love found Spanish gold. Plus, he'll be getting his very own spread in National Geographic for finding it. Sad part is, I had to hear the great news from Meno and not my best friend.

She's a real peach. Sweet and friendly and full of well wishes. The polar opposite of her boyfriend. He's a surly fucker, who just leaves whatever room I walk into. Including his own when I tried to corner him to talk.

I'm pulling out all the stops today, starting with breakfast. Flipping the last chocolate protein pancakes, his favorite, I turn off the burner. They came out perfect, if I do say so myself.

Then I set the table semi-fancy with real plates and shake a little powdered sugar over the spread. I included scrambled eggs, bacon and an assortment of fruit. I overslept, or I would have run down to The Gingerbread Man. They make the best muffins on island, and I wonder if Robin had their Carrot Cake yet, I remember it was her favorite when she was little anyway. I'll have to take her sometime. Even if it's just to get out from under Milo's disappointment in us.

His anger is fucking crushing, during the most exciting time in my life. If the big, bearded baby doesn't talk to me soon and start being happy for me, I'm going to start questioning how one-sided this friendship has been. He's the first person I normally would have told the good news. The one I need to hear tell me I'm not going to fuck this up.

Waddling in, at an adorable five-feet and maybe five-inches, an adorable Robin takes in my masterpiece. She gapes at its majesty, while I stand with pride like a hunter providing for my mate.

"Feast," I declare, acting like a goofball to make her laugh.

But she doesn't. Suddenly, her face morphs to pain, and she grabs her belly and clenches.

I quickly reach her, full of worry. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't reply but groans, gripping my fingers and then boom! a bucket of water falls at our feet.

"The hell?" I say in panic, but she looks to me and then releases the death grip on my fingers.

"It's time. The baby's coming."

"What?" I say, my soul leaving my body.

"Time to do this damn thing," she stutters, going into another contraction and squeezing my hand. I rub her back until it passes.

At that second, Meno and Milo rush in and see the mess.

"They're close. We've got to move."

"Meno can you grab some towels? Milo will you go start the car?" I ask, and they both nod and jump into action with no push back.

Slowly, I walk with Robin out to the car as she leans on me for support. Laying down the towels for her to sit, I run back for the hospital bag with all the things she wants and needs. A few short minutes later, we're driving down the road, poor Robin gripping the doorhandle with another contraction. Fuck, my stomach twists in pain, hating every second she hurts.

"If I could take the hurt for you, baby, I would."

The official due date isn't for another week, and the thought of the baby being early makes me worry. Worst case scenarios play in mind as I drive as quickly and safely as fucking possible, all while trying to read Robin's pain levels and silently freaking out.

Milo's truck follows close behind us, and I try my best to focus on the road. Luckily, the island is small, and we make it to the hospital in under fifteen minutes then rush inside to a private delivery room. Fuck, this is it. My boy is coming!

"Breathe, baby. You got this," I repeat as my strong woman screams in pain. This is the worst feeling in the world, watching someone you care about—fuck love. Someone I love, cuz I love her—and she's in pain, and I don't know how to help.

Feeling useless, I just hold her hand and listen to all of the nurse's directions. Minutes later, we're interrupted by someone attempting to stop the soon-to-be uncle. Milo roars Robin's name, and I jump up.

"Please don't fight here. Not today," Robin whines before going into another contraction.

"I swear it," I promise her with a kiss to her sweaty forehead.

"This baby is coming. Where's Dad?" a nurse says before I can make it out of the room. "Are you him? Will you be the guest staying with her for the delivery?"

My eyes shoot to Robin because we haven't had the chance to talk about it yet. Just then, Milo bursts in.

"There you are. Tell them I'm supposed to be here."

Shit, my hearts sinks. I want more than anything to be the man by her side, but her very protective brother might already be chosen, and I won't fight either of them on the decision if that's what she feels is best.

The whole room looks to Robin for the answers.

"Milo," she starts, and for a moment, my heart sinks in disappointment. "Soren is the father of my child. He deserves to be here, no matter how mad you are him. I want him here with me. You will forever be my big brother, and I love you for everything you've done for me through this crazy pregnancy, but we can do this. We're going to be more than okay. I promise."

The sibling stare at one another for a moment. Crestfallen, Milo merely nods his understanding and turns to me. Without a word or his usual scowl, he gives me a nod that seems to convey an understanding. I take the win and thank him as he leaves. He stops at the door but doesn't turn back. At least, I know he heard me.

Another contraction makes Robin scream again and I force myself to put on a brave face.

When I get back to my girl's side, she's in more pain than ever.

"Drugs! Drugs, please!" she begs.

"It's too late. I'm sorry, Robin. Your baby is coming. I have faith in you. Everything is going to go smoothly, and soon, you'll be holding him," her doctor, a nice older woman with red hair, tells her, taking a seat between Robin's legs. She's scrunched, knees up and feet back, while she pushes. I encourage her, kiss the back of her hand, and pray. It's all I can do. That and admire her strength.

"You're my favorite super hero, Robin. Push, baby. Bring your sidekick home to us," I tell her, and then she screams again, turning red, pushing our baby into this world. Seconds later, a high-pitched scream fills the room. This time, it's our son crying with healthy lungs.

"It's a boy!" the doctor announces, and a few nurses cheer.

Joy fills the room, even though it's all real fucking blurry right now. My emotions sit on my eyelids as I stare at the most unbelievable core memory of my life.

He looks like a squishy potato, but I love him already.

Robin's painful cries turn to real tears as she loses her breath at the sight of him.

He's placed on her chest, and we both gape at the beautiful boy we've been blessed with.

It's the best day of my entire life, and I owe it all to the strong woman staring at me with so much adoration I fear I'm falling too fast. There is so much to learn about each other, and we just added raising a child to the mix of life. Plus her brother still hates me.

Surprisingly, though, the same adrenaline that fills me before each dive or protest or fight against a raging storm at sea hits me now. I have a huge adventure ahead of me. The best part is the amazing, smart, spunky as fuck woman beside me will do it all with me. I've learned so much from her already, and I'm looking forward to each milestone, making memories for the rest of our lives.

I'm such a lucky man.

CHAPTER NINE

Robin

“*I*t’s now or never,” I tell Soren as Milo enters the room.

The day has already been one for the books, but I have a suspicion we’re nowhere near done crying.

Meno comes to my side first and gushes on my son’s cuteness.

For a bowling ball, he’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I loved him at first scream. It made my ears split, but I knew instantly I would die for him. Walk into a burning building, stab someone who looks at him wrong, all the mama bear instincts instantly.

Then I saw the moment Soren fell for him, too. I looked away from my tiny human to see his father’s reaction and knew he loved him the same. The three of us sat in the moment for what seemed like hours, and we decided on our son’s name.

“He’s so perfect. Like the cutest baby on earth,” Meno sobs at first sight.

I nod, knowing it’s exactly true. He is perfect. Gray-blue eyes and dark fuzzy hair. Ten tiny fingers and ten more toes.

“How much did he weigh? How tall is he? Oh my gosh, what did you guys decide to name him?”

Here’s the moment we were waiting for. It feels weird because my brother still hasn’t come to terms with me and

Soren, but Soren and I talked about it, and we know it's right.

I start answering Meno's questions. "This sweet boy weighs eight pounds, ten ounces and is twenty-one inches tall."

Then I look to Soren to announce his name. Soon, my parents will be here, and Soren's will be flying in tomorrow. This is our chance to tell Milo how much he means to us and how we'll always love him. I'm worried my brother is feeling left out, as if he's lost his best friend and me. I might be his annoying sister, but we're close. And I'm fighting for us, damn it.

"His name is Milo Patrick Mathews. After his uncle. His father's best friend."

Then the most shocking sight I have ever seen happens. My giant, burly brother breaks down into tears. He comes over and wraps his big oaf arms around the three of us then quickly decides to come back in for another, hugging me and bro-hug Soren. It's a long *let's never fight again* hug that needs no words. After we finally dry all our tear-stained faces, we coo over baby Milo and talk about nicknames.

"Junior," Milo suggests.

"Not a chance," Soren says, shutting it down. The light tone finally sets my anxiety at ease. My heart so full it could burst if anything else were to happen. We get about thirty minutes before my mom and dad join us. Milo finally shed his anger, and as the grandparents and friends pile in, I'm happy the two most important men in my life sneak out. They said it was to go get food, and I couldn't push them out fast enough. There's no way they won't talk today, and it's overdue.

Thinking of them in the cab of Milo's truck, finally hashing out the macho bullshit my brother had up his ass, puts a smile on my face, and I lie back against the five pillows I have behind my back and under my arms.

Baby Milo pulls at me as he eats, and I wince at the pain. I hope breast feeding gets easier because I can already feel myself chapping, and we're still technically on day one.

The room quiets as peanut, nickname still a work in progress, falls asleep. Our guests are asked to leave but promise to come back tomorrow. The nurse comes in to check on our feeding schedule and diaper count and then finally says goodnight, promising to wake me several times tonight. We laugh good-naturedly, but I'm already dreading her return.

The room finally quiets, and it's just me and my son, having a moment alone. I fight sleep to watch him and listen to him breathe. It's become my new favorite thing. I'm so entranced by the miracle I'm blessed with I don't notice Soren standing in the doorway.

"Oh my gosh, you scared me."

"Sorry. Just wanted to take your picture. You're absolutely beautiful."

"I just had a baby and haven't showered. You're crazy. You need sleep," I joke but swoon at his expression. The intense way he's locked eyes on mine pulls me like a moth to a flame. Soren comes to sit on the bed beside us.

"There's something I really want to tell you, but I also don't want you to freak out, so I keep biting my tongue."

"I have no idea what to say to that," I say honestly confused.

"It's ok I'll get it out eventually. Is there anything I can do for you two?" Soren asks, his eyes begging me to change the subject.

"Want to hold your son, and I'll take your picture?" Then just to lighten the mood, I purr, "Daddy."

He groans. "Don't say it like that."

"What do you mean?" Batting my lashes playfully, I bite my lip as he comes closer until he's towering above me. Then with so meaning swirling in his dark eyes he fills my heart with his words.

"Robin, I will never be able to find the words to tell you how fucking incredible I think you are. I am so proud you're the mother of my child."

Emotion seems to choke him, and with that, he leans down to kiss me, never knowing how much those words mean to me.

CHAPTER TEN

Soren
Something's beeping. Or buzzing. What is that? Peeling open my tired eyes, I realize I'm on the floor of the living room. Baby Milo is in his basinet while Robin lies across the couch. The buzzing sounds again, and my brain finally registers the doorbell.

Running my hands over my face and beard, I try to wake up while I jog to answer the door then swiftly shut it in the intruder's face. There's a giant sign in the window that says, *Newborn baby sleeping. Please do not disturb.* This better be good.

Swinging the door open, I crumble inside. "Mom."

"Oh, honey."

My mom's small arms wrap around my waist as I hug her, resting my head on hers. The familiar smell of her floral perfume is so comforting, and emotion swirls in my throat. I want to cry but also not be a fucking pansy. Instead, I hold my little mama for a few extra minutes. So long my dad chuckles and wraps his big arms around the both of us. We family hug it out for a long while.

"I'm so happy for you, son." The old man mutters.

"I'm so overjoyed. And Robin, of all people. It's like an answered prayer I forgot to ask for. If anyone were to already be my daughter, it's that angel," Mom cries. I hug her tighter, loving how close our family is. I never wondered what it would be like to bring home a girl to meet my parents because

I never wanted to. Robin's already a permanent fixture, loved by my parents as one of their own.

"Hey, you guys," Robin says when my parents come inside.

Closing the door, I decide to put on another pot of coffee. With baby Milo waking every hour to feed, we're not getting any sleep and barely functioning.

"We are so very sorry it's taken us so long, but your dad's cold took a scary turn. Had us worried."

"Oh, I'm fine dear."

"I know you are now." Mom winks. "Any who, we had to make sure he was one hundred percent for this little prince."

While they say hello, I change the laundry, making a mental note to grab the trash. The rest of my checklist runs through my head, and for the first time in my life of list making, I'm forgetting something. My brain too tired to function properly, and I honestly just give up. Shaking my head at the turn of events, I think back to just six weeks ago. My son was born, and we came home and started a comfortable routine. I made schedules and checklists, much as I did for every trip I took for work.

"My son has the most beautiful son on this planet," I hear my mom gush.

"Everyone want some coffee?" I ask, pouring two cups.

"Sure," Dad says.

"How is baby Milo sleeping? Why don't you two go to bed for a few hours. Dad and I will watch the baby, and I saw your impressive stash of breastmilk, Robin. That's so much for just a few weeks."

Mom's compliment goes right to Robin's ego. "Wow. Thank you so much. It does seem like a lot, but it wasn't easy at first."

That's a fucking understatement. Robin's goal has been to up her milk production, so we've tried all kinds of stuff. Oat cookies, smoothies, and pumping nonstop. I also get to play

with them all the time. She calls it a massage, but I get to feel up her beautiful tits and make her feel good. Oh and it helps make more milk and not hurt her.

The thought of snuggling in bed and comfortably falling asleep with her in my arms sounds like heaven.

“What do you think, babe?” I ask the boss, to see how comfortable she is with letting my folks watch Milo. No one would be upset if she wanted to keep him close.

“Sleep sounds so good,” she almost cries, and I walk to her side.

“Okay.” I take her hand. “Thanks, Mom.”

“No, thank you, guys, for trusting me. I’ll make you proud. Get some rest. We have everything taken care of.”

I’m glad Robin loves my parents enough to trust them already. It means a lot and brings me back to that suddenly settled feeling. As if this is my happily ever after, even though everything has happened so fast.

I’ve still been too chicken to admit my love to Robin. We’ve grown even closer over the last weeks, parenting side by side and stealing kisses when we can. Our chemistry is as strong as ever, but I never pressure her. I’m happy to hold her.

After turning the air conditioner down, since she’s been getting hot lately, I help my sweetheart under the covers then crawl in behind her.

We snuggle in close, and I suppress a groan at the contact of her lush ass conforming to my growing cock and take a deep breath. Quickly, she settles. I don’t move again, but she begins to grind back onto me. I should stop her. When she teases me like this, my blue balls make me pay for it. Still, I let her torture me, loving every second. I groan when she pushes back harder and decide to snake my hand to the front of her center, assuming she’ll stop. She doesn’t.

Instead, she moans.

“Baby, you’re killin’ me,” I moan, getting hard and swallowing my desire, so I don’t hurt her.

“Oh, I’m sorry, does this bother you?” she sasses but does it again harder, forcing my grip to tighten on her hip.

“You need to behave, mama.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

I smile at spunk, and honestly, I’m glad she still wants me after days without a damn shower, but I have a surprise.

“Sleep now. I promise it’ll be worth the wait.”

“But this is such a rare moment, and today is –” She lets it hang as if I don’t realize the significance.

Being a terrible liar, I pretend to fall asleep, so I don’t end up ruining my own plan. She has no idea what I have in store for her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Robin

I think I've fallen in love with my baby daddy. And not the childhood crush love I've felt for him for so long, but a bone-deep, I-don't-want-to-do-life-without-him love.

After a nice, long nap, I check on my happy baby who's having a great time with his Nana and Pop-pop, and they can't stop gushing over him and taking pictures of each tiny change in his expression. It's so cute.

Waving my thanks, I head back upstairs to take a shower. The stairs are no trouble to climb anymore, my body finally feeling like mine again, instead of a constant food source. I also really appreciate my bed over the couch, so it's worth it to me. Actually, with six weeks down, I'm feeling back to my old self—at least, physically strong again. Mentally, I'm still figuring it all out. Luckily, I'm not alone.

Soren's standing at the shower, feeling the temperature when I come in.

"Hey, you." I try again at seductress. We've been flirting easily, but he hasn't made any move for more, and I'm kinda worried that watching me birth his gigantic baby might have turned him off. I can't imagine what my lady taco looked like all stretched out with a baby head. I shudder at the thought.

"Hey, baby, shower's ready for you."

"For just me?"

“Need me to shave your legs again? I will,” he asks so genuinely I can’t even be upset that he thinks of my hairy legs over getting naughty.

I just shake my head. “No, I got it now. Thanks for all your help. You’ve been beyond great.”

“Anything you need, I’m happy to be here.”

His words have been backed up by the sweetest actions these past weeks.

“Thank you. I’m fine.”

With a heavy sigh, I watch him leave. I can’t exactly bring myself to beg him...at least not yet. If he keeps sleeping with his cock warmed in my cheeks, we’re definitely going to be talking about when it might happen again.

Just when I’ve stripped down and stepped into the steaming hot shower, there’s a knock on the door and Soren pops his head back inside.

“Oh, I forgot to give you this,” he says, hanging a pretty blue dress on the back of the door. “Take as much time as you need. We’ll leave when you’re ready.”

“What? Leave for where?”

“Our first date,” he says with a wink then slips back out, leaving me bewildered.

Just when I start to doubt his affection for me as a woman, he proves me wrong.

Our first date?

We have a kid now. I kind of assumed we missed out on the dating stage, but I’m hoping I’m wrong. If anyone could easily impress me, it’s that bearded, tatted man, so I decide to just go with the flow.

Quickly washing and shaving everything, I take a bit of extra time to lotion, fix my hair and actually put on makeup.

With one last glance, I nod my acceptance to my reflection.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, mama, but you still got it.”

Stepping out, I find my sandals then head downstairs. The lights are all dimmed, and the house smells like spaghetti.

“Yum, it smells amazing in here. Did you make dinner?”

“Nope, that would be Soren,” Dennis says from the recliner.

“Never seen a grown man make such an absolute disaster in the kitchen,” his mom laughs, wiping something off the counter. “We’re supposed to send you out back.”

“Don’t worry about my little buddy here. We got everything covered,” Dennis assures me.

“Well, okay,” I tell them. A sudden burst of excitement fills me and sets off a million butterflies in belly.

Skipping down the steps, I land on soft sand and decide to ditch my wedge sandals and just carry them. There’s a path up ahead, lit by solar lamps and paved with flower petals.

My hand flies to my chest as I choke at the sight before me.

First, my eyes catch on Soren. He’s dressed in dark gray suit pants, a crisp, white button down, and a classy black belt with matching shoes. The picture could have graced any magazine, but it’s for my eyes only. I’ve never seen this perfectly polished side of him. As kids we were always dirty, running around the woods of our small town.

“You look so handsome,” I tell him honestly as he stares at me.

“You look good enough to eat.”

His words steal my breath and relief fills me...along with desire that raging harder with every step he takes toward me.

But then, I see everything he’s done.

Coming around me, Soren wraps me in his arms as I take it all in.

The setting for our first date is perfect.

On the beach, outside the big house, it appears he's taken what looks like rugs and made us a floor that steadies the iron coffee table and chairs he's brought down from the deck. It's perfectly set with our nice plates and dishes, covered to keep away the bugs. Surrounding the table are tiki torches that will help with that as well as give the perfect amount of light.

Soren bites at my neck, his beard tickles me, and I giggle.

"Okay, I'll feed you first, but then you're all mine," he growls, sweeping me off my feet and into his arms.

I can't help but kiss him as he walks us to the table. His soft lips are exactly where they belong, and I'm eager for them to take more, but I also want to take our time. I'm already wishing the night would never end.

He sets me in my seat and takes his then reveals the pasta dish.

"Ta-da!" Soren sings. "Chef Boyardee."

I laugh at the obvious joke. "Very funny. This is five-star pasta, right here," I say, pointing to my dish and diving in. I moan around my bite with exaggeration, and Soren's eyes blow wide.

"Damn, baby, if you're always going to sound like that, consider me the chef of the family. I'll take dinner duty every night if you'll be my dessert."

Fuck me, I think he's as strung tight as I am. The tension is strong while I take another slow bite, teasing him when I suck in my long noodle.

It splashes against my chin, but before I can wipe it myself with my napkin, he swipes it clean with his thumb.

I'm a panting mess as he sticks that same thumb into his own mouth.

Then he mocks me, slurping up a noodle that splashes his own chin. I reach out with my thumb and wipe it up, our eyes locked as if we're trying to send each other the official *I really want to fuck now* bat signal.

By no doing of my own, my slutty foot rakes through the sand and crawls up his leg. There's a long, white tablecloth, giving us just enough privacy on the very off chance someone wanders down to this part of the beach. It's off of our home, but we have neighbors and no fences.

But there are a lot of trees. My mind starts wandering to all the old hide-and-seek places we could find. By the smirk on his face, his mind is in a similar place. We eat quietly and quickly, eye-fucking the hell out of each other. The long build up is finally coming to a head. I feel it vibrating in the air between us.

"This is the best spaghetti I've ever had. Did you know it's my favorite?" I say in a weak attempt to distract myself.

"Of course, I did. Every summer, when it was your night to pick dinner, you always picked pasta. I couldn't remember if chicken Alfredo or spaghetti and meatballs was your number one, but I'm glad I guessed right."

His boyish smile shines with pride, and I wonder if our son will have that smirk, too.

The thought alone brings back all these feels I've been trying to slow down, and that damn L-word threatens to spill out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Soren

“I love you,” I tell her without a shred of remorse. My heart just too full not to share what’s so obvious to me. It’s fast, the realization has stopped me before, but not this time.

“I love you,” she says and then looks surprised. “I thought I was saying it first.”

“I love you, too, then,” I reply, feeling the word through my whole body.

Our story started with such simple roots and now, has grown into something I’ll cherish and nurture for the rest of my life.

Her eyes burn into me as the moment cements itself in our history book.

The heat between us has only grown hotter, so in an attempt to draw out our precious alone time I ask, “Would you like to go for a walk with me?”

“Sure,” Robin agrees, and I stand and help her push out of her chair.

I kick off my shoes, and she leaves hers behind. We hit the sand at a slow, lazy pace while the sun disappears beyond the horizon. The homes on this stretch of beach are set way back against the shore, so the moon and stars are the only thing lighting our way. The night air is calm, so the waves are, too, and even though the breeze is cool, it’s a warmer night than it

has been. We walk hand-and-hand for a long moment before either of us say a word.

“I have to admit something to you.”

“Oh no, that sounds ominous,” she counters.

“I saw your designs. Not intentionally, at least not without your permission. You left your tablet out, and your project was open. It was awesome,” I say casually.

“Oh, um, thanks.”

“Is that what you and Daphne were talking about earlier?”

“Yeah. Somehow, she convinced me to produce a batch of my styles and see if they sell. I’m only doing it because it’s free commercial space, Whimsical Weddings isn’t ready to expand, so she has an additional room with its own front window display and bathroom. I’ve done all the research, but I just don’t know if I’ll be able to pull it off. I just had a baby. Plus my style isn’t for everyone. The masses won’t come running for patchwork and ripped T-shirts.”

“Um, yes, they will. Don’t say that. I think it’s fucking awesome you’re sharing your clothes. Every time we’ve left the house, you’ve been complimented on your style. That’s your proof.”

She laughs, but I know it’s true.

“You’re not doing anything alone, ya know. If you really want to do this, I believe in you. I know you’ll be a success. I won’t be working very many hours at Grand Rapids, so consider me your first employee.”

“I can’t pay an employee.”

“That’s cool. I work for tacos,” I say, grinning from ear to ear.

“I think I could swing tacos. Beef or chicken?”

“Oh no, baby. Not that kind of taco.”

Her eyes blow wide, and so does her smile. I don’t give her a chance to say anything else. My lips crash to hers in a searing kiss.

I pour into her all the things she makes me feel. Fear but courage, lust, a soul-deep desire to make her happy. More love than I ever thought I was capable of. She kisses me back with the unspoken love I feel through my core.

She's my person, the mother to my child, and I can't wait to make her my wife.

We've made it back to our families' property, and as she deepens our kiss, filling my mouth with her eager tongue, I pull her up into my arms. Those lush thighs wrap around my waist and balance me.

Feeling the rise of our constant desire with her in my arms, I walk us up to the house. Her lips move across my skin while she teases me with her tongue. She licks a hot trail that forces a deep moan from my chest. Quickly, I move to the outdoor shower stall, not wanting to stop for even the moment it would take to make it upstairs.

Instead, I round the copper fence enclosure and press her fine ass to the wall, freeing my hands to take off our clothes. Robin helps by ripping off the buttons on my shirt.

"Holy fuck, you're so hot," she says at the sight of my abs. I've been appreciated before, but not by anyone who really knows me. The nerdy me does not get the girl, but this woman fucking wants me, and it feels better than the handful of empty nights I've spent away from her. Now, I'm wishing I could turn back time, because I would have waited. I thought this feeling, our connection, only happened in movies.

Robin's little dress comes off easily, and her big, full breasts sit heavily in my hands. That vicious mouth of hers still sucks the skin on my neck, down to my chest. Each kiss fans the fire inside me. I'm so close to losing control and fucking her like the animal she makes me feel like.

Her moan fills the small area of the shower as she arches in pleasure. My mouth makes contact with her pretty pink nipple. She tastes sweet like coconut, and I draw out her sounds, my tongue writing dirty fantasies against the tip, flicking back and forth, promising more as she bucks off the wall.

“Please,” she begs, and I obey, pushing my pants down to my ankles.

“Attached to these?” I ask, holding the cotton center of her panties.

“No.”

When her answer hits my ears, I tear, relishing the sound of ripped cloth and her gasp that shoots straight to my hard cock. At the sight of her glistening for me, I fall to knees, placing her softly back on her feet. Then I take her taste, savoring the sweetness I’ve missed for so long now. Robin rewards me with the sweetest sounds of pleasure and a flavor that reminds me of cotton candy.

My wide tongue licks up her pussy, pressing harder on her bud. When I do, her fingers snake into my hair and her voice rings out with my name. I feast as she whimpers and rocks above me, the sight so beautiful I could stay down here for eternity. Flicking again, I spell our names together, hers with my last name, as I hum. Her flesh is so soft beneath my rough fingertips, still I pull her closer, lapping at her wetness, feasting.

Robin bucks against my mouth, needing more. I push in a digit and slowly pump as I listen to her. She loves it, begs me for more. Another finger in and I thrust harder, picking up my pace while she pulls my hair. I feel her orgasm building, twisting her tight as she reaches the peak.

When she crashes, it’s sweet and beautiful. With stars shining above her, she comes for me, shaking with release. I pause my mouth to kiss her inner thigh while she catches her breath. Her long nails keep me in her grasp, not wanting to let me go.

Standing again, I take her once more, using the wall for balance I let her reach for me, pants still around my ankles.

In her hands, I’m under her control, and she knows it. That sexy smirk grows as her eyes darken and she pulls up my length. A groan rips from my chest when she licks her palm then strokes me again.

“I need all of you, Soren.”

Her words shatter my reserve, I lift her plump ass and align my crown to her waiting pussy.

“Yes. Now.” Her breathy plea spurs me on, and I thrust inside her hard.

Again.

Again.

As the love of my life rakes her nails over my back, I fuck her against the shower wall. Like an animal released from my cage, I unleash into her harder and faster with every pleased sound from her sweet mouth.

Sneaking my thumb up to her clit, I massage while I fuck her fiercely.

“Oh. My. Gah. Wha. Yes.”

I growl as she comes again, her walls squeezing my cock with her quaking orgasm. Her tight grip on my length is too good to hold back any longer. I come hard. Taking her lips, I fuck her mouth with my tongue as we finish together. Every part of me wanting to fuse to her.

Robin’s putty in my arms as we come down, breathless and sated.

“Un-fucking-believe-able,” she pants, and I smile at the compliment.

Kissing her cheek, her forehead and her neck, I tell her honestly, “I love you, Robin.”

“I love you back.”

This time, when we kiss, it’s slow and savoring.

Our first date.

Our first I love yous.

Our first time together after our son was born. It’s a night under the stars I’ll never forget for as long as I live.

EPILOGUE

Soren

One Month Later

“Smile big, motherfucker,” I tell Milo, who’s looking sheepish in the full-length mirror. He’s dressed in his best navy dress pants and a white polo. His beard is so shiny I’m pretty sure they won’t have to edit a single misplaced stray.

My best friend groans in reply as I enter the small dressing area. The big dogs are here, and it’s his turn for the spotlight.

“Come on, grumpy-puss. This is a bucket list item. Cheer the fuck up.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Why so nervous?” I ask, genuinely surprised he’s nervous until he pulls out a small box.

Opening it, he shows me the big diamond ring. Well, I’ll be a son of a gun. That was fast, but—

“Damn, I’m happy for you, brother,” I tell him honestly, pulling his shoulder until we embrace. Slapping one another on the back, I take it all in, a moment I feared would never happen again. Milo’s sharing an monumental success with me. After all the bruises our friendship took, I’ve been worried we’d never be the same.

As we hug, the emotions build, and tension eases in his shoulders.

“Thank you, brother,” he replies. “I want you to know I’m happy for you, too. It stung like a motherfucker to find out I’d been hating the baby daddy for fucking months for taking off and it was you. No one knows more than me how cut off from the world you were out there. And then, Robin not telling me hurt even worse. It felt like she lied, but I understand why she did. I wish she would have known you as well as I do. She wouldn’t have doubted you stepping up. You’re a damn good man, and I’m proud to call you my brother.”

Choked, I stay silent and let him pull me back for another hug. As if he knew all the hurt I still held onto, my best friend kills my fears.

I’m filled with gratitude, and he’s not done.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re already doing a great job. Your little family clearly loves you.”

And now, I’m crying on his shoulder like a fuckin’ baby. We must be a sight. Two giants in loving embrace while the short one cries.

Laughing, I push him off me.

“Damn it. I love you, man.” I point to him, so he knows I’m serious, but I wipe my eyes and keep my distance.

After a moment to collect myself, I straighten my shirt and brush off my man’s shoulders.

“Okay, big guy, this is your moment. A memory you’re making for you and your future wife.”

“Holy shit, I’m going to puke.”

“Wait until after National Geographic takes your pretty picture,” I reply, slapping his face a bit. “You’ve got this, Milo. She’s a lucky woman, and I’m so happy for the both of you.”

“What if she says no?”

“She’s going to say yes because she loves you and wants you, too. I can counter every bad scenario running through your head, but let’s save some time. Go get your girl and your global magazine cover.”

“All of our dreams are coming true.”

I remember all the bucket list wishes we put together as kids and nod.

“Cheesy and I’ll never admit to saying this, but we’re getting our happily ever afters, my friend.”

“Deserved,” he replies.

And just like that, our friendship is back to its former glory. Milo is going to be engaged and soon start a family of his own. The two never stop talking about it, so I’m predicting a baby announcement to quickly follow their engagement.

As I watch Milo and Meno pose with the buried treasure they found, I smile for our future. Our kids will be cousins and as close as best friends. Our families will continue the tradition our parents started, vacationing together, and we’ll live long full lives down in the hot sands of Candy Cane Key.

The end...

Or would you like a little more?

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Thank you for reading my book baby.

I knew as soon as I wrote her Robin was going to get a story of her own. Little did I know at the time she was going to come with a brother and a bunch of drama. As you know I like to keep it light because the little family in this book might have easily talked things out but we all know words and actions have real consequences in real life. Some families will never accept or understand your partner's choice and other times you know its better for you and your made family to stay away from toxic people even if they're related. Because family

is never perfect, I wrote one that is, and I hope you loved their journey together to welcome baby Milo.

Wishing you all the best book boyfriends, xoxo

Heather Lauren

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Lauren is a Polly pocket size mom of three who only takes her book boyfriends seriously. She lives in sunny Arizona and enjoys writing steamy contemporary romance and romantic comedies with a strong cup of coffee or a sweet cocktail in hand. Listen along to your favorite book characters on the made for you playlists on Spotify and watch out for Easter eggs in all her books.