

EARN  
YOUR

*Extra*

CREDIT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN  
QUINN



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## Prologue

### ROMEO

“Do you want to sit next to Stella on the airplane?” Arlo asks.

“What? Fuck, no,” I say while turning up the game so I can hear the announcers over my tedious, wedding-planning best friend.

Arlo snatches the remote from my hand and turns off the TV. The room is silent for a moment before uproarious objections fill the air.

“Gentry is up next,” Gunner, my other best friend and former teammate, complains from next to me. “He’s three for three so far.”

“We need to talk,” Arlo says in that stern, alpha-like voice that won over his fiancée. Little does he know it doesn’t work on me.

I reach for the remote but he swats my hand with a resounding thud, causing me to yank my hand back. “What the actual fuck, man?”

When I decided to have the guys over to my loft, I assumed we’d tear up some wings, drain some brews, and watch the Bobbies game. Never in my wildest fucking dreams would I have pictured Arlo Turner, the grumpy curmudgeon of the Forest Heights English department, to roll in like a beaming bride, holding a wedding planning folder to his chest,

and consume the night with questions about what he should wear and if coconut cake is too “Hawaiian-y” for his Maui destination wedding.

But here we are.

“Cut the crap, Romeo.”

“Cut what crap?” I reach over to the coffee table and pick up my almost empty glass of beer.

“I’m not about to have the Bickersons attend my wedding, so what the hell is going on with Stella?”

“Nothing is going on,” I answer, then take a small sip of my beer, making the liquid last so I don’t have to get up for a refill.

Gunner leans in and asks, “If we get to the bottom of the problem, can we turn the TV back on?”

“Yes,” Arlo answers.

“Then it was the baseball game he took her to.”

“Dude,” I say in protest while sitting up on the couch. “What the fuck happened to *don’t say anything?*”

Gunner unapologetically shrugs. “I really want to watch the Bobbies kill the Rebels in interleague play.”

“What baseball game?” Arlo asks. “Do you mean the game you took her and Cora to?”

“Yup.” Gunner pops a chip in his mouth from the bowl on the coffee table. “Except Cora wasn’t supposed to go. It was supposed to be a *daaate*,” Gunner drags out.

“You asked Stella out?” Arlo asks, shocked.

“Way to sell me out for a game, you dick.”

Not showing an ounce of remorse, Gunner stands from the couch and takes my glass from me. “I’ll top you off. You’ll need it.”

Seething, I pass my hand over my head and say, “Yeah, I asked her out. She invited Cora. End of story.”

“That’s not the end of the story,” Gunner says from the kitchen, the open concept of my loft allowing his voice to carry to us easily.

When you think a friend is trustworthy and then they go and shock your fucking nuts right off by divulging everything you told them in secret . . . without even a blink of an eye. Gunner is dead to me.

You’re probably wondering why I didn’t say anything to Arlo about what happened, given he’s one of my best friends, right? It’s simple. Gunner got me drunk and I relished in the comfort of far too many cold beers and a listening ear. If it wasn’t for that, I’d have kept my mouth shut, because the entire incident was fucking humiliating.

Between you and me, I’ve liked Stella Garcia, the Spanish teacher at Forest Heights, for a while now. Far too long actually. I can’t quite pinpoint when it happened, but all I know is over the three years I’ve known her, I’ve been pining after the girl for the majority of the time.

Fucking bold, quick-witted with a sharp tongue, loves sports, shy when it counts. Flat-out gorgeous with her long, wavy brown hair and fascinating green eyes that have a ring of brown around the pupil. She’s had my attention for a while and last year, I decided to finally make a move.

Enough was enough. We shared too many dinners together as friends. She’s pressed her lips to my beer glass without a second thought way too many times. The moment presented itself, I grew a pair, and asked her out to a baseball game knowing she loves watching the sport as much as I do.

But fuck did it backfire.

“What’s the end of the story?” Arlo asks, growing agitated. His patience runs thin, which is surprising, given his profession of educating the youth.

He’s not going to drop it.

Arlo’s relentless when he wants to know something.

Dragging my hand down my face, I say, “It was supposed to be a date.” Gunner sits next to me and hands me my refilled



glass, which I gladly take. “She invited Cora. Which was fine. We had a good time, I still sat next to Stella, and we shared jokes even if there was a third wheel. But it was what happened afterwards that—”

“That gutted him,” Gunner finishes for me. When I snap a look at him, he smirks. “That’s what you told me. Just thought I’d help tell the story.”

“I wasn’t gutted.”

Maybe I was a little.

Hell . . . I was humiliated.

Gutted isn’t a strong enough word for what happened.

“What the fuck happened after? Christ. Why are you taking so damn long to get to the point?” Arlo practically growls.

“Go easy on our guy.” Gunner grips my shoulder. “He was embarrassed, man.”

“It’s fine, I’m over it now,” I say in a passive-aggressive tone.

“You’re clearly not if you and Stella can’t even be in the same room together. I don’t want anything ruining this trip for Greer, and your constant arguing with Stella is driving everyone fucking crazy.”

“Great, then I just won’t talk to her. Simple.”

“Just tell him,” Gunner says, nudging me.

Christ.

Staring down at my beer, I quietly say, “She went home with someone else that night.”

The room falls silent.

They don’t have to react for me to know what they must be thinking. They know I’ve liked Stella for a while. They know I’ve been trying to figure out a way to ask her out.

And this . . . hell, this was an epic fail on my end.

It wouldn't be as bad if I weren't already carrying a chip on my shoulder about the way I was forced to twist my life around.

Five years ago, everything changed.

Five years ago, I was stripped of the one thing that brought me life.

A ruptured Achilles tendon ended everything for me.

I never got the chance to appreciate my last game.

I never had the opportunity to sit on the field and say goodbye.

Instead, playing professional baseball was stripped from me and I was forced to fall back on my teaching degree I earned while playing in college.

To say I'm bitter, resentful, and fucking angry . . . yeah, that's an understatement.

I live with regret daily and harbor more animosity than anyone should.

So, when I took Stella to the game, on a date, hoping to tell her how I feel, and she went home with someone else, it fucking stung.

Do you know what stung more, though?

The fact that she looked right past me and instead went for a rookie on the Bobbies.

Why go out with a washed-up baseball player turned phys ed teacher with a slight limp in his walk, when you can go out with an unmarred professional baseball player?

Yeah. There's resentment for a reason. She chose the star. *That's who she wants.*

*That's who I'll never be.*

And that's why I plan on staying as far away from Stella Garcia on this trip as I can.

And when we get back to Chicago and the school year starts, everything will go on as planned.

Avoid. Avoid. Avoid.

*Too easy, right?*

## Chapter One

---

### STELLA

“This place is amazing,” Cora says, lost in the ambiance of the grand lobby of the Four Seasons Resort Greer and Arlo chose for their wedding locale.

I’ll give it to them, fantastic choice. Thanks to the time difference, we arrived right at noon. The car service that picked us up from the airport offered us fresh fruit, snacks, and champagne. I indulged in all of it.

And I realized something—it might be the tropical breeze, or the fact that I can already feel my body starting to relax, but the pineapple here tastes a thousand times better than on the mainland.

Yup, I’m using the terminology already.

“Greer informed me of the absence of any person younger than the age majority while we holiday,” Keiko, my wonderfully brilliant, slightly quirky, always awkward friend says as she adjusts her glasses on her nose. She went all out on the Hawaiian prints when packing for the trip. She went with a light blue print featuring palm trees and rainbows for her first day, tucked into a pair of khaki Bermuda shorts.

Cora, Arlo’s sister, and a member of our Ladies in Heat Book Club, gives me a confused look. “What did she say?”

“I think she’s trying to tell us there won’t be kids here.”

“Affirmative,” Keeks says while reaching into her pocket and pulling out a pair of sunglasses that attach to her glasses. “Shall we comb the grounds and make ourselves familiar with the exotic vegetation?”

“Uh, I think I’m going to head to the bar,” I say. “After that flight, I need a Mai Tai.”

“I second that.”

“Was the flight unsettling to you?” Keeks asks, confused. “I don’t recall much turbulence nor an uproarious baby that could deter a flight from being enjoyable. In fact, you had two and a half mimosas, the egg and bacon sandwich, which the flight attendant paired with a lackluster bowl of fruit, a strawberry yogurt cup, and an uninspiring croissant. After you nourished yourself to satisfaction, you delighted in a role reversal romantic comedy, *What Men Want*, and then proceeded to take slumber on my shoulder, where you sleepily salivated, leaving a one-inch diameter wet stain on my sleeve. If anyone had a rough flight, it would be me, having to fend off your hot breath on my shoulder while I attempted to compete in a challenging game of travel chess against myself.”

Did I mention Keiko has no problem telling it like it is?

Nor does she have a filter.

“My breath wasn’t hot,” I mutter.

“All human breath is hot—”

“Okay,” Cora cuts in, eyes wide. “Let’s not get into the core temperature of our breath. I think Stella was referring to the way Romeo was sneering at her the entire flight.”

“Oh.” Keiko nods. “Why, yes, I did happen to arrest a contemptuous glance from him. But I considered the object of his disdainful glare to be the lusterless fruit bowl.”

“I wish it were the fruit bowl,” I say while scooping my long hair up and quickly tying it into a knot on the top of my head with my hairband. “He has something against me and I don’t know what it is.”

“I feel as though it’s been going on for months. You two have not been fun to be around,” Cora says.

“Which is why I don’t plan on being around him at all during this trip.” I take in a deep breath and let the ocean breeze wash over me. “This is my time to relax and enjoy watching Greer marry the most pompous and arbitrary man I’ve ever met. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need a drink.”

I head toward the bar when Keiko says, “Although relaxation of the human spirit is much needed when basking in the glow of paradise, have you forgotten about the detailed itinerary?”

I pause midstride and swivel on my heel to face Keeks. “Uh . . . what?”

She adjusts her glasses, chin tilted up. “The itinerary. It was attached to your flight information. There are quite a few excursions the happy couple planned for the group.”

“Oh, yeah,” Cora says. “I remember something like that. There was some sort of chocolate tour I was excited about.”

“Itinerary?” I groan. “Is it mandatory?”

“Indeed,” Keeks says. “The Arlo and Greer company were all summoned to the excursions, which would include Romeo.”

“I connected the dots, Keeks.” I sigh. “Well, whatever, doesn’t mean I have to talk to him. It’ll be fine. Is there anything going on tonight?”

From her pocket, Keiko takes out a piece of rolled-up paper and, as if it’s a paper scroll, she unravels it and holds it like the town squire about to announce “hear ye, hear ye.” Her eyes travel over the paper and she says, “After giving the itinerary a quick overview, tonight is scheduled as free time.”

“Thank God for that.”

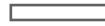
“As well as tomorrow.”

“Hey,” I say, smiling. “See? This is starting to be better than we thought.” I take Cora’s hand in mine. “Let’s get a drink.”

“It would behoove you to hydrate after a long flight,” Keeks calls out.

“That’s what we plan on doing,” I say over my shoulder. “Hydrating with Mai Tais.”

In the distance, Keiko starts rattling off how alcohol actually dehydrates the human body, but we press forward with one thing on our minds—tropical inebriation.



“I LIKE RUM,” I say, licking the rim of my glass rather aggressively. “I’ve never been this attracted to rum, but I’m feeling . . .” I pause and roll my head to the side. “Dare I say, I might have a crush?”

“I’ve had a crush on liquor before,” Cora says while sucking on the end of a cherry stem. “It ended poorly. We broke up the next morning while my body revolted over giving the intoxicating beverage a chance.”

“What was it?”

“Fireball.”

I wince and give the rim of my glass one more lick before tipping back the rest of my Mai Tai. “Fireball is a devious bastard. Grabs your attention, makes you feel all warm inside, and then BAM!” I smack the table. “Trouble. That’s what it is . . . just trouble.”

“Fireball is like the bad boy you should stay away from.”

I nod. “If Fireball had a mode of transportation, it would be a motorcycle, and you know Fireball wouldn’t wear a helmet.”

“Or a condom,” Cora adds. “Fireball is too good for a condom. For any protection.”

“Fireball says FUCK condoms and then shoots its load on your back.” I gesture with my hand.

“And it’s a cinnamony load.”

“So much cinnamon.” I sigh and sit up. Turning to face Cora, I say, “I believe we’ve reached the threshold of loving Mai Tais or hating Mai Tais. If we drink one more, we’re going to regret our decisions, but if we stop here, we’ll remember how much Mai Tais make us feel valued and respected, unlike the shrewd Fireball.” I press my hand to hers and speak with my heart. “I want a long-term relationship with Mai Tais, a meaningful vacation fling that will mean something to me when I’m sixty and thinking about my younger years. I don’t want to be resentful and rigid when thinking about them . . . like how you feel about Fireball.”

She nods. “I hear you and I see you.” She drops her cherry stem to the counter and takes a deep breath. “I need a Pop-Tart.”

“Pop-Tarts by the ocean,” I say, the idea so grand in my head that I can’t imagine doing anything else. I can’t possibly fathom something bringing me more joy. I tap the bar top and say to the bartender, “Dear sir, we shall take two Pop-Tarts.”

The bartender, whose name we don’t know, turns to me and says, “Sorry, ladies, we don’t have Pop-Tarts here, but you could check the gift shop.”

“You’re a gem.” I smile at him. “We’d like to close our tab.”

He chuckles. “I have it on your room. Just need your signature.” He slips me a receipt attached to a board and I quickly sign across and up the paper, and then draw a palm tree after my name. I hand the receipt back to him and say, “The palm tree is a little treat for you.”

“That was very kind of you. Let us know if you need anything else . . . like a shot of Fireball,” he says with a smirk.

My eyes widen as Cora gasps next to me, hand to her chest. “How dare you bring up an ex-lover? You know we’re in a weakened state.”

“That’s why Fireball is the bad boy of liquor. It doesn’t care about your feelings; it just keeps you coming back for more.”



I stand from my chair as Cora reaches out her hand. “No,” I say into her ear. “You’re strong. You don’t need Fireball. It’s not good to you. It doesn’t care about your feelings.” I wrap my arm around her chest and slowly pull her away from the bar.

“It loves me.”

“It doesn’t,” I snap back and then calm my voice to a whisper. “It . . . doesn’t.”

Resigned, she nods, and I hold her hand, guiding her away from her toxic lover. Our flip-flops snap against the beige tile as we drunkenly navigate through the luxurious hotel. With a lack of walls, the entire lobby and dining area are open to the sea breeze and lit up by strategically placed tiki torches. Faint Hawaiian music plays in the background, and because the hotel isn’t crowded this weekend and is free of kids, it’s quiet. Serene. Just what I need.

Yes, I do believe I’ll have a love affair over the next two weeks. A love affair with Mai Tais, the sun, and the sand.

“Thank you for being there for me,” Cora says quietly. “What you just saw was a low point. Bottom of the barrel. I’m hoping it’s only up from here.”

“I pass no judgement. I know what it’s like to be in a weak moment like that. It’s hard to see past what your heart wants. But I’m proud of you. You held strong. Now we can enjoy our Pop-Tarts and think about how we’re strong, confident women who don’t need Fireball to make us feel good.”

Cora gives me a side hug. “I’m so glad you’re here. I was feeling like the third wheel coming on this vacation. It seems as though everyone is hooked up with someone. Arlo and Greer, Gunner and Lindsay, Keiko and Kelvin—well, when he gets here. I assumed you’d be tied to Romeo the whole time.”

“Ha!” I let out a loud guffaw. “Yeah, no thank you. Trust me, there will be no tying myself to Romeo.”

We turn the corner and find the gift shop, which is still conveniently open. “The motherland of snacks,” Cora whispers. “Do you think they have Pop-Tarts?”

“Not sure, but if we put out good vibes, we might be able to manifest it.” I pause in our pursuit to the store and take a deep breath. “Dear Hawaii, please provide us with the sweet, sugary nectar from Kellogg’s.”

“Preferably blueberry nectar,” Cora adds.

“Blueberry, really? I never pictured you as a blueberry Pop-Tart girl. You’re more like a brown sugar.”

“What? How so?”

I loop my hand through her arm and continue to walk toward the store while divulging my logic. “You’re fancy. You have a posh upbringing. I’m not saying you’re the kind of girl who would frown upon a Pop-Tart, but you do have a more refined palate, and in my head, brown sugar is more refined than an artificial fruit flavoring.”

“They’re all artificially flavored, but I understand what you’re saying.” She gives it some thought. “You know, I am a brown sugar kind of girl. If I’m going to eat a Pop-Tart, by God, it will be fancy.”

We step into the store and we’re greeted by the attendant behind the register. “Aloha.”

“Aloha,” I say, diving right into the culture. Look at me. Mai Tais and alohas. Next thing you know, I’ll be firing up the pit for the luau. Is it called a pit? Hmm, something I need to look into. If I’m firing it up, I need to know the terminology.

“Can I help you find anything?”

Hands clasped together, Cora asks, “Do you have Pop-Tarts?”

The attendant smiles and points to the back of the store. “With the snacks.”

“Oh, thank God.” Cora bows and then says, “Mele Kalikimaka.”

“That means Merry Christmas, you nitwit,” I say, laughing.

Cora pauses while the attendant laughs as well. “It felt like a Mele Kalikimaka moment, didn’t it?”

“Thank God you didn’t have the Fireball,” I say while dragging her toward the back.

“I won’t see her at Christmas. Maybe I was wishing her Merry Christmas in advance. That’s just kind.”

“Is that what you were trying to do?”

She shakes her head. “No, I think I was going for God bless.”

“Exactly.” I move around a rack of kid souvenir shirts, and from the corner of my eye spot the familiar blue package. “Gasp,” I say. “There they are.”

“Where?” Cora whips around, looking frantic. “Do they have my fancy flavor?”

I direct her head toward the Pop-Tarts just as I hear, “Stella?”

My entire body freezes as the authoritarian voice I grew up with shakes me to my bones. Slowly, I turn around and come face to face with my dad. My dad, shirtless, wearing swim trunks and a straw hat.

I’m going to tell you right now—this isn’t normal.

Growing up, my dad was straitlaced. Rigid, almost. He woke up, worked out in the garage, ate breakfast with the family, and then went to work, where he did something like computer processing. Still not quite sure on the details. When he’d get home, Mom would have the food on the table, ready, and then he’d check over our homework while Mom cleaned the kitchen. If we were lucky and he was in a good mood, he’d play a round of cards with me and my sisters. He wore a button-up shirt until he had to take it off to go to bed, and his hair was always perfectly parted to the side and slicked down with gel. Not a hair out of place. Always a freshly shaven face.

That is not the man I’m looking at right now. Yes, he might have the same stern look in his deep chocolate eyes, but that’s as far as it goes when it comes to the man I know as my father.

“Dad?” I ask, still unsure if it’s him.

“Stelly, have you been drinking?”

My spine immediately stiffens, and I’m about to answer when Cora tumbles into me. “Oh yes. The Mai Tais are fantastic and we plan on procuring a long-lasting relationship with them while here, but don’t worry, Mr. Stella’s Dad, we stayed away from Fireball.” She taps her nose and then points at my dad. “We’re keeping it classy.”

Yup . . . really classy.

My dad has never seen me drunk.

And the fear coursing through me of acting like a fool in front of him is real.

But to my shock, he says, “The Mai Tais just about took me down last night.”

Umm . . .

What?

Dad reaches his hand out and says, “I’m Donny.”

I nearly choke on my own saliva. Donny?

**\*\*EYES POP OUT\*\***

DONNY?

Uh . . . never in my ENTIRE twenty-nine years has my dad EVER referred to himself as Donny. He’s always been Donald, and nothing else.

Donald Garcia with the pressed pants.

Donald Garcia with the sensible Volkswagen, which wasn’t allowed to be eaten in.

Donald Garcia who would polish his shoes at night as a relaxation technique.

Never once was he ever called Donny. My mom never called him Donny. She wouldn’t dare. Maybe that’s why they fell out of love—the inability to call each other nicknames.

No. I know why they divorced.

They never really loved each other. Thrown together by their parents, they married, had kids, raised them, and when we were all out of the house, they called it quits. They're friendly with each other, but not friendly enough to call each other nicknames like Donny.

"Coraline, but everyone calls me Cora." She shakes my dad's hand. "Wow, what a surprise, finding your daughter in Hawaii, at the same resort. What are the odds?"

Yeah, what are the odds?

I'll tell you. They're slim, but that seems to be the kind of luck I have.

Perplexed and still trying to figure out if this is a side effect of the Mai Tais, I ask, "Dad, what, uh . . . what are you doing here?"

He rocks on his heels. "Oh, you know, just living the good life."

Okay. This is definitely the Mai Tais. There's no way in hell my dad would ever say something like *living the good life*. And here I thought I'd have a long-lasting relationship with the rum concoction.

Oh hell no. Not if it's making me have strange conversations with my dad where he says things like *living the good life*.

Chuckling, I shake my head. "Sorry, I thought you said 'living the good life.' These Mai Tais must be hitting me really hard."

"No, that's what he said," Cora says. "And I couldn't agree more. Life is too short. We have to enjoy it when we can. By the way, love the board shorts. Men are so scared to wear the short ones, but, dare I say, great legs, Mr. Donny."

"Why, thank you. Your friend is smart." Dad looks at me and smiles before opening up his arms. "Where's my hug, Stelly?"

Before I can even consider what it would be like to be pressed against my dad's naked chest, he envelops me against

him, and I'm caught up in the smell of sunscreen and beer as he snuggles me against his furry chest.

Curly hairs rub against my nose.

His pecs encase my cheek.

And I can honestly say, I've never been this intimate with my father.

"It's good to see you. You're always so busy, I never get to see you anymore." When he pulls away, I try not to flinch as I feel the imprint of my dad's gray chest hair against my cheek. Not sure I've ever seen him shirtless, let alone hugged the man when he's running around topless.

This shop must be another dimension. Alternate reality. A threshold for what-the-fuck situations. I hate to say it, but I don't think the Pop-Tarts are worth the trouble. And that's saying a lot, coming from drunk me.

"Why aren't you visiting with your dad?" Cora chastises me.

"What?" I blink, still trying to comprehend what's going on. "Uh, I teach a lot."

"Not during the summer."

"I teach workout classes during the summer," I say, dazed.

"What kind of workout classes?" a female voice asks to my right.

*Now who the hell is that?*

I turn to see who spoke up when my jaw nearly hits the ground.

No.

Fucking.

Way.

"Stella Garcia, as I live and breathe." Turning to my dad, she asks, "Donny, did you plan this?"

Dad rests his hand on his stomach and in a jolly tone says, "I had no idea she was here."

Please excuse me while I brace myself against a clothing rack.

The cool fabric of the souvenir shirts, which have been hanging in the air-conditioned space, are a contrast to my heated skin.

What in the fresh hell is happening?

Ashley Broome, my high school nemesis, is standing in front of me. The girl who made my freshman and sophomore years on the volleyball team a living hell is standing . . . right . . . there . . . looking at me with those perfect blue eyes, long blonde hair and—oh, wow.

And she's calling my dad Donny.

Swallowing back the bile that has risen in my throat, I say, "Ashley. Wow, what are you doing here?"

She laughs and pushes at my shoulder as if we've been friends for years. "Oh, always the joker."

She steps toward my dad and, in absolute horror, I watch as she slips her hand into my dad's.

My eyes zero in on the connection. My vision begins to tunnel.

She's holding on to him.

But not just like "oh no, I tripped on my ho-y sandals and I need to brace myself."

No, she's holding him as if—as if . . . she belongs to him.

As if they're—I swallow bile—together.

What in the devil is happening?

"We're here celebrating," Ashley says.

Mouth dry, my heart pounding, ready to escape my chest, I say, "Celebrating what?"

She chuckles, and I watch as she takes her other hand and presses it against my dad's naked chest, just where my cheek uncomfortably rested a few moments ago. She smiles up at him as if he's her entire world, and that's when my eyes see it.

The glint of a diamond.

The sparkle of promise.

The eternal commitment between two lovers.

No.

No fucking way.

There's no fucking—

“We're celebrating our engagement, of course.”

“Oh . . . shit,” Cora whispers next to me as I blink rapidly, attempting to comprehend what's unfolding in front of me.

“Isn't it amazing?” Ashley reaches out and takes my hand in hers. “I'm going to be your new mom.”

I . . .

There's . . .

WHAT?

That's it.

No more Mai Tais. Here I thought it was Fireball that was going to wreck us, that was going to swoop in with its wild ways and make us regret our decisions. We didn't give Mai Tais credit where credit is due.

Can we cue up a slow clap for the rum concoction? Because, well done on the mindfuckery.

Well fucking done.

Boss-level mindfuckery.

Bringing a parent to an island in the middle of the ocean, changing his personality completely, and then attaching him to the girl—*two years my senior*—who used to torture me all throughout volleyball practice. Not just attaching, but marrying him.

Ha.

Oh, good one.

This is really freaking good.



“Why are you slow clapping?” Cora asks me.

I look down at my hands—they’re moving without my knowledge. I shake my head. “Can’t tell you, but I do think I’m having some sort of weird episode.” I clear my throat. “I think there was something in the Mai Tais that’s making me delusional.” I swallow, my saliva feeling like a boulder trying to squeeze down my throat. Clutching the back of my neck, I say, “You see, I thought I saw my dad in Hawaii and engaged to a girl two years older than me.”

“She’s two years older than you?” Surprised, Cora looks past me and asks, “What’s your skincare routine? Your skin is flawless.”

“Aw, thank you,” Ashley says, making me nearly jump out of my flip-flops. “But this is just me, nothing special. I just seem to be lucky.” She pushes my shoulder again. “But I do recall someone having a tremendous amount of acne in high school. Looks as though you’re all cleared up now, Stella. Good for you.”

Still uneasy, I face the sight in front of me, my dad looking jolly—yes, freaking jolly—holding Ashley Broome’s hand, her bosom high and large and in your face, a pink sarong wrapped around her stomach making her look like Hawaii Barbie.

This is real.

This is actually real and happening.

My dad is engaged to Ashley Broome, an absolute witch.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Ashley says to Cora.

Waving, Cora says, “I’m Coraline, but everyone except my brother calls me Cora. Arlo never took to the nickname.”

“Cora, nice to meet you. Are you Stella’s partner?”

“Partner?” Cora asks. “Ohhh, like her lover?” Cora starts giggling like a moron.

“No, she’s not,” I say.

“Oh, sorry. She just seemed like your type,” Ashley says offhandedly.

My dad clears his throat. “I wasn’t aware that you like women. Is this a new development?”

“What? No,” I nearly shout.

“We always thought she was into girls,” Ashley says.

“Who’s we?” I ask.

What is happening right now? Why is my sexual orientation a point of topic? And why is Ashley bringing it up? Not that it would be a bad thing to be gay. I envy lesbians at times, not having to deal with the disgusting intricacies of the male population. Is it too much to ask to wash your hands after you go to the bathroom? You touch your private parts to pee, therefore WASH YOUR HANDS. The amount of times I’ve seen male teachers come out of the teachers’ lounge bathroom with dry hands is—

“Kristin, Tiffany, and Madison,” Ashley answers, interrupting my thoughts. “We actually thought you and McKenna were a secret couple.”

“No.” I shake my head. “She was my best friend.”

“McKenna would spend the night often at our house,” Dad says, a raise to his brow.

“Because she was my *best friend*.”

“You’d giggle in the back of the bus on school trips.”

“Because she was my FRIEND!” I shout, drawing attention from the shop attendant.

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” Ashley waves me off. “I was just confused because your dad was telling me you’ve never been in a relationship, so I figured you were just hiding yourself.” Ashley touches me again on the arm and I swear if she does it again, I’ll— “It’s okay to be open with me. I’m going to be a big part of your life. I’m quite maternal. If you want to come out to me—”

“I have a boyfriend,” I shout, surprising Cora and myself.

“What? Since when?” Cora asks, taking a step back to look me up and down.

Christ, if only she could read a room.

Jaw clenched, I say, “Uh, we’ve been keeping it secret.”

“Oh my God, who is it?” Cora asks, completely oblivious.

I try to communicate to her without talking but we’re both too wasted to have any sort of mindreading communication translated so I say, “Uh, he’s, uh . . .” Think. *Think, Stella. Who’s your boyfriend?*

Chris Pine.

Chris Evans.

Chris Hemsworth.

No, no, no. Why is Chris in my head right now?

Think of a name.

Any name.

A man’s name . . .

“Romeo,” I say before I can stop myself.

Oh no.

“Shut . . . UP,” Cora shouts. “God, I knew it. I freaking knew it. I told Greer the other day you two were totally together and putting on a front.” She parades around the small space in the back of the store, fist-pumping the air with certainty. “I can’t wait to tell Greer and shove it in her face. This is fantastic. And he’s here, in Maui. Oh my God, are you two sneaking off to be with each other?”

“Uh, no, it’s not—”

“He’s here?” Ashley asks, jumping up and down, her boobs bobbing with her. “Oh my God, Donny, we need to meet him. Tomorrow night, let’s have dinner together.”

And this is why you don’t say a name people know.

*Damn you, Mai Tais, we’re done.*

*You had your chance, and you didn't play your cards right. It's over between us.*

“You know, I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Oh, so you're not really together then?” Ashley asks, a challenging glint in her eye.

And that right there, that one look, pushes me over the edge.

Something in me snaps.

Maybe it's the athlete in me.

Maybe it's the Mai Tais.

Maybe it's my jealous breasts who wish they were as perky and nice as Ashley's, but I up the ante on the delusional situation I seem to be in.

“Oh, we're together. We, uh . . . we're actually engaged too but we're not saying anything since we're here on our friends' wedding trip.”

“You're ENGAGED?” Cora brings her hands to her head in utter shock.

Ugh, how could I forget she was still here?

Ignoring Cora, I say, “So, yeah, happy and in love.”

“Stelly, I'm so happy for you,” Dad says in a warm tone as he scoops me up into a hug and presses a kiss to the top of my head like he used to when I was growing up. “This calls for celebration.” He holds my shoulders and looks me in the eyes. “Tomorrow night, dinner. You, me, Ashley, and Romeo. I'll text you the details.”

Ashley smiles at me. “I can't wait.” And then she comes up to me and pulls me into a hug. “We're going to have the best mother-daughter relationship.” When she lets go of me, she pinches my cheek and then steps away. Giving me a small once-over, she says, “And maybe while you're here we can go shopping together, get you something more . . . modern?”

“That would make me very happy, seeing you two spend some time together.”

Over my dead and Mai Tai'd body.

Dad tips my chin up. "See you tomorrow." And then with his hand to Ashley's lower back, he guides her out of the souvenir shop.

Leaning against the wall with an open Pop-Tart package—when did she grab that?—Cora says, "Wow, just wow. Family reunion, two secret engagements, and no Fireball to skew our thoughts. What a night."

I swat the Pop-Tart away and watch it hit the floor before looking into Cora's eyes. "We're not engaged, nor are we in a relationship, nor have we ever come close to touching each other. I just said that to save face."

"What?" Cora whines. "Ugh, come on. You literally just peed all over my parade."

"Ugh, you just had to escalate it with your oohing and ahhing."

"I didn't ooh and ahh, and why are you lying, anyway?"

"Uh, did you not happen to notice that my dad is engaged to a woman two years older than me? Or better yet, to a woman who was my archenemy in high school?"

Cora gasps. "Noooooo, really? Ooo, plot twist."

"No, not plot twist. This is my life."

Cora starts to giggle. Then snorts. *Loudly*. "How do you suppose you're going to get the Master of Sneer to attend dinner with you?"

*Shit.*

Things I didn't think through.

Ugh . . . crap.

## Chapter Two

### ROMEO

“Those pancakes were magnificent,” Gunner says, patting his stomach as we make our way to the pool. “It really tasted as though I was chewing a piña colada.”

The visual is too much.

Our first morning in Hawaii and I spent it with Gunner and Lindsay at a table for four, watching them make heart eyes and share their food by feeding each other every other bite.

It was revolting.

And it put me in a shit mood.

“What a beautiful day,” Gunner coos. Yup, he’s cooing. The man is so far in love, I think if I looked behind us, a trail of hearts would be streaming from his ass.

“I’ve never been to Hawaii,” Lindsay says. “Not sure I’ll ever leave.”

“If you love it here, we’ll live here,” Gunner announces. “We’ll have your parents bring Dylan, we’ll grab a place by the beach, and we’ll enjoy all the piña colada pancakes we can eat.”

“Sounds dreamy,” Lindsay says, rising to her toes and pressing a kiss to Gunner’s jaw.

“Anything for my girl.”

“Oh-kay,” I say, louder than expected, my irritation level high. “I’m going to go this way.” I point to the right. “You two go that way.” I point to the left. “And for the love of God, don’t follow me.”

Without a goodbye, I take off, following the paved path to one of the many secluded pools on the resort. Since we caught a late breakfast and the lovebirds took forever to eat, it’s already past ten in the morning, which means it’s almost lunchtime, which means I can start consuming alcohol.

Since Arlo and Greer are spending the day tightening up all their wedding plans, we have a free day to do whatever the hell we want. I took that to mean my ass will be attached to a rented cabana where I will be served drinks and food and pay attention to nothing and nobody.

By the pool, there’s a covered attendant station for guests. I walk up to someone folding towels that smell like fresh laundry and island breeze. “Hey, I rented a cabana for the day and was wondering where I’d go to find out which one?”

“I can help you,” the guy says while setting down a towel. He picks up a tablet and starts scrolling through it. “What’s your last name?”

“Romero,” I answer. “Should be under Brock Romero.”

“Ah, yes. I have you over in cabana twelve, which has a beautiful view of the beach. We have a group of sea turtles that have been hanging out by the rocks lately. If you’re lucky, you might catch a glimpse of them.”

“Awesome,” I say, starting to feel relaxed already.

“I’ll let your server know you’re taking the cabana early. His name is Koa. If you need anything, just let him know and he’ll bring it to you. Will anyone be joining you?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Just me.”

“Very well.” He hands me a few towels. “These are in case you decide to hop in the ocean to cool down. If you need more, please let us know.”

“Thanks.”

The attendant rounds the corner of his shack and says, "I'll take you to your cabana. Follow me." Pleased with my decision to escape for the day, I follow closely behind the guy. "How is your morning so far?"

Ah, small talk, the devil's work.

"Good," I lie. "Had breakfast with some friends who raved over the piña colada pancakes."

"Yes, our specialty. Did you have some?"

"Nah, stuck with an omelet. But I might indulge in them tomorrow." Another lie. I prefer donuts if I'm going to pack on the carbs for breakfast, but the mini donuts in their buffet didn't look as if they were worth the calories. Nothing like Frankie Donuts back home.

"I recommend trying them with the piña colada syrup. Your day will be made." He gestures to a cabana. "Here we are. Would you like me to draw down the curtains for you?"

I take in the square cabana with a shade stretched over the top and curtains tied back on each pole. There are two padded loungers flanking a table and overlooking the gleaming ocean. It's serene, quiet, and exactly what I need.

"I think the curtains are fine where they are now, but thanks."

"Anytime. Koa will be by shortly to take your drink order. Please feel free to flag down anyone if you need something."

"Thanks."

After the guy leaves, I step under the cabana and take a deep breath. The whisper of palm leaves flickering in the wind mixes with the lapping waves against the rocks, providing the perfect, melodic soundtrack for my relaxing day. I slip off my sandals and plop the towels on the other lounge before taking a seat on my own. I stretch out my legs and lean back.

Perfection.

Just what I need.

To wash away last year.



To wash away the inadequate feelings taking Stella to a game brought up.

To wash away . . . Stella.

With a deep breath, I rest my hands behind my head and shut my eyes, letting the beautiful morning carry me into a deep, relaxed state.

“God, there you are.”

I open my eyes just in time to have two towels tossed at my face.

“I’ve been hoofing it around this entire hotel looking for you.”

What the hell?

I lower the towels and look to the right, where I see Stella sitting on the second lounge, looking fine as hell in a hot pink bikini. Her long hair is tied into a bun on the top of her head, and she’s wearing large tortoiseshell sunglasses and some kind of wrap around her waist. But it’s the small covering of her bikini over her tits that’s grabbing my attention—unfortunately.

“Uh, hello? Eyes up here.” Stella smacks my arm, pulling me from a deep stare and reminding me that I want nothing to do with her. That I rented this cabana to avoid her.

And yet, here she is.

“That seat isn’t for you.” I set the towels on the table between us and force myself to look out over the ocean. “Leave.”

“Expecting company?” she asks, clearly not budging.

“No. And that’s exactly the point. I want to be left alone.”

“Hello,” a male voice says. “I’m Koa. You must be Mr. Romero.”

I turn to find a younger-looking dude in white shoes, white Bermuda shorts, and a white short-sleeve button-up shirt.

“Koa, nice to meet you.” I hold out a hand. “You can call me Romeo.”

“Great. Can I get you anything to drink? Eat? We have a complimentary fruit platter coming shortly, but would you like to add anything to that?”

“Yeah, could I get a Bikini Blonde Lager?” I ask.

“Of course. And for you, Miss?”

“Oh, she’s not—”

“Water, please, and can I get some of those piña colada pancakes?”

“She’s not—”

“Sure thing. I’ll be back shortly.”

“You’re not staying,” I say as Koa leaves to put in our order.

“You have a perfectly good unused lounge. I’m not about to leave when pancakes are on their way.” She slips off her flip-flops and lies back on the lounge. “Wow, these are comfortable.”

Sitting up, I turn toward her and speak firmly. “I don’t want you here. I rented a cabana for a reason—to avoid everyone today.”

“God, way to be antisocial.” She adjusts her bikini top and my eyes fall to her breasts for a second before I force myself to look away, not wanting to be caught staring again. “It’s not going to kill you to be around me.”

“My dick is already shriveling up from the thought of it.”

She lifts her sunglasses and gives me a look. “Cute.” And then she makes herself more comfortable, making me incredibly agitated.

“Seriously. Leave.”

“No. I’m good, thanks.”

“Stella.”

“Brock.”

Growling, I lean back in my lounge, my momentary good mood completely vanished. “Why the fuck would you want to be around me anyway? It’s not as if we get along.”

“We used to,” she says, her voice softening.

Yeah, we used to.

We used to be good friends. We used to hang out all the time. We used to be able to know what each other wanted without even having to ask.

And then I asked her out and everything went to shit.

“Yeah, well, we’re not now.”

“And why is that?”

Closing my eyes, I say, “Because you’re an annoying ingrate.”

“I’m choosing to ignore you just said that.”

I hear her shift on the lounge but I keep my eyes closed.

“And because I’m choosing to ignore your insults, I’ll take that as you owe me one.”

“What?” I laugh sarcastically and turn to look at her. She’s facing me again. “How do you figure that?”

“Insults can be hurtful, Brock. But I’m not going to let your insult hurt me. Therefore, I’m taking the high road and not forcing you to apologize to me, which means, you owe me one.”

“Your logic is fucked,” I say, turning back away from her.

“You know, I think I’ll cash in on my IOU right now.”

“How about I haven’t asked someone to escort you out of my cabana as a favor?”

“Funny.” She stands and unties the curtains, blocking off the back and sides, caging us in so our only view is the ocean. Hate to admit it, but it intensifies the ability to relax. Too bad Stella is still in the cabana. “There, that’s better.” She picks up a remote from the table and asks, “What does this do?” She

presses the button and the fan above us turns on, cooling the now closed-in cabana.

Damn it, she's making it more relaxing.

I swear she's doing this on purpose.

"Wow, I'm glad I found you. This cabana thing is where it's at." She picks up a menu from the table. "Look, they have couples' massages. We should get one. I can ask them if they do happy endings, since you clearly need one."

"Do not fucking ask that," I warn, knowing she has zero filter.

"But you're up for a couples' massage?"

"No."

"But they use hot stones."

"No," I say, sterner. "You're not staying."

"You keep saying that, and yet, I'm still here."

"Not by my choosing." Where's that damn drink?

Instead of sitting back down, she struts around the cabana, running her fingers along the curtains, walking behind the loungers, taking in every inch of the small space.

"Jesus, will you sit? You're driving me nuts."

"Are you inviting me to join you?"

"No, but if you're going to be in here, stop walking around. It's the least you can do."

Just then, there's a knock on one of the cabana pillars, and Koa slips through the curtains, bearing a tray with our fruit, Stella's pancakes, and our drinks. He hands out our items, and I quickly start to chug my beer.

"Could I get another one of these?" I ask Koa before he can leave.

A little surprised, he nods and then takes off again.

"Slow down. You don't want to pass out before noon."

“How little you know me,” I mutter, bringing the cool glass to my lips again.

“Fruit?” She offers me the plate.

Without looking at it, I shake my head. “Your grubby hands are all over it, so, no thanks.”

“Well, we’re mature today.” She sets it down and I hear her cut into her pancakes, followed by a moan. A moan that stirs my goddamn groin. I might want her out of here, but that doesn’t mean I’m not affected by her. “These pancakes are making my nipples hard.”

Jesus Christ.

Don’t look.

Don’t even think about fucking looking.

They’re probably not hard anyway.

She’s saying that metaphorically.

I slightly turn my head—because my head is uncomfortable, nothing more—and out of the corner of my eye, I spot a hard nipple.

Motherfucker.

Pancakes made her nipples hard.

What else makes her nipples hard?

Donuts?

I’ve given her many donuts in the past and she’s never mentioned a hard nipple in exchange.

“What are you thinking about over there? Your face is all twisted up.”

“Nothing,” I say far too quickly.

“Doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“Just finish your pancakes and leave me alone.” I take my hat off my head and plop it over my face to block her out. Too bad I don’t have a hat for each of my ears, as well.

“But you still owe me a favor.”

“You’re delusional. I owe you nothing.”

She sighs. “You know, I wasn’t going to bring this up, but since you’re being difficult, I guess I have no choice.”

Oh, this should be good.

“A couple of months ago, I was heading into the teachers’ lounge for some much-needed coffee, and when I got there, you took the last cup. I didn’t have enough time to make a new pot before class, so I was stuck with no coffee. It was a dreadful day, to say the least, and I’ve never brought it up because I didn’t want to stir trouble, but here we are.”

“Ever heard of reaching? That’s what you’re doing.”

Grumbling now, she sets her plate on the table and then pushes at my leg, lifting my hat. I find her standing over me right before she sits on the edge of my lounge.

Eyes up, man.

“Brock, I need your help.”

Ahh, and here it is.

“Why do you need my help?” I ask, sitting up some more so I can look her in the eyes better.

She worries on her bottom lip and I can tell this is a painful ask for her, but, hell, I’m going to enjoy it, because she’s made my life a living hell. Not that she knows that, per se, but I’m still blaming her. No one said I was mature.

Clearing her throat, she says, “I need you to pretend to be my boyfriend tonight.”

Ha.

Okay.

Sure.

Did I hear that right?

Pretend to be her boyfriend?

I shake my head. “You’ve fucking lost it.” I move to put my hat over my face again but she stops me.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Go find someone else.”

“I can’t find someone else.”

I gesture behind me. “There are plenty of people out there. Go take your pick.”

“I’m not going to ask a stranger to pretend to be my fiancé.”

“Uh, you said boyfriend, not fiancé.”

She waves her hand at me. “Semantics. But seriously, I can’t be with a random guy.”

Sure could when we went to the baseball game. Okay, I know, that sounds petty and childish. That was the last one.

“Ask Gunner.”

“He’s here with Lindsay on a sex vacation, as he so eloquently put it this morning.”

“Arlo will help you out.”

“Arlo is about to get married and has better things to do than pretend to be my fiancé. Plus, he’s so stiff, he’d never do anything like that.”

“I’m sure Keiko could pretend to be a man.”

“You and I both know Keiko doesn’t have the empathy to understand something like this.”

“And what’s *this*, actually?” I ask, looking her in the eyes.

“Just, you know . . . a quick dinner.”

“With who?”

She looks away and says something under her breath.

“What was that?” I ask.

She sighs and says, “With my dad.”

“Your dad?” I ask, surprised. “Is he here?”

She nods slowly. “Yup. I’m just as surprised. Anyway, he thinks I have a fiancé named Romeo—”

“You don’t even call me Romeo.”

“I know. It just slipped. Anyway, he thinks I have a fiancé named Romeo and he wants to meet you.” She looks me in the eyes. “So, will you come to dinner tonight?”

I keep her gaze and say, “No.” Then plop my hat on my head and close my eyes.

“Brock, please?”

The way she says *please* nearly breaks me down, but I hold strong and shake my head. “Just tell your dad the truth. You lied to him for God knows what reason and you’re, in fact, single, the way you like it.”

The last part comes out harsher than I intended.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “For the love of God, just leave me alone.”

“You don’t have to be so mean all the time.” She stands from the lounge.

“I’m not mean all the time.” I lift my hat off my face to catch her adjusting the wrap around her waist.

“We used to be friends, you know? Apparently, ‘used to be’ being the keywords.” She moves to the front of the cabana. “Thanks for nothing.” And then she takes off, leaving her half-eaten pancakes and untouched water behind.

I bring my beer to my lips and attempt to sort out what just happened and the guilty feeling that’s brewing in the pit of my stomach.

Why the hell do I feel guilty?

Because I don’t want to pretend to be her fiancé?

Pretty sure that’s a fair reaction.

Especially since . . . well, since I used to have feelings for her. *And I’ve missed her because we used to hang out all the time.*

This my vacation, damn it.

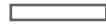


*I considered her one of my best friends.*

I'm not about to parade around and act as though I'm in love with a girl when I'm not.

*I once thought she wanted me too.*

Nope. It's me and this cabana.



"OH, YOU'RE LOOKING NICE," Coraline says, coming up to me in the hallway. "Not sure I've ever seen you in dress-up clothes."

I glance down at my black chino shorts and black T-shirt and say, "I'm not dressed up."

She motions to my outfit. "That's not dressed up for you?"

We both walk to the elevator together, my flip-flops clacking with her sandals. "No, these are regular clothes."

"Huh, well, I guess I always see you in athletic gear. Well, you look nice for your dinner tonight." She winks at me.

"Why are you winking?"

"You know, because of the whole fake fiancé thing." She winks again.

"You know about that?"

She laughs just as we reach the elevator. She presses the down button. "Oh, I was there. I thought it was the Mai Tais playing games with me at first, but then she explained it all to me."

"Explained what exactly?"

"How she's trying to save face." The elevator dings. "I thought it was really quick thinking on her part, even though her mind was mush with alcohol."

I follow in behind Cora and she presses the button for the lobby.

“I’m shocked that she got you to agree to go to dinner, though. When she told me everything she said was a lie, I couldn’t fathom how she could convince you to go. But looks as if she proved me wrong.” Cora pats me on the shoulder. “That’s awfully big of you, Romeo. She’s in quite a pinch. You should have seen how ashen her face was last night when she realized her dad was engaged and she had no idea. I felt so bad for her. And to a girl she went to high school with. Ugh, my heart broke. You’re really saving her.”

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

“I haven’t gotten to know you all too well, but stepping up when you two are feuding, that really shows your character. Makes me want to give you a big hug.”

Cora spreads her arms and before I can stop her, she wraps me up in a hug and squeezes me tight.

“What a great guy you are.”

She releases me just as the elevator dings and the doors open.

“Have fun tonight.”

*Fun. Right.* I doubt that a dinner with Stella’s stuffy dad will be *fun*. And I have to admit, I do hate that Stella was so upset too. She said nothing about that earlier, but then, that’s Stella. Independent. Fiercely so.

Okay, then. One dinner.

Then I’m done. She starts to walk away when I call out, “Uh, do you remember where they were having dinner?”

“The Reef,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “God, men. Always forgetful.”

## Chapter Three

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### STELLA

Standing behind a pillar outside the restaurant, I take a deep breath and wring my hands together.

Bad clams.

Food poisoning.

Been sick all day.

That's the story.

It checks out.

But . . .

She's not going to believe it.

Ashley is going to see right through me and realize I'm lying. She has a way of sniffing out the truth, and I have a feeling that's what's going to happen the minute she notices Brock isn't showing up.

For a second there, a very small second, I thought he was going to say yes. That he was going to set aside the anger he seems to be harboring and help me out. Boy, was I wrong. Really wrong. He couldn't say no fast enough.

And, yeah, it cracked my heart.

We were such good friends. We'd spend hours at the Atomic Saloon, our favorite bar, watching baseball games,

drinking beer, and eating off each other's plates. It felt so seamless, and then . . . something changed. I don't know what changed, but something did, and now he's distant. He wants nothing to do with me, which was evident this morning. And, yes, that stings. It hurts, but I haven't been game to ask him what went wrong between us. What caused the rift in our friendship. And . . . I've missed him. His friendship. Having someone to hang with who's . . . *normal*. Laid-back. Easygoing. Fun.

Sighing, I gather myself and get ready for an epic humiliation.

Ashley is never going to let me live this down, and I'd say no big deal, I'll never see her again, but that's not the case this time. Because you know . . . she's engaged to my DAD.

God. I press my hand to my head and will back the embarrassed tears. Maybe I can feign being sick as well. Spend the rest of the vacation in my room, order room service, attend the wedding incognito, and then head back to Chicago, where I can lick my wounds.

That's not that bad of an idea, actually—

“Stelly, there you are.”

Crap.

I look up to see my dad walking toward me, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and khakis, Ashley at his side in a skimpy red dress with a deep *V* cut in the front. Not surprised she brought the ladies to dinner.

“Hey, Dad,” I say, giving him a hug. When I pull away, Ashley scoops me up into a hug as well, her boobs smashing into my face, thanks to her high heels.

I've never been a tall girl. Yes, I played division one volleyball, but I was the libero. You don't have to be tall for that position, and my shortness isn't coming in handy right now, especially pressed into Ashley's cleavage.

“How was your day? Mommy wants to know.”

I will kill her.

“It was fine,” I say through clenched teeth.

Dad looks around. “Where’s your special man?”

Seriously, what is going on? When has my dad ever said “special man”?

I’ll give you a hint. Never.

“Is he . . . not here?” Ashley asks in a sly, knowing tone.

God, I hate her.

I hate this.

Emotion wells up in my throat.

The memories from high school hit me all at once. Ashley’s torments, her teasing, her ruthless way of making me feel less than her every single day. How can my dad like this woman? How could he possibly think it’s okay to be engaged to someone two years older than his youngest daughter? How could he not see how spiteful and vindictive she is?

My sensible, logical father.

It’s as if he’s been blinded by her boobs.

And, yeah, my dad is a good-looking man, he’s aged well, has that whole suave look about him, but what does Ashley want with him? What can he possibly offer her that a younger man can’t? To my knowledge, my dad doesn’t have some golden nest egg hidden somewhere. He worked a good job but by no means does he have a pot of gold for Ashley to dig up.

Trying to hold back the tears that want to splash forth from the knowing look on Ashley’s face, I say, “Well, um—”

“He’s not coming, is he?” Ashley asks, looping her hand through my dad’s arm.

Damn it.

Damn her.

My lip trembles. A wave of embarrassment rushes up my spine and lights up the back of my neck.

She’s going to see right through me. There’s only one thing to do.

“You see, the truth is—”

“There you are, babe. Sorry I’m late.” Before I can turn around, an arm wraps around my shoulders and I’m pulled into the familiar scent of Brock “Romeo” Romero just as his lips land on the top of my head. “I was stuck in the elevator chatting with Cora.”

Shocked.

Stunned.

Unsure if what’s happening is actually real.

I glance up at him just as he looks down on me, and my heart nearly trips in my chest when he winks. Then he stretches his hand out to my dad and says, “You must be Mr. Garcia. It’s great to meet you, sir.”

Dad’s eyes light up and he takes Romeo’s hand in his. “The pleasure is mine.”

I glance over at Ashley, whose eyes are wide, her mouth parted.

Yup, stare all you want.

Brock is a sight to behold. Standing at six foot three, he’s a phenom of muscles and tan skin. A former athlete, he’s kept in amazing shape and vibes with the whole “dark and smoldering look” with his deep brown hair and matching eyes. And then there’s his smile.

It’s unlike any smile I’ve ever seen on a man.

Charming.

Handsome.

Captivating.

That smile can make anyone want to be near him, get to know him, attach themselves to him.

I haven’t seen that smile in a long time . . . until now.

“And you must be . . .” Romeo says, waiting to be filled in about Ashley.

“The future Mrs. Garcia,” Dad says with a smile.

Romeo takes her hand and gives it a quick shake. “Nice to meet you.” I watch his eyes, to see if they stray like they do when he’s looking at me, and to my surprise, they remain fixed on her face and not the billowing bosom beneath.

“Wow, when Stella said she was engaged, she didn’t mention it was to a stud like yourself.” Ashley’s cheeks actually blush.

“You didn’t tell them how handsome I am?” Romeo asks while giving me a squeeze. “I think she doesn’t like it to go to my head.”

“A confident man is well-respected; a cocky man is trouble,” Dad says, puffing his chest.

“I couldn’t agree more, Mr. Garcia.” Romeo motions to the restaurant. “Shall we?”

“Of course. We’ll lead the way.”

I stay back a few feet, and when I know they’re out of earshot, I say quietly, “Oh my God, you came.”

“I did,” he says, the charm in his voice gone, which makes me believe he came very reluctantly.

“Why?” I ask.

“Ran into Coraline. She put me through a guilt trip. Did you plan that?”

“What? No,” I whisper. “I was seconds away from telling my dad you didn’t exist before you arrived.”

“Damn, I should have taken longer doing my hair.”

I stop him and force him to look at me. In my most sincere voice, I say, “Thank you for being here. It really means a lot.”

“Yeah, don’t sweat it,” he says gruffly before taking my hand in his and walking me the rest of the way to our table.

He might be here, but he’s stiff. He’s clearly not happy about it, and I’m pretty sure I’m going to owe him enormously after this. And from the way our relationship has always been, I’m prone to believe he’s not going to let me off easily.

“You don’t have to walk so fast,” I say, trailing behind him.

“Just trying to get this over with.”

I stop him and turn him toward me. “If you’re going to be in a bad mood, I’d rather you not be here at all.”

His eyes narrow. “Was I in a bad mood while talking to your dad?”

“No.”

“Then stop snapping at me. I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you saying you have experience in being a fake fiancé?”

“God, you’re annoying.” He pushes his hand through his hair. “I know how to be a decent human being. Something you apparently doubt about me.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“Are you two coming?” Ashley asks, waving us over to their table, which offers a beautiful ocean view.

“Yup.” Romeo plasters on a smile and then secures his hand in mine again, his palm so much bigger than mine, and guides me to the table, where he pulls out a seat for me.

He helps me into my chair and then smooths his hands over my shoulders, sending a chill down my spine. His fingers linger and drag across my shoulders before he takes a seat next to me. The table is set up so there are two seats on one side, two on the other, with the view of the ocean to our left.

With the sun setting, we picked a beautiful time to meet up for dinner, even if the entire exchange makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable.

“So, I can’t help but notice, but there doesn’t seem to be a ring on your finger,” Ashley says.

Oh, shit.

I open my mouth to answer when Romeo slips his arm around my shoulders and says, “Our friends are getting



married while we're here, and we didn't think it would be right to steal their thunder. We left the ring at home. It's subtle, but beautiful. Perfect for my girl."

"Is that so? Do you have a picture of it?"

God, she's annoying.

"He just proposed before we got here, and I didn't tell anyone so I didn't take any pics," I answer while Romeo's finger draws small circles on my arm, causing my arm to break out in goosebumps.

"And how did you propose?" Ashley asks, leaning forward so Romeo has a perfect view down her cleavage.

Ignoring what she's clearly offering, Romeo looks me in the eyes and says, "It was simple. I invited her over to watch the Bobbies like we always do and during the seventh inning stretch, I got down on one knee and asked her to be mine forever. It was an easy yes for her, wasn't it, babe?"

I swallow hard, something inside me making my heart pound harder as he sits there, staring at me as though I'm really his entire world. Okay, yeah, he's good at this.

"Didn't even have to think about it," I answer while wetting my lips. Romeo's eyes flash down to my mouth as his teeth run over the corner of his lip.

Hell, that's one sexual look he's sending my way.

"Oh, that is a simple proposal," Ashley says in a snide tone. "But to each their own."

She's so freaking rude, and I'm about to snap at her when the waitress approaches our table. "Hello, I'm Kiki and will be serving you tonight. Can I get you started with some drinks and tell you about the specials?"

"That would be wonderful," Dad says.

While Kiki takes our drink order—two bottles of wine for the table—and rattles off the specials, I stare Ashley down. At the corner of her eyes, I can see the faintest lines showing her thirty-one years she's spent baking in the sun.

“Is that good for you?” Romeo asks, slipping his hand over my thigh, where he grips my leg tightly, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Uh, what?”

“The mahi-mahi special.”

“Oh, yeah, great,” I answer as Romeo’s hand slips farther up my thigh, which sends a new bolt of lust between my legs. Before he can go any farther, I press my hand to his and stop him. They can’t see under the table, no need to touch me there.

“Stella has always been a burger-and-fries kind of girl, but on occasion, she’ll switch it up for a fish dish. It’s rare, though,” Romeo says, shocking me. “It has to be a certain kind of fish paired with a certain kind of sauce. And if there isn’t rice included, she wants nothing to do with it.”

“Is that so?” Dad asks, charmed. “I didn’t know you were that particular about fish. I honestly didn’t think you ate fish. You always hated the salmon your mom served while growing up.”

Romeo chuckles. “Salmon is on her no-eat list. Even if rice is included. It’s the one fish she can’t stand, but I’ve seen her stomach it at a friend’s house a few times to be polite.”

“Glad to hear you still have your manners about you.” Dad laughs.

“For the most part.” Romeo looks at me and smirks. “She still lets out a belch every once in a while as we’re watching the game. The kind of belch that shakes the walls.”

“I do not,” I protest with an offended gasp.

“Babe.” He gives me a look. “Did you or did you not knock over my empty beer glass that one time when you burped?”

“I told you it was my hand that knocked it over.” I push at his shoulder.

He chuckles. “Seemed like crazy timing if you ask me.”

Dad joins in and says, “I’ve heard her burp. I could see a glass falling over.”

“Okay.” I hold up my hands. “Can we not discuss my burping?”

“I don’t know. I’m having fun talking about it,” Romeo says with a teasing tone, the same teasing tone he used with me what feels like so long ago, before things got weird.

“Well, frankly, I’m bored,” Ashley says.

*Because the conversation isn’t about you?*

Not that the conversation about me is the least bit flattering. But it’s not about her and since she’s always seeking attention, she’d take anything, even if it’s about her earth-shaking belches.

“How long are you here for?” Romeo asks, changing the subject with ease.

“Nine days,” Ashley says. “Donny got us a beautiful room overlooking the ocean. We’ve been waking up with the sunrise every morning. It’s been an absolute dream.”

“Sounds like it. This is just our second day here,” Romeo says. “We’ll be here for two weeks. I’m planning on some sunset walks with this girl.” Romeo lifts my hand and gently places a kiss along my knuckles. “We have some outings planned, as well. I think we’re going on a chocolate tour tomorrow.”

“Is that tomorrow?” I ask, realizing I should probably pay attention to the itinerary so I don’t miss anything.

“Yeah, babe. Remember how I said I was going to feed you chocolate with my mouth?”

Dear Jesus, things NOT to say in front of my dad.

“Sounds romantic,” Ashley says. “So, you’re a teacher? Is that right? That’s where you two met?”

Romeo nods. “Yup. PE teacher.” He takes my hand and intertwines our fingers together. “We started off as friends.”

“The best foundation,” Dad says.

“I couldn’t agree more. It was when we were friends that I really got to know Stella.” He kisses the back of my hand again, and a wave of butterflies erupt in my stomach as I listen to him. He’s dangerously good at this. He’s making me believe what he’s saying, especially by how he’s treating me. It reminds me of how things used to be. Easy, simple, fun. “And then there was this moment.” His eyes connect with mine. “We were at our favorite bar, Atomic Saloon. I was telling her about how Carson Stone is on track to get two thousand hits, and she listened intently and then casually reached over and snagged one of my fries off my plate. It was natural, as if this was how we were supposed to spend the rest of our lives—sitting in a booth together, talking sports, and taking fries off each other’s plates. That’s when I knew, she was it for me.”

Romeo’s eyes stay on mine.

His hand’s linked with mine.

And, oh my God, I can’t breathe.

*How is he doing this?*

He gave me shit later, claiming I distracted him with questions as he was talking passionately about baseball so I could get away with stealing his fries. He was wrong, I was actually curious. It just so happened that I got to eat his fries while I listened.

But I remember that night so vividly. I felt at ease with Romeo. As if in that moment, we were going from friends to best friends. At least, that’s what it felt like.

“So, you’re a big baseball fan then, huh?” Dad asks.

“He used to play professionally,” I say and then immediately feel Romeo tense next to me. He reaches for his water and releases my hand as he takes a sip.

“You used to play professionally?” Ashley asks, looking far too interested now.

Romeo clears his throat and nods. “Yeah. Played down in Texas. Outfield.”

“Why did you retire so young?” Dad asks.

Romeo grips the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable. He always loves talking about baseball, so why does he look incredibly pained right now?

“Uh, injury. Ruptured my Achilles tendon. My buddy Gunner had finished playing as well and our college coach said Forest Heights was looking for someone to take over the baseball program, so we jumped on it.”

“Do you miss it?” Ashley asks.

“Every day,” he says solemnly and lets out a sigh. Then he picks up his wine glass and says, “We never toasted.” Warily, I pick up my wine glass and hold it to the sky as Romeo says, “To the newly engaged—that would be all of us.” He winks, and we clink glasses. And just like that, he switches the mood to happy again, but it doesn’t change the way I’m thinking about him, or the pained look in his eyes, or the way he shifted uncomfortably in his chair over the talk of baseball. The sadness is there, and I’m wondering why he’s never spoken to me about it.



“THANK YOU FOR DINNER, DAD,” I say as we walk out of the restaurant.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Garcia. It was kind of you to pick up the bill.”

Holding Ashley’s hand, he says, “Think of it as an engagement present.” He gestures toward the elevators. “I’m assuming you’re going back to your room?”

“Yes,” Romeo and I say at the same time, making it seem as though we have “plans” for back in our room.

“Well, then we can walk together.” We walk toward the elevator bank and Dad presses the up button. “You know, it would mean a lot to me if you’re at the wedding,” Dad says. “I, uh, I tried to call you before we left for Hawaii but kept getting your voicemail. I spoke with your sisters and they both seemed less than supportive of our union.”

Hmm, I wonder why.

“A lot of people haven’t been supportive,” Ashley says, sounding somewhat normal. “We understand there’s an age difference.” Oh, they’ve noticed? That’s a relief. “But we also can’t help that the heart wants what it wants.”

“We’re going to have a small ceremony in a month. We’d be honored if you two would be there,” Dad says as the elevator dings to announce its arrival.

“Uh . . . I mean, I can be there,” I say, stumbling over my words as well as we enter the elevator. “But I’m not sure Romeo—”

“We’ll be there,” Romeo says, and casually pushes the button for his floor. “What floor are you?”

“Same,” Dad answers. Of course. “And that would mean so much to us if you were.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Romeo says as he drapes his arm over my shoulders, portraying brilliantly the role of the happy-go-lucky fiancé.

The elevator stops on the fifth floor, and we all get off and head to the right.

Please don’t let us be next to each other. Please don’t let us be next to each other.

“This is us,” Dad says.

I glance at Romeo and he says, “We’re down the hall.” He holds out his hand and Dad takes it. “Thanks again, Mr. Garcia. It was a great night.”

“It was.”

We say our quick goodbyes, Ashley giving us both a hug, chest first of course, and then Romeo takes my hand in his and we walk down the hallway, make a right turn, and then he stops at his door. From his wallet, he pulls out his keycard and lets himself in.

Unsure of what to do, I follow him and stand in the entryway, letting the door shut behind me. He kicks off his

sandals, goes to his mini-fridge and chooses a beer made by one of the local microbreweries, and then flops on the couch. He picks up the remote, props his feet on the coffee table, and starts going through the channels while popping open his beer.

“Um, do you want to talk about what just happened?”

“Nope.” He sips his beer, and I can see the wall visibly starting to erect around him again. The easygoing, fun Romeo I’ve grown to know, the guy who showed up at dinner, he’s nowhere to be found. Instead, the curmudgeon of a man who’s been nothing but nasty for the past several months is in his place.

“Brock—”

“I’m going to stop you right there.” He looks at me. “I did you a favor because I felt sorry for you. There’s nothing to talk about. There’s nothing to hash out. The dinner is over and done with. You can go.”

For some reason, his dismissal, his *pity*, stirs up a wave of embarrassment and insecurity I wasn’t expecting. Triggered, I feel my throat start to grow tight and my eyes start to well with tears, but I won’t cry, not in front of him.

Taking a deep breath, I ask, “What about my dad’s wedding?”

Eyes on the TV, he says, “I’m sure you’ll find a way to break up with me before then. You’re pretty good at this whole lying thing.”

Cold.

Heartless.

Detached.

How could the sweet man who spoke such beautiful words of how we met, of when he knew I was the one, vanish so quickly? My heart aches for him. My battered ego wishes for some mercy from the storm brewing over him.

Anything.

Any sort of acknowledgement that the friendship we once had is still there.

But as I stand here, staring at him—him unwavering in his position—I realize that's not going to happen.

Capitulating, I back up to the door and grip the handle. Quietly, I say, "Thank you for coming tonight. I know it was the last thing you wanted to do, but I appreciate what you did very much."

And, with that, I exit his room, forlorn. The last twenty-four hours have been one horrible blow after another, but all I can ask myself in this moment is—*what did I do wrong? What did I do to lose the friendship of this man?*

And how would I guard my heart around him for the next twelve days?



## Chapter Four

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### ROMEO

“You look like shit,” Gunner says, walking up to me.

“I feel like shit,” I say, plopping my sunglasses over my tired eyes.

“You realize you’re in paradise, right? This is the time when you’re supposed to relax.”

“Trust me, I’m trying,” I say, leaning against a pillar in the lobby of the hotel. I uncap my water bottle, take a sip, and try not to think about the shitshow that was last night.

The thought of Stella confessing to her dad about a fake engagement ate through me. Even though I’m trying not to be affected by this girl, I am, and the thought of her being embarrassed by her blatant lie didn’t settle well, and before I could stop myself, I was heading to the restaurant, hoping I wasn’t too late.

And I wasn’t.

I was just in time to play the role of doting fiancé.

And fuck did I play it well.

Disturbingly well.

There was ease in holding her hand, a calmness while touching her, talking about our relationship. And then when I spoke about the moment I knew she was the one, it felt so

goddamn real, because, hell . . . it was real. That was the moment that I knew I wanted something more with her. I spoke from the heart the entire night. I held her like I always wanted to hold her. I looked at her as if she were mine. And for a short moment in time, she was.

Last night was all too fucking real, and when we finally parted from her dad, I knew I had to get away. I had to shut down on her, or else I was going to do something I regretted, such as confess my feelings, the ones I've been trying to suppress whenever she's around. The ones I'm trying to forget, trying to move on from.

After last night, I realized I'm not even close to moving the fuck on.

And that's when I got drunk. I pounded six beers after the wine I consumed at dinner, and I woke up this morning with a raging headache, an aching body from being so goddamn tense, and a need for the woman who sees me as a favor and nothing else.

"Ooo, long night?" Cora says coming up to me, a huge smile on her face.

Shit.

I didn't think this whole thing through. Cora is like her brother, needles you for information until she's satisfied. She's got that playful gleam in her eye, and I can see this not going well for me.

"Enjoy meeting the parents?"

Yup, I was right.

Gunner gives me a confused look just as Cora squeals, "Ooo, free pineapple." And then she takes off to the right, where there's a fruit display in the lobby for guests.

I can feel Gunner's gaze on me as I avoid all eye contact with him.

Just keep looking away. Maybe he won't bring it up. Maybe he—

"Care to explain what that was all about?" he asks.

Toeing the ground, I say, “Not really.”

Just then Arlo strides up to us, grabs me by the arm, and pulls me toward an empty hallway, Gunner gleefully trailing behind us. When we’re out of earshot from the lobby, Arlo lifts his sunglasses off his head and asks, “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Does this have to do with last night?” Gunner asks. “Cora was just saying something about meeting the parents.”

Arlo folds his arms over his chest and looks me in the eyes. “How stupid can you be?”

“Why am I the one getting in trouble? I didn’t say I was engaged. This is all on Stella.”

“Wait, what?” Gunner asks. “You’re engaged?”

“No. This dumbass thought it would be a smart idea to pretend to be engaged to Stella,” Arlo says, thumbing toward me.

“Why the hell would you do that? Wait . . .” Gunner leans in. “Do you get free stuff from the hotel if you’re engaged? Like a honeymoon suite or something? Because I could totally convince Lindsay to pretend with me.”

Sighing, I say, “Stella’s dad is here with his new fiancée, and for some godforsaken reason, she told them she was engaged as well. To me. She asked me to have dinner with them last night and I said no at first, but then I ran into Cora in the elevator and she made me feel guilty, so I played fiancé last night.”

Gunner lets out a long whistle. “Wow, that’s a bunch of bad decisions, all around.”

“A lot of bad decisions,” Arlo cuts in. “Why did you think that would be a good idea?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” I answer honestly.

“You weren’t.” Arlo drags his hand over his face and looks toward the lobby, where the girls have gathered, and then it dawns on me.

“This isn’t going to take the spotlight off your trip and why we’re here,” I say quickly. “This trip is still very much about \_\_\_”

“That’s not what I’m fucking worried about.” He blocks off the lobby with his back and looks me in the eyes. “I’m worried about *you*.”

Taken aback, I ask, “Worried about what?”

“Don’t fuck with us. We know you have feelings for her. This is going to mess with your head.”

“It was a one-time thing,” I say, not admitting that he’s right.

“Yeah, and you look like shit this morning,” Gunner says. “Did you drink away your feelings last night?”

“No.” I look away, unable to meet their probing eyes. Because, yeah, I did.

I drank away all of my feelings.

I drank away the look of relief when she saw me coming to the rescue. The way her hand felt in mine when we weaved through the restaurant. The feel of her knuckles beneath my lips. The look of surprise in her eyes when I charmed her father with anecdotes of our friendship. The scent of her when I held her as close as I wished. The softness of her cheeks when I kissed her. *It all felt too fucking real.*

“Dude.” Gunner steps in closer. “We can see right through you. This put a chink in your armor. Admit it.”

Jesus.

What’s the use?

I sigh and press my hand to my forehead. “It was fucking torture last night.” I lean against the wall and allow myself this moment to get everything off my chest. “Holding her hand, being close to her, acting as though she was actually mine. It left me bitter last night and, yeah, I had a beer or two . . . or six.” I take a deep breath. “But it’s over. One night, that’s it.”

“And what about the rest of the trip?” Arlo asks, his brow no longer angry, but full of concern instead. “How are you going to handle being around her?”

“Like I have for the past few months.”

“By being angry and unbearable?” Gunner asks. “Ever think that telling her the truth might be better?”

I shake my head at the suggestion. “No. She’s made her stance clear on where I stand romantically. I’m not the guy for her, and I need to accept that and move on.” I look over at the girls, who are starting to become concerned as they watch us carefully. “Listen, I’m going to be fine. Let’s just go and enjoy this chocolate tour and focus on the wedding. Okay?”

“Romeo—”

“Arlo,” I counter. “I’m serious. Drop it, okay? I’ll be fine.”

His jaw moves back and forth as he appears to weigh whether he should drop it or not. Thankfully, Greer calls from the lobby, “The tour bus is here.”

In a low tone, Arlo growls out his frustration before saying, “Fine, but you tell us if you need to talk. Got it?”

“Yeah, sure,” I answer, knowing damn well this conversation with them ends here. As far as I’m concerned, Stella isn’t someone I’m going to spend my time worrying about. What’s done is done, and now I can really start to relax.

Together, we walk to the girls. Stella and Coraline lead the way. Stella glances back at me but I avoid any sort of facial expression and stare forward.

I can be cordial.

I can be drama free.

I can avoid her as much as I can.

Even on these excursions. I can just hang back with . . . Keiko.

Turning to her, I ask, “Are you excited to learn about chocolate?”

“No,” she answers while securing a camera around her neck with a strap. “Any data or anecdote we ascertain on this tour will be a blip in the pool of knowledge I’ve consumed regarding cacao estates.”

Or maybe I won’t be hanging with Keiko.

“I didn’t know you were interested in cacao estates.”

“I’m not,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone. “But in preparation for this journey, I studied rigorously about the archipelago so I can enrapture the minds of my comrades with astute narration about native vegetation, indigenous rituals, and entertaining hobbies conducted on land and sea. Being that the cacao nib is popular, I designated three and a half hours on the harvesting and fermentation process, as well as the journey from nib to chocolate bar. Three and a half hours was an adequate amount of time to comprehend the ancient method.”

“Wow, three and a half hours, huh?” I ask, looking around. “Hey, didn’t you say Kelvin was coming?”

“He’s been held up with family affairs. But he shall make his journey in a few days. Now, can I delight you in a story about a cacao nib?”

Good Christ, no.

“Uh . . .”

“Over here,” Arlo calls out, pointing to a bus.

“You know, maybe on the way,” I say to Keiko.

“Lovely. I have quite the story in the queue.”

“Wait for us,” I hear a familiar voice call out. I turn around just in time to see Ashley and Donny pulling up the rear. Looking like the ever-present tourists, they stumble forward with a bag, camera, and sun hats, waving to the bus.

Holy shit.

“Romeo, we’re coming too,” Ashley says, waving frantically.

Keiko turns to me and asks, “Did you become acquainted with fellow guests?”

Fuck . . . FUCK!

If you know anything about Keiko, it’s that she doesn’t quite grasp illogical things, even if they’re meant to help someone out. The idea of a fake engagement isn’t going to compute in her mind, and I can see the fallout already.

And the fallout is going to hurt Stella, and for some godforsaken reason, deep down, I can’t let that happen.

I grip Keiko’s arm and say, “I have to run up ahead. Catch you on the bus.” I then turn quickly, wave to Donny and Ashley, and then jog up to the bus, where I push past Gunner to cut the line and take the steps up in one giant leap. My eyes scan the seats and land on the back, where Stella is sitting next to Cora.

Her eyes meet mine and then widen as I charge back toward her.

“Cora, Keiko duty, now.”

“Excuse me?” she asks, sounding insulted.

“You have two goddamn seconds to run interference. Stella’s dad is joining the tour.”

“What?” Stella shouts and looks out the window, where I’m sure she spots her dad. “Oh, fuck.” She then shoves Cora off the bench and says, “For the love of God, please keep Keiko busy and away from me and my dad.”

Cora registers the situation quickly, and so do the others. They all fill in the seats in front of us, putting some distance between Stella’s seat and where Donny and Ashley will probably end up.

As I take a seat next to Stella, I feel Arlo’s eyes on me and guilt immediately hits me hard. This was supposed to be something fun for their wedding party and now it’s turned into this . . . awkward situation.

“Sit closer to me, *dear*,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’m your fiancé, after all.”

“Brock, I didn’t know,” she says in a panic, her voice choked up. She leans forward and, through the crack, she taps Greer on the shoulder. When Greer turns around, Stella says, “I’m so sorry. I had no idea they would come.”

“It’s okay,” Greer whispers.

“It’s not.” Stella shakes her head. “I’m just going to tell him the truth.”

“Don’t you dare,” Greer says. “That will make things worse and you know it. It’s just a chocolate tour. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s ruining your wedding.”

Greer smiles slyly. “Actually, I enjoy watching you two squirm. It’s rather entertaining.” Then she winks and turns around.

Stella leans back and crosses her arms over her chest, only to turn away from me. I can distinctly hear her snuffle, sending warning bells off in my head.

“Are you crying?” I ask, leaning over so I can see her face.

She turns closer into the window. I glance outside to see her dad about to board. “Unless you want your dad thinking we’re fighting, you can either stop crying, or you can cry into my shoulder.”

Realizing the predicament she’s in, she turns toward my shoulder, and I wrap my arm around her as she quietly cries.

I stroke her arm up and down and try to console her as much as my heart will allow. When her dad boards the bus and spots us, his smile turns into a frown as he sees his daughter is clearly upset.

“Everything okay?” he mouths to me.

I just give him a smile and a thumbs up. He tosses me a quick nod and then sits down in a seat up front with Ashley, who tries to scoot toward the back, but thankfully Donny insists on giving us some space.

Thank God for that.



When they're seated, I lift Stella's trembling chin and force her to look at me. "Talk. Now."

She wipes at her eyes. "What are you, some sort of caveman? That's not how you speak to women."

"Last I checked, I was doing you a favor, so I'd prefer to know what's going on in that head of yours so I can understand the situation."

"As if you care," she says, wiping at her eyes, speaking low so we're the only two who can hear our conversation.

"You're right, I don't care. I'm just ruining my vacation to save your ass," I hiss into her ear.

"You said you were done last night," she hisses back.

"Yeah, well, clearly, we didn't think that through, now did we?"

"If you didn't shut me out, maybe we could've had a conversation about it," she counters with a lift of her chin.

"Maybe I didn't want to have a conversation about it," I say unintelligently because, honestly, she's right. I did shut her out, and that's because I needed her gone.

I needed her out of my room, away from me, so I wasn't tempted to touch her again, to let her fresh, flowery scent float near me, or, hell . . . so I wasn't tempted to take exactly what I wanted from her.

"That was obvious from the way you suckled on your beer and ignored me."

"I don't suckle."

"Oh . . . you suckle." Stella folds her arms.

"I do not fucking suckle."

"If anyone has ever suckled, it's you."

"I wouldn't even know how to suckle if I wanted to."

"Hey," Arlo snaps at us through the crack. "The bickering ends now."

We both lean back, the fury of his one eye glaring through the crack shutting us both up. The bus driver stands at the front and talks about safety and where we're going and how long it'll take to get there—forty-five minutes but with an ocean view on the left the entire time—and then he takes off.

Once again, Arlo leans into the crack between the seats and says, “You have forty-five minutes. Fix whatever needs to be fixed, get on the same page, and get it together. Don't make me say it again.”

I fear for his students, because he just used his teacher voice on us.

Knowing he's right, I turn to Stella to talk to her, but she's completely shut off and facing the window, looking out toward the ocean. Seems as though she has other ideas than fixing our problem.

Fine by me.

Two can play at that game.

I have no problem taking the silent route. I've been doing this for months. No problem at all.



Is she really not going to fucking talk?

Where does she come off being mad at me? I'm the one doing her the favor. I'm the one who's going out of my way, taking time out of my vacation to humor her.

And now she won't talk to me?

Fuck that.

“You're really fucking ungrateful, you know that?” I say in a hushed tone, but just loud enough for her to hear me.

Thankfully, it gets her attention, her angry attention, but at least she twists toward me in her seat. There might be some steam rising off her head, but it's nothing I haven't dealt with

before when it comes to dealing with the passionate Stella Garcia.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re ungrateful.”

I can practically hear Gunner’s groan in the back of my head. He’d tell me this is not the right approach, but then again, as if I care. She needs to hear the truth and I’m not about to sugarcoat it. She’s being ungrateful, so I’m telling her.

“I said thank you last night.”

“And yet you’re acting as if you’re entitled to my help now.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Are you talking to me?” I counter with a lift of my brow.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“You have plenty to say to me.”

“Like what?” she asks.

“How about we start with the truth?”

“I haven’t lied to you.”

“But you haven’t told me the full story, either. Why are you so adamant about proving to your dad that you’re engaged?”

Her teeth roll over her bottom lip and I realize that I’ve struck a nerve. There’s definitely something she’s not telling me, the real reason why I’m part of this entire farce.

“It’ll benefit you to be truthful,” I say in a stern voice, wanting to coax everything out of her.

Her eyes well up with tears and she looks away again, but not for long, because I press my fingers to her chin and force her to look me in the eyes.

“The truth, Stella.”

She lightly shakes her head. “It’s embarrassing.”

“As if this entire situation isn’t?”

“It’s embarrassing to tell *you*,” she says.

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Because . . .” She lets out a shaky breath. “You’re, you know . . . you.”

“Yeah, I’ve no idea what that means.”

“Never mind,” she says, exasperated. “You’re not going to understand.”

“How the hell am I not going to understand? Do you really think I’m that much of a monster that I can’t understand something you’re going through?”

“You were the popular kid,” she says quickly and quietly. “You were the guy in college who got any girl he wanted, and don’t deny it, because I’ve heard the stories from Gunner.”

“I don’t get every girl I want,” I say before I can stop myself, my eyes cutting through hers.

But either she ignores me or doesn’t get it, because she moves right past my obvious pain. “You were popular. You had it together.”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“I went to school with Ashley. She’s two years older than me, and she was the girl that bullied me my freshman and sophomore years in high school, making my life a living hell.”

“What?” I say through clenched teeth, my eyes darting up front.

“See, it’s embarrassing.”

“That’s not embarrassing. That’s infuriating. What the hell is your dad doing with her? And why the hell does he think it’s okay to be with someone who picked on his daughter?”

“He doesn’t know,” Stella says, resigned. “I never said anything to my parents. I never said anything to anyone, really, besides my best friend at the time, and even at that, she was picked on too, so it’s not as if we could do anything about it.” Stella shrugs and stares down at her connected hands. “Seeing her with my dad, it . . . it struck me hard. Just seeing her again

in general brought back all these terrible feelings, but seeing her cozied up to my dad . . . it makes me feel insane.”

“I can imagine,” I say, feeling my heart thaw momentarily. “But what does this have to do with you being engaged?”

Stella rolls her eyes. “Of course, she asked about my love life and tried to claim I didn’t have anyone special and that she wasn’t surprised at that. It was the snide tone, the same tone she’d use when we were in high school. I was sick of it. I was drunk. And before I knew what was happening, I told her I was with someone and that we were, in fact, engaged. She didn’t believe me, of course, and that’s when I said it was you. Cora pointed out that you were here with us and it all unfolded from there.” Stella glances up at me and sincerely says, “I’m sorry. I know this was the last thing you wanted to be dragged into, but I was just trying to . . . I don’t know, not be a loser in front of her.”

“You’re not a loser,” I say, dragging my hand over my face.

Fuck, I feel angry. Angry that Ashley, the girl her dad is engaged to, was a bully. And now that I look at the night with different eyes, I can see that. Ashley wasn’t happy whenever Mr. Garcia asked anything about Stella’s life. She made very subtle comments designed to trip up Stella, but I didn’t see Stella stumble once. *Because she expected it? Was used to it?*

I’m angry that I’m starting to feel bad for Stella on a whole new level. I fucking hate that I care, feeling emotions I shouldn’t be feeling.

And I’m even more pissed off that I know there’s no backing down from this, no matter what my heart says. My head is telling me I can’t leave Stella to fend for herself against Ashley.

Groaning, I say, “So I guess we’re engaged.”

“You don’t have to do that, Brock. I can think of a way to break it to them that you’re really not my fiancé.”

“Yeah, but it’s not something you have to worry about on this trip.”

“Says the guy who can barely stand to be around me.”

“I can be around you,” I counter. “I’m sitting next to you right now, aren’t I?”

“Yes, but your body language screams you’d rather be anywhere else but near me.”

*On the contrary, I’d prefer you sit on my lap, wrap your arms around me, and hold me close, but we both know that’s not what you want.*

“Just irritated,” I say. “I’ll get over it.”

“Irritated because I ruined your vacation?”

“You didn’t ruin it, you just put a kink in it.”

“Sorry,” she says again, and with every weakened sorry she throws my way, my heart thaws more and more.

“It’s fine,” I say, my voice coming out harsher than I care to admit, but I’m desperately trying to hold up my guard.

“Is it?”

“It is.” I glance up front, where I see Ashley leaning against Donny’s shoulder. “What does she want with your father, anyway?”

“I have no clue,” Stella answers with agitation in her voice. “Maybe she didn’t feel as though she picked on me enough in high school. She needs to become, as she put it, my new mommy.”

That makes me snort. “She did not fucking say that.”

Stella looks me in the eyes and says, “To my face. She said it. To. My. Face.”

“Oh, shit. Well, at least she’s attempting to fall into the right role. You should pop out a kid just to make her a grandma before she’s thirty-five.”

Stella’s eyes widen and a smirk crosses her face as she stares me down.

“Oh, fuck, no,” I say, seeing where that’s going. “Forget I ever suggested it.”

“Don’t be too repulsed by the thought,” she says, leaning against the window of the bus.

“I’m barely on board with the fake engagement. Fake grandchild is overstepping.”

She motions at me. “So, this isn’t an à la carte situation? I can’t pick and choose what I want my future to be?”

“No.”

“Shame. Could be a business for you. You’re not too shabby at the whole fake fiancé thing.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I think it is.” She leans forward and pokes Arlo through the crack of the seats. When he turns around, she says, “I just paid your boy a compliment.”

Arlo glances at me and then back at her. “Good. Don’t stop. There better be fucking rainbows propelling you two forward when we get off this bus.”

“Don’t be greedy,” Stella says. “A compliment is a massive improvement.”

If she only knew.

## Chapter Five

### STELLA

“Felicitations are in order,” Keiko says when she joins us after visiting the bathroom once we arrived.

“Huh?” I ask.

Keiko leans forward and says, “Coraline informed me of your visceral relationship and pending nuptials. I would be remiss if I didn’t say I predicted your coupling, but my projection was off. I assumed you would be joined in a committed union a few months ago and would be feverously having coitus by now.”

Dear Jesus, Cora.

What did she say?

“Coitus?” Romeo’s face scrunches up.

Keiko nods. “Penetration.”

“Okay, thanks, Keeks,” I say, feeling my face burn up. “But, you know, we’re not really talking about it.”

“Cora did inform me of such precautions. This trip is to be about our comrades Greer and Arlo. Understood. But I wouldn’t be a friend if I didn’t offer my blessing.” She picks up both of our hands and gives them a squeeze before walking away.

“That wasn’t weird at all,” Romeo says.



“I’m going to have to talk to Cora to find out what the hell she said.”

“Gah, can you believe we got the last two tickets for this tour?” Ashley asks, bouncing up to us.

I turn toward Romeo and say, “I’m sorry for whatever happens.”

Instead of saying anything, he puts his arm around my shoulders and brings me closer to his chest.

“What a lucky grab,” Romeo says in his chipper voice.

“When I heard you guys were going on the tour today, I just knew Donny and I had to go, as well.” She motions to our friends. “Is this the group you’re with?”

“Yup,” I say. “These are our friends. The surly-looking man in the corner with the pinch to his brow, that’s Arlo. He’s marrying Greer while we’re here. This trip is for them.”

“Oh, enough said,” Dad says. “We won’t barge in on your fun. We can enjoy this trip by ourselves. Isn’t that right, sweetie?” Dad pinches Ashley’s chin, and I nearly throw up right there on the spot.

Gross.

“It would be fun with a group.” She turns to my dad and continues, “But you know I always love alone time with my Donny Bear.”

Bile.

Bile is rising.

“Then we’ll see you around.” Dad winks and grabs Ashley’s hand. They walk to the front of the group where the tour guide is gathering everyone.

“That was easy,” Romeo says, letting me go.

Weirdly, I miss his tight hold on me. Maybe because it feels like a protective shield from the evil blonde witch.

“That seemed too easy,” I say, taking the pessimistic route. “I feel as though that’s not the end of it.”

“Let’s hope it is.” Taking my hand in his, Romeo walks us toward the group of ten, and we all listen as the tour guide talks about taking four-wheelers down to the cacao fields, where we’ll help harvest the cacao pods for the fermentation process. Honestly, it’s all in one ear out the other for me, because all I can think about is the territorial way Romeo is holding my hand.

Our fingers aren’t intertwined; instead, his palm seems to eclipse my entire hand, swallowing it whole and claiming it as his, while he holds me near him, our arms touching.

I’ve watched the way Arlo takes care of Greer and the way he’s protective around her, always having a hand on her in some way. I’ve wondered what it felt like to have such an alpha-like male crowd her space, hold her hostage in his care.

The way Romeo is holding my hand, the possessiveness, it feels like that. Or at least what I think it would feel like, but the difference between the two is that Arlo and Greer are real. Romeo and I are fake.

Not that I’d want us to be real.

“You are not qualified to drive such machinery,” Keiko says loudly enough to pull my head out of my thoughts and to where Keiko and Cora are standing next to a four-wheeler.

“And you are?”

“As a matter of fact, I have precisely eleven point three hours of experience driving a light utility vehicle.”

“Where?” Coraline asks, hands on her hips.

“If you must pry, I once courted a male who was nurtured in the hilly terrain of Indiana. When present on his adolescent turf, he donned clothing of the camouflage variety because he was tickled by being flush with the countryside vegetation.”

“You dated a country boy?” Cora asks.

“Precisely.” She pushes past Cora. “So, if you don’t mind, I will be handling this vehicle, not you.”

“I wouldn’t mess with her,” Greer says with a laugh as she snags the keys to her four-wheeler from Arlo. Being the loving

and smart man that he is, he doesn't put up a fight. Gunner hands over the keys to Lindsay. My dad gives Ashley the keys, and when I look up to Romeo . . . he shakes his head and says, "In your dreams, wench," and then proceeds to settle himself into the driver's seat.

"Hey, why can't I drive?"

"For one, you owe me your life at this point. And two, I'm not going to subject myself to your driving. Last time I was in the car with you, I wound up smashing my head against the windshield."

"You didn't smash your head, you barely flew forward. And that wasn't my fault. A butterfly dove in front of my car. What did you want me to do? Hit it?"

"It was a butterfly."

"Yeah, and guess what, *Romeo*? I brake for butterflies."

His eyes narrow and then he nods behind me. "This isn't a negotiation. Hop on or get left behind."

"God, you're insufferable," I mumble under my breath while straddling the back of the four-wheeler. "Do you expect me to hold your waist?"

"I don't expect you to do anything," he says. "Just don't fall off."

My hands search around for something to grip, and when I realize there really isn't anything, I succumb to wrapping my arms around Romeo's waist.

"Are your arms burning from having to touch me?" he asks.

"There will be third-degree burns at the end of this."

"That's what you get for calling me Romeo." He starts the four-wheeler and I lean forward so he can hear me over the engine.

"You don't like me calling you Romeo?"

He glances back at me and says, "You're the only one who calls me Brock."

“And you like it?”

He revs the engine. “Nah, but only my friends are the ones who get to call me Romeo.”

*Ouch. Okay then.*

And before I can come back with a response, he takes off, falling in line with the other couples.

What an asshole.



“YOU’RE REALLY NOT GOING to let me hold the machete?” I ask, trailing behind Romeo as his strides eat up the rows of cacao trees.

“If I didn’t let you drive the four-wheeler, I sure as hell am not going to let you carry the machete. You’re on bucket duty.”

I trudge along behind him, the bucket in my hand bouncing against my leg. “Are you really going to take all the fun out of this for me?”

He pauses and spreads his arms out. “You call this fun? We’re free labor for the farm. Harvest your own damn nibs.”

“God, you’re cranky.”

“It’s fucking humid as shit out here, and according to Barry, the resident farmer, we have another forty-five minutes before we head back to the main farm. I’m starving, hungover, and thirsty. So, yeah, I’m fucking cranky.” He points the machete at me. “And if you were a decent fiancée, you’d have a snack for me in your pockets.” He stares me down. “Do you? Do you have a snack?”

“No.”

“Christ,” he mumbles and starts moving down the row again. “Carrying this fake fiancé team on my back. The least you could do is have a snack for me.”

“I had no idea we were playing fiancé today.”

“Well, now you can be on your toes.” He stops at a tree and points at a ripe pod for me to cut down with the pruning shears I’m allowed to use. “Water and snacks—have them at all times.”

“You’re a grown man.” I cut down the pod and hand it to him, then move to another ripe one. “Bring your own damn snacks.”

“I shouldn’t have to now. I have a fiancée to do that for me.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh. “Never pegged you to be a misogynistic asshole.”

“I’m not, but when I’m doing you a giant favor, I expect you to do the same.”

“You’re expecting a lot from me.” He lifts an eyebrow at me and I mumble, “Never mind.”

With the machete in one hand and a cut-resistant glove on the hand holding the pod, he cracks open the pod and pulls off the top like they showed us when we first arrived. He tosses the bottom to the base of the tree, where it’ll turn into compost, and then he shakes the top at me, the white, floppy beans resembling a girthy, limp penis.

“Do you have to do that every time?” I ask.

“At least I’m not holding it up to my crotch like Gunner.”

“Thank Jesus for small miracles.”

He harvests the beans and tosses them in the bucket. “Seriously, why did Arlo and Greer think this would be fun?”

“Probably some couple thing to help strengthen their bond before they get married,” I say, snipping another pod and handing it to Romeo.

“Or a way to torture us. They couldn’t just be nice and give us a free trip to Maui, there had to be torturous strings attached.”

“Such a cynic.”

He pauses and looks me in the eyes. “The first week Greer was at school, did she or did she not pull pranks on Arlo just to torture him?”

Good point.

“It wasn’t to torture him. It was to get back at him for being mean.”

“Well, one of us fucked with them and this is their way of getting back at us.” He shreds more beans into the bucket.

Footsteps approach, and I pray it’s Gunner and Lindsay. They’re the only two I can stomach at this point. Arlo and Greer are being far too lovey-dovey, which is surprising, because I never pictured Arlo as a PDA guy, but Greer changed that drastically. Keiko and Cora are borderline lunatics at this point. You can hear them arguing from a mile away, Keiko constantly spitting off factoids about the cacao farm and harvesting process while all Cora wants to do is machete some pods open. And then my dad and Ashley, and I think we all know why I’m trying to avoid them.

“There you two are,” I hear my dad say. Yup, my luck has run out. “How are you faring?”

“Oh, good,” I say, holding up our bucket. “Really getting the good stuff.”

“Us too,” Ashley says, walking up in nothing but a pair of short denim shorts and a tiny red bikini top. Holy Jesus, her boobs. She rubs the back of her hand against her forehead and then holds up her bucket. “This is our second bucket.”

“Your second bucket?” I ask, looking down at our not-even-halfway-filled harvest.

“Oh, yeah, once we got the hang of it, we went to work. There’s something about being out here on the land, doing work with your hands. Right, Donny?”

Dad nods. “Makes you feel as though you’re a part of something. Wouldn’t you say, Romeo?”

“Ah, yeah. Love this,” he responds, but his voice barely shows enthusiasm. He’s lost his pizazz, and I think we can

blame it on the hangover and humidity. “Just wish it wasn’t so goddamn hot.”

Dad chuckles. “Glad I wore my tank top.” He plucks at his shirt and then pats Romeo on the arm. “You’re a strapping young fella. You could take your shirt off and get away with it.”

“That’s not necessary,” I say just as Romeo nods.

“You’re right. What the hell am I doing?” And before I can stop him, he’s reaching over his head and pulling his sweat-soaked shirt off, revealing his perfectly bronze and ripped chest.

That’s exactly what I didn’t want to happen, because I’ve seen Romeo with his shirt off, many times, and I know what he hides under his shirt.

Lots of muscle.

Thick, sturdy pecs.

Corded muscles in his ribs.

Taut, well-defined abs.

And hip divots that leave nothing to the imagination.

And right now, they’re all on display, as well as the black waistband of his Calvin Klein boxer briefs.

Casually, he folds his shirt into threes, lengthwise, and then tucks it into the back of his shorts so it hangs down his leg but is secure.

“Better.”

For a quick second, I glance over at Ashley, who seems to be taking all of Romeo in—I don’t blame her—and then she laughs. “Look at us, a bunch of topless cacao harvesters.” She bumps my arm. “Your turn.”

“You want me to take my shirt off? Isn’t that weird?”

“No, have fun,” Dad says while taking off his tank top, and I honestly can’t fathom what the hell has gotten into him.

*No . . . have fun?*

\*Strips\*

What?

Like . . . what?

All three pairs of eyes stare at me, waiting. Two of them are encouraging me, saying enjoy life, while the other set is humored.

“I think I’m good with my shirt on,” I say. Especially since I’m with my DAD.

Has anyone forgotten that?

“It’s okay if you’re shy. Body confidence takes a while to establish,” Ashley says. “She always hated changing into her jersey when we were at practice.” And that triggers me.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m pulling off my shirt and tossing it to the side. I snap my hands down to my sides and puff my chest out in my plain, black sports bra.

“Happy?”

My shirt dangles off the limb of a cacao tree while I statuesquely stand there like Superman, the breeze barely pushing back the sweaty strands of hair around the crown of my head.

“There she is,” Romeo says, placing his hand on my shoulder. “In all her glory, ratty bra and all.”

Ashley chuckles. “At least you’re cooler now. Come on, Donny. We have more seeds to get.” She tosses us a wink, then takes my dad’s hand, and together they jog off to another row. When they’re out of sight, I spin on my heel and face Romeo, fire in my eyes.

“Ratty bra?” I say through clenched teeth.

The minute I address his choice of words, regret flashes through his eyes.

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

I swat at his arm. “You can’t make fun of me in front of her. And this bra isn’t ratty. Yes, maybe it’s seen some years,



but it's not ratty.”

He pushes his hand through his hair. “I wasn't thinking.”

“Damn right you weren't thinking.” I snatch the machete from his hand, and he backs up.

“What the hell are you doing with that?”

“Afraid I might castrate you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you better step aside, don't you think?” He moves out of the way and I start whacking down cacao pods, letting them fall to the ground. “She did that on purpose, humiliating me like that, and you didn't help.”

“She didn't humiliate you—”

I turn around and point the machete at him. “You don't get to choose how I feel.”

He holds up his hands. “True, but I also think you're overreacting.”

Steam pours out of my ears. “Do you realize that's the last thing you should ever say to a woman?”

“Are you a woman? That sports bra isn't revealing much, so I can't tell.”

“Wow.” I drop the machete and fold my arms over my chest. “Even in my weakened state of humiliation, you don't hold back.”

He rolls his eyes. “Lighten up, Garcia.”

“Lighten up?” I ask, feeling my sanity disappearing every second. “Lighten up? How the hell am I supposed to lighten up when my dad is engaged to *HER*?” I motion toward them with my arm.

“Have you asked him?”

“Nooo,” I drag out.

“And why not?”

“Because,” I answer with zero explanation as I start picking up pods and cracking them open. Well, attempt to crack them open, but I find the task a little more difficult than it looks.

Romeo comes up from behind me, his chest against my back, and instead of taking the machete away, he helps guide me by cutting into the pod and then showing me how to twist the bottom off with the push of the machete.

Talking quietly, his hands still on mine, he says, “Because why?”

Together, we shuck off the bottom and peel the seeds out, then drop them in the bucket.

I bend down and pick up another pod, but Romeo doesn’t move. Instead, he wraps his arms around me again, helping me with the next one, and for the love of God, I can’t will myself to move out of his embrace.

“Because why?” he repeats.

Together we crack open the pod, and I say, “Because I don’t have that kind of relationship with my dad. I honestly can’t remember the last meaningful conversation I had with him. He always loved us and would play with us after work, but he was also very uptight, never spoke of his life and what was going on with work because, as he’d say, no need to bother the kids with that nonsense. The comfort in having that type of conversation with my dad isn’t there.”

“So just because it’s uncomfortable, you’re not going to talk to him?”

“What do I say?” I toss the bottom of the pod on the ground. “Hey, old man, do you realize you’re marrying the girl who made the first two years of my high school life a living hell?”

“Why not?”

“Because,” I groan, tossing the seeds in the bucket and turning toward him. “He’s probably going to say something like ‘you need to get to know her, she’s changed.’”

“Then get to know her.”

“I don’t need to. I know enough.”

He rolls his eyes. “Fuck, you’re stubborn.”

“How would you feel if your mom was dating one of your friends?”

“Give her a high five for getting at it.”

“You’re a liar,” I accuse, and then sigh. “I just hate this so much. Why her? And how? How did they even meet?”

“You haven’t asked?” Romeo breaks open another pod, this time taking the machete from me.

“I didn’t even know he was dating anyone seriously, Brock. We haven’t spoken for a while, and when we did, he didn’t mention he was dating someone seriously.”

“If he was dating someone his own age, would you have the same problem?”

“No.”

“Is it her age or is it her?”

“Both,” I answer, just as Ashley and Dad come walking up to us again.

Ashley points at the bucket Dad is holding and says, “Full bucket again. Looks as though this will top us off. Still working on your first bucket?”

“Did you see us grab a new one?” I shoot back at her, sounding ruder than I intended.

Or maybe I did intend the rudeness. Who knows? My emotions are all over the place.

Stepping in, Romeo says, “It’s my fault we’re moving slow. I keep catching Stella in the perfect sunlight, and stop to snap pictures of her.”

Ashley presses her hand to her chest. “How sweet. Can I see one?”

Great.

Good job, Romeo.

Now she's going to know—

“This one is my favorite,” Romeo says, flashing his screen at Ashley.

Uh, what?

“Oh, wow.” Ashley looks at me. “You actually look gorgeous in this picture. Look, Donny.” She hands the phone to my dad, who smiles warmly.

“Quite lovely.”

“I think so,” Romeo says, pocketing his phone without showing me.

“Well, either way, we still beat you in buckets.” Ashley winks. “Catch you back at the four-wheelers, slowpokes.”

And then they take off again.

When they're gone, Romeo says, “See? She called you gorgeous.”

“She said you *actually* look gorgeous. It was a backhanded compliment.”

Romeo rolls his eyes and starts to walk away with the bucket and machete, but I stop him. “Let me see the picture.”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I don't need you judging my photography.”

“It's a picture of me. I have the right to see it.”

“It's actually a picture of one of the floppy penis pods. You just happen to be in it.”

He continues to walk toward the four-wheelers, where Dad and Ashley retreated to, but I run ahead and stop him with a hand to his chest. “Let me see it.”

“No.”

“Brock, let me see it.”

“Just because you used my first name doesn’t mean I’m going to hand over my phone.”

“What’s the big deal?” I ask when he walks past me.

“The big deal is I’d like a thank you for saving your ass again. Try that instead of badgering me.”

“I’m not about to thank you for every little thing.”

“Yes, wouldn’t want to bruise your brain with that much activity.”

Huffing, I move past him, bumping his shoulder with mine. “You’re freaking rude.”

“Yup, I’m the rude one. That’s right,” he says as I move full steam ahead in front of him.

*You ACTUALLY look gorgeous in this picture.*

That was a purposeful way of saying you’re a troll every other time I look at you. Am I crazy? Am I the only one who sees this?

“You’re mumbling to yourself,” Romeo says, catching up to me.

“When someone wants to walk alone, you usually let them.”

“You didn’t announce you wanted to walk alone. Usually if someone wants to walk alone, they announce they want to walk alone because the rest of us don’t read minds.”

I spin to look at him. “I want to walk alone.”

“Good. Me too.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

I take off, wondering how we can be this hot and cold with each other. How one minute he could be embracing me, making me feel protected and, dare I say . . . liked, and the next he can look at me as if I don’t even matter.

Who am I really mad at right now, though? Am I mad at Ashley or am I mad at Romeo?

I think I'm just mad. I'm never this mad, this irritated, this angry all the freaking time.

I'm the easygoing, fun-loving friend who likes to make others uncomfortable, who points out the obvious. The side character that everyone loves. Not the annoying heroine that people want to slap across the face.

That's how I feel right now—like the annoying heroine.

I don't want to be that person.

I don't want to carry around all this irritation.

I don't want to have to get along and put on a happy face for my dad and for Ashley.

I want to be like Greer. Take no prisoners.

Show no guilt.

Charge full steam ahead with my agenda because it works for me.

I spot our group gathering around the four-wheelers, and Cora is the first one to catch my eye. Her concerned look says it all. If I saw my reflection in a mirror, I'm sure I'd be startled with the vengeful look on my face.

I toss the pruning shears into the pile, shuck my glove, walk over to our four-wheeler, and climb onto the driver's seat. Romeo can suck his big, fat toe for all I care. I'm driving.

I'm taking charge now.

No more playing around to make others feel good, damn it.

Be like Greer.

Leave a stink bomb in someone's classroom.

Make someone pee blue.

"Um, are you okay?" Cora asks, coming up to me.

"Never been better." I smile, gripping the handles of the four-wheeler. "I'm finally seeing clearly."

"Do you realize you're not wearing a shirt and you have a hole in your bra?"

“Yup.”

“Okay, and do you realize you have an insane look on your face?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Fair, fair. And do you realize Romeo is charging toward you with a look of death on his face?”

I don't turn around. I just grip the handles harder. “I dare him to try and get me off this thing.”

“So that's where we're at right now?” Cora asks, truly concerned.

“That's where we're at.”

“Okay. Good talk, pal.”

“Great one.”

From behind me, I can hear the farm manager discuss the importance of a proper harvest, how the beans will go through a fermentation process for a week and then will be dried out until they're ready to be broken down. Blah, blah, blah. Let's just get to the chocolate and wine.

“You left your shirt,” Romeo says, tossing it on my shoulders.

“Thank you, dearest,” I say with a smile, just as Arlo makes eye contact with me. Can't throw him off the scent of the happy couple. Don't need him butting into my business once more.

“Dearest? That's not what I thought you were going to call me back there.”

“Do you want me to call you what I'm really thinking?”

He leans forward, his chest up against my back.

“Try me.” His mouth is so close to my cheek, goosebumps raise on my arms and spread all the way down to my hands.

“All right, let's head back to the farm,” the farm manager calls out.

Ignoring Romeo, I start the four-wheeler, only for him to ask, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Driving. Either hop on or walk.”

“You don’t know how to drive.”

“It’s not that hard.”

“It’s harder than you expect,” he counters.

“Why? Because I’m a woman?”

“No, because you have zero experience.”

“This vehicle says experience not needed.”

“Stella.”

“*Romeo.*” Everyone starts to take off and I continue, “You have three seconds to get on or I’ll leave you, and don’t think I won’t.” He doesn’t move, so I start counting. “One, two—”

“Jesus,” he says, getting on the back, his strong legs sliding up against mine as his crotch lines up with my butt. Hmm, maybe I didn’t think this all the way through.

*No.*

*You did.*

*You’re taking what you want.*

*Carpe diem!*

You are owning life now. Life is your bitch. This vehicle is your bitch. Those cacao nibs were your bitch, and the chocolate you’re about to consume will be your bitch.

Everyone is your bitch!

“Beat you there,” Ashley says right before taking off.

And she is your bitch.

“Oh, hell no,” I say, revving the engine.

Determination in my eyes, rage and passion pulsing through my veins, I hunker down and push forward on the handles.

I push forward fast.



Faster than I expected.

Faster than Romeo expected.

Faster than the four-wheeler expected, because it rears up on two wheels, sending both me and Romeo backward. Romeo lands flat on the ground, I land on top of him, and the four-wheeler charges forward into a cacao tree.

Oh, dear God.

“Motherfucker,” Romeo says, groaning underneath me and then shoving me to the side so I fall flat on the dirt. He rolls over, revealing a pair of pruning shears with the blade face up.

Oh boy, that doesn’t bode well for me.

Neither does the absolute fury in Romeo’s eyes.

Nervously laughing, I wave my finger at his back and casually ask, “Any chance you got cut?”

He grips the side of his ass and breathes heavily.

Hmm, that isn’t a good sign.

“Fuck,” he yells a little louder and struggles to stand.

I’m going to take that as, in fact, he did get hurt. Seizing life and making it my bitch just backfired in my face . . . and Romeo’s ass.

When he finally stands after a few more heavy breaths, he hobbles around, still gripping his left cheek while I chase after him.

“Did you pierce your ass? Do you need me to look? Are you bleeding? Do you need stitches? Do you need ice? Should I call 911? I don’t have a phone. Oh God, did I hurt the tree?” I rush over to the tree and notice it’s barely scathed, then I turn back to Romeo, who has murder in his eyes. “Uh . . . is there blood?” I twist my hands together and then hold out my shirt to him. “I can fasten a tourniquet.”

Through clenched teeth, he says, “Get on the goddamn back.”

“Yup, sure. Probably best.”

I quickly and carefully—carefully being the key word—back up the four-wheeler and then hop on the back, where I wait for him. I watch him limp toward me, hand still on his side. When he reaches the four-wheeler, I ask, “Want me to look at it? If it’s bleeding, we should see if it needs stitches.”

“Just shut up for a second.” He takes a deep breath and removes his hand. He then gently pulls down on his pants, revealing one of the most impressive Adonis belts I’ve ever seen and a well-defined glute. Good God.

That’s hot. I’ll admit it, his body is—

“Oh, looks like no bleeding,” I say when I spot the puncture wound. Well, it’s not punctured, just intensely indented. “Man, your skin must be made of scales for those shears to not go through.”

He snaps his shorts back into place and then gets on the four-wheeler carefully. Immediately I grip around his waist so we don’t have a repeat of before and then suction my chest to his back. Which isn’t a great thing to do in my state, as Brock smells all man, sweat and all. *Do not lick his deliciously shirtless back, Stella. That would not be tolerated.* And, oh God. My hands are on his abs. I try desperately not to rub my hands over them to confirm there is indeed a six-pack there. *But he’s so warm. Stella!*

Knowing I owe him an apology, I say, “Sorry. Are you okay?”

He lets out a long breath and his head falls forward. “Yeah.”

“It’s going to be a bad bruise.”

“Yup.”

“As your fake fiancée, I can ice it for you when we get back to the hotel.”

“Yeah, you will,” he says before starting the engine and slowly taking off toward the farm.



“HOW DOES YOUR BUTT FEEL?” I ask Romeo, three glasses of wine in and feeling great.

“Better than before,” he says, four glasses in and looking better than me.

“Would you like another piece of chocolate?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he says, before sticking out his tongue and, my oh my, would you look at that.

“Your tongue . . . it’s so . . . large.”

He smirks. “Don’t you know this already?”

I shake my head. “You’re a selfish lover and you’re saving yourself for marriage. It’s why we got engaged so soon into our budding relationship.”

“Because you need my tongue?”

Drunkenly I nod. “Yup.” Then I plop a piece of chocolate in his mouth.

We’re sitting at a table for two off in the corner. The trip back to the farm was quiet. I held on to him tightly and felt his tension the entire way back, which just made things more awkward. But thanks to the wonderful creation of alcohol—mainly wine—that tension has faded, and instead I’m genuinely having a good time with the mercurial Romeo.

We were divided into pairs and given a flight of chocolate as well as guessing cards. The staff turned the event into a trivia game of who could guess the flavor of the chocolate, bonus points given to those who could detect different notes of cacao beans.

Ashley went full-out competitive and has been fighting it out with Keiko, who’s been in the lead the entire time. Winner takes home a basket of chocolate. Cora has been the hype woman of her team, wiping Keiko’s mouth, clearing her palate, showing up for the team. Romeo and I decided to just sit back and drink, and that’s what we’ve been doing since.

Occasionally participating, but mostly just enjoying chocolate and wine.

Lots of wine.

So much wine.

Big glasses of wine.

“Apricot,” he says. “There’s apricot in that.”

I smack the table and shout, “Apricot.”

“That was one flight ago,” Greer says, laughing.

I glance down at our table and notice the amount of chocolate flights spread out. Oops.

“Well, was it apricot?”

Greer laughs some more. “There was an apricot one, yes.”

“Nailed it.” I give Romeo knuckles, which he returns and tacks on a wink.

“Your fiancé is smart.”

“The smartest,” I say, taking another large sip from my wine glass, and then decide to finish it off because there isn’t much left. I set the glass down and Romeo lifts up the bottle of wine we kept for ourselves.

“Shall I top you off, my dear?”

I hold my glass out. “Don’t mind if I do.”

He fills up my glass and then tops off his, as well. He lifts his glass and loops his arm around mine so we’re linked together but drinking out of our own glasses. “To our marriage. May it be long-lasting and full of wine.”

“So much wine.”

“A wine a day keeps the divorce away,” he says with a boyish grin.

“You’re a smart man, Romeo Romero.”

“You’re a smart woman for marrying me, Mrs. Romeo Romero.”

“I think you two should lay off the wine,” Arlo says from the side.

But we just laugh and then tilt our glasses and drink.

Romeo leans his forehead against mine when we’re done with our sips and says, “I really like the hole in your bra. It adds character.”

God, how sweet.

“I appreciate you for appreciating my hole.”

“I appreciate you for appreciating me for appreciating your hole.”

“Those should be your vows.” I hiccup and then we both let out a loud laugh, causing an interruption in the competition.

“Hey,” Cora snaps from across the room. “You’re throwing off my girl’s concentration.” She’s rubbing Keiko’s shoulders. “We’re one guess away from bringing home the basket.”

“Oops. Ssssssss-orry.” I put my finger up to my lips and turn to Romeo. “Shhhh, they’re going to win the basket.”

“Quiet on the green,” Romeo shouts, making Greer, who seems to be a few glasses deep herself, laugh some more.

Leaning forward, I whisper, “Are you drunk?”

She nods. “But Arlo isn’t, and I can tell he should have been drinking.” She thumbs toward her fiancé. “He’s quite uptight.”

“When is he not uptight?” I say, and then turn to Arlo. “Where’s your trusty cardigan?”

“Did you know I wear his cardigans—and only his cardigans—when I really want to rev his engine?”

“Greer,” Arlo says in a low tone.

She laughs and rises from her chair to sit on his lap, then presses a kiss against his lips. His hand falls protectively to her thigh, which he grips tightly.

I sigh. “I want that,” I say without thinking.

“You have that, babe,” Romeo says, tugging on my hand and pulling me out of my chair and onto his lap, where I sit sideways. His free arm snags around my waist and holds me close. “And I have more muscles than Arlo, so bonus for you.”

I shift on his lap, and because of our size difference, I’m face to face with him. Nose to nose.

“You think you have more muscles?”

“I *know* I have more muscles.”

He’s wearing his shirt now but I can attest to the muscle thing. Although, I’ve never seen Arlo with his shirt off. But just from a quick gander between the two, it’s obvious Romeo is slightly bigger.

“You have a big tongue too, which is useful.”

“I can only see how that benefits my fiancée.”

I tip back my wine, getting comfortable on his lap as he rests his hand and wine glass on my leg. “It benefits me well in my head.”

“Cappuccino is correct,” the chocolate game person—can’t remember their name—says, causing Cora to immediately start fist-pumping the air obnoxiously. She runs over to the basket and parades it around the room, holding it high above her head like a wrestling belt.

“Look how happy she is,” I say, wistfully.

“True joy.”

I loop my arm around Romeo’s neck and whisper, “Ever think we’ll find that kind of joy again?”

“I’m pretty content with my wine,” Romeo says.

I shake my head and look him in the eyes. “No, I mean between us. Do you think we’ll ever find joy in our friendship again?”

He studies me, but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he lifts his hand to my face and pushes a stray piece of hair behind my ear. It feels as though the room falls silent, even though in the background, I can hear our friends talking and Ashley

blabbing about how close they were to winning. But all of that fades away as Romeo's eyes stay trained on mine. His hand on my leg drags a little higher, he wets his lips, and his head tilts ever so slightly to the side.

He's so handsome.

Those deep brown eyes are so soulful, and his lips are plump and enticing. The strong angle of his jaw, shaping his face to have pure masculine energy, and his hair, slightly askew to look adorable, but also styled enough to be detrimental to any girl's libido.

I've always found him attractive. I've always tamped down that attraction because he's my friend, my coworker.

But right now, in this moment, when the people and the place around us seem to fade to black, my attraction comes back at a roaring speed. Especially with the influence of wine.

"Brock," I say quietly.

"Hmm?" he says, his hand traveling up my spine to rub my back gently.

"Will we be friends again?"

He goes to answer, when Arlo stands from his chair and says, "I believe the bus is ready to take us back to the resort."

Romeo glances toward Arlo and then tips back the rest of his wine before helping me off his lap. We both wobble a little when we stand, but the fun, playful side of me is gone, and the insecure, drunk side has surfaced.

"We're splitting the basket, right?" I hear Cora ask Keiko as they walk past us toward the bus. "Because without me wiping your mouth, I'm not sure you'd have won."

"I can't even think about another piece of chocolate," Lindsay says, holding her stomach while Gunner holds her close to his side.

"We're going to hit up the gift shop," Ashley says, giving us a wave. "We want to grab some of that apricot chocolate."

And then we're left with Arlo and Greer.

“That was so much fun,” Greer says. “I particularly liked seeing you two get along.” She waves her little finger at me. “Can’t you see it, Arlo? They’re totally going to fuck on this trip.”

“You’re drunk,” Arlo says.

“Maybe, but I also know when two people are going to fuck, and they’re totally going to get it on.”

Arlo looks at us as we stand there awkwardly side by side but not touching. He shakes his head. “No, I don’t see it.”

Greer pats his back and starts walking toward the bus. “Just you wait. By the end of this trip, they will see each other naked.”

When they exit the building, I look up at Romeo. My heart is racing in my chest. *They’re totally going to fuck on this trip.* Does Romeo think that? Imagine that? I try to read him, but it’s as if he’s shut down all emotions. There’s no affection. No light. No kindness. Without a word, he takes my hand, intertwines our fingers, and then leads me out of the building and onto the bus, where we take our seats in the back again. He takes the seat next to the window this time and then tugs me down next to him, wraps his arm around my shoulders, and pulls me into his chest.

And that’s how we stay for the rest of the return trip. I fall asleep on his chest, the comfort of our friends and the hum of the bus in the background.



“WHAT A DAY,” Ashley says as we walk down the hallway to our rooms—well, their room and Romeo’s room. I’m just along for the ride, of course. “We had such a blast, but honestly, I think that Keiko girl was cheating. Pretty sure she had a cheat sheet with her.”

“She wasn’t cheating. She’s just a human computer.”

“Well, it wasn’t a fair competition.” Ashley sighs. “God, I’m horny after all that chocolate. Let’s go to bed, Donny.”



“Ew,” I say before I can stop myself.

Ashley glances at me, insult in her eyes. “For your information, your dad is an amazing lover.”

“Ashley,” Dad says and chuckles. “Maybe not something my daughter wants to hear.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“She should know you have an active sex life. It’s one of the reasons I love you so much. You’re a real man who knows how to pleasure a woman.”

“I’m going to throw up,” I say, leaning into Romeo, who’s still wavering back and forth next to me. The alcohol is still affecting us.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have had so much wine,” Ashley says. “Being into physical fitness, you’d think you’d understand how harmful it can be to your body in mass quantities like you had today.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have to drink so much wine if my dad weren’t engaged to someone my age.”

“I told you,” Ashley says, moving closer to my dad. “I told you she wasn’t cool with it. You assumed your precious little Stelly was supportive when, in fact, she’s not.” Ashley gets teary eyed. “No one understands.” *How could I when I didn’t even know?*

“Is that true?” Dad asks. “Do you not support us?”

“She’s just drunk, Mr. Garcia,” Romeo says.

“And drunk is when the truth comes out,” Ashley practically hisses.

“I am not—”

“Goodnight,” Romeo says, waving and then pulling me down the hallway.

“What are you doing? I’m not done talking to them.”

“You’re done,” he says as I try to fight back.

“I don’t believe you, Stella,” Ashley calls out. “I’ve never even seen you two kiss.”

“Ashley,” Dad says, pulling her too.

“Oh, we’re getting married,” I shout back. “We’re getting married so hard.”

Romeo picks me up and tosses me over his shoulder before running into the wall from being off balance.

“Fuck,” he mutters while straightening himself.

“We kiss all the time too,” I shout. “I can’t stop kissing him. I need ChapStick because we kiss so much.”

He turns the corner so they can no longer see us.

“Put me down so I can tongue you in front of her.”

“Stop wiggling.”

“We need to tongue.”

“Stop saying it like that.” Romeo stumbles into his door. “Jesus, stop moving.”

“We need to show her.”

“We’re showing her nothing.” He opens his door and pushes through it. He tosses me on his couch and then takes a deep breath and leans against the wall. “Fuck, I have a headache.”

I motion to the door. “Can you believe she’d say that about us? Of course we’re getting married.”

“No, we’re not.”

“She doesn’t know that,” I say, not making much sense. “In a fake reality, it’s obvious we’re getting married. I mean, we touch each other. We’re compatible. Why would she think we wouldn’t get married? Yeah, maybe I’m marrying up a bit, but that should be points for me.”

“Who says you’re marrying up?”

I scoff. “Please, Brock. I wore a bra with a hole in it today. I’m marrying up.”

“I liked the hole.”

“We’re both drunk. Sober, no one likes the hole. Sober, you’d agree that I’m marrying up.”

“That’s not true.” He shakes his head and then slides down against the wall until he’s sitting on the floor.

I flop across the couch so I can look at him while I’m talking. He has his knees drawn up so his arms can rest on them. His head is pressed against the wall as he looks at the ceiling. Look at the column of his neck, all thick and manly. If I were his real fiancée, I could lick my way up his neck and see what he tastes like.

Hmm, maybe I *should* lick his neck. Maybe that will be more believable to Ashley.

“I should lick your neck,” I say.

One of his eyes pops open and he glances at me. “Why the hell would you do that?”

“To prove to Ashley that we’re getting married.”

“She’s not even here.”

“I’ll take a picture.”

He stands and shakes his head. “No more pictures.” And then he mutters something about a shower, but I don’t quite catch it as he makes his way to his bed. He takes a seat and then flops backward. “This is why I don’t drink wine.”

Getting up from the couch, I join him on the bed and lie down, as well. “You took a picture of me today.”

“Of the cacao pod.”

“So why won’t you show me?”

He shrugs. “I don’t want you to delete it.”

“I won’t. Remember, apparently I *actually* look gorgeous in the picture.”

“You do,” he says quietly. Then he scoots up on the bed to carefully and slowly remove his shirt before he climbs under the covers.

“What are you doing?”

“Sleeping.”

“Can I sleep with you?”

He flips the covers down and I take that as a yes. Brain foggy, eyes heavy, I forget everything else and climb into bed next to Romeo.

We don't touch.

We don't talk.

We just sleep.

## Chapter Six

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### ROMEO

“Fucking hell,” I say, leaning against the bathroom counter with both hands. I take a deep breath and will my brain to stop pounding.

Nope, that’s not going to work. Breakfast and coffee and painkillers. That will do the trick.

Towel wrapped around my waist, I head out of the bathroom and straight for the dresser where I unpacked my clothes. Two weeks at a resort called for unpacking.

Sometime in the night, Stella left. Couldn’t tell you when. All I know is I woke up this morning and she was gone.

Yesterday was . . . hell, I don’t even know what yesterday was, but the one moment that keeps flashing over and over in my head is when she was sitting on my lap, asking if we could have joy in our friendship again.

I didn’t answer because I knew if I did, I’d say a lot more than I should. I’d tell her I want more than joy in our friendship.

I’d want passion.

I’d want pleasure.

I’d want the chance at love.

But I know that’s not what she wants, at least, not with me.

I pull open the top drawer of my dresser just as there's a knock at my door. Going to the entryway, I don't bother to look through the peephole, and instead, open the door to a freshly showered Stella. She's wearing a bathing suit top—I can tell from the strings around her neck—and a simple sundress that hugs her breasts but flows the rest of the way down to her knees.

Her wet hair is gathered together on the top of her head and crowned with a pair of sunglasses.

“Can I come in?” she asks, looking nervous.

I push the door open and she walks under my arm and into my hotel room, then turns around with a concerned look on her face. Her eyes scan my body, fixating on my chest for a few seconds longer than necessary, before she clears her throat and says, “Uh, I need your help.”

Moving past her and putting my guard up, I say, “I believe I'm already helping you.”

“I need an extension of that help.”

I pick out a pair of boxer briefs from my dresser and, with my back toward her, drop my towel, exposing my backside, and then quickly pull up my black briefs. When I turn around, I catch a look of disbelief in her eyes.

“Never seen a male ass before?”

“I, uh . . . I mean, yes, but I wasn't . . . sorry, I looked.”

“Didn't give you a second not to,” I say, grabbing a pair of blue board shorts and a loose-fitting tank from the dresser. I get dressed and then move back to the bathroom, where I grab my toothbrush, load it up with toothpaste, and start brushing my teeth.

She steps up to the bathroom doorway and quietly asks, “Are we back to not liking each other again?”

“No.”

“You're being cold.”

“I have a headache,” I counter.

She shakes her head. “No, you’re being cold again. Your body language and clipped tone are cold. Do I really have to get you drunk for you to treat me like you used to?”

“What do you want me to do when you come into my hotel room? Throw a parade?”

“No.”

“I can do a jig for you. Sing a song about how blessed I am to have you walk into my room. Or would you rather I throw you up against the wall and passionately defile you?” I raise a brow at her and her eyes narrow.

“You don’t have to be a dick, Brock.”

I spit out my toothpaste, rinse my mouth, and then ask her, “What else do you want from me, Stella?”

*You’ve taken my heart.*

*You’ve taken my soul.*

*There’s nothing else left for me to give.*

“Do you remember what happened last night?”

“I was drunk, but not pass-out drunk.” I wipe my face with a towel and move past her to find my sandals.

“So, you remember Ashley calling us out?”

“Yup.”

“And you’re not concerned about that?”

I shake my head. “This isn’t my lie. I’m just unfortunately along for the ride.” I pocket my phone and my wallet and head toward the door.

Her little steps quickly catch up to me, and before I can reach for the door, she blocks me with her hand to my chest. She doesn’t put up much of a roadblock, I could step over her and make my way out the door, but for some reason, I’m oddly curious about what she needs this time.

“Please, Brock.” Her desperate eyes stare up at me and I inwardly curse because, goddamn it, I don’t think I can say no

to this girl. She has me wrapped around her finger even though I'm trying my hardest to keep my distance.

Well, am I really trying my hardest? I could be trying a lot harder, but she's persistent, and even though it's not good for my already depleting wall I've built around my heart, I can't help but revel in the moments when I get to hold her hand. When I get to be near her. When I get to play the part of her man. When I get to be the one this fiercely and wonderfully independent woman needs. *Even for a moment.*

"What do you want?" I ask in a stern tone, trying to put up the best front I can.

"We need to break them up."

"Break who up?"

"My dad and Ashley."

Jesus Christ.

"Fuck, no." I shake my head and try to move past her, but she blocks the door. "I'm not helping with that."

"Brock, please," she begs, pushing her hand to my chest. "She's all wrong for my dad."

"You don't know that. You haven't even spent the time to get to know them as a couple."

"Brock, come on. I've always considered my dad a smart man, but Ashley is just how she was in high school. She's vindictive. She's petty. She's rude toward me, even though it's been twelve years since she last saw me. Surely, over that time she should have been able to grow up and not treat me like shit. I don't get what he sees in her. And, well, I don't want my dad to get hurt."

I drag my hand over my face. "What are you going to do to convince your dad of those things? He looks pretty happy to me." I know there have been little jabs here and there from Ashley, but I wonder how much of Stella's animosity is from high school, and how much is from present day.

"I don't know yet, but I do know I need your help." She steps up and tugs on my shirt. "Please, Brock."



Christ.

Those eyes, that pleading tone. I have no defense against them. I wish I could tell you I was stronger. I wish I could show you just how much of an asshole I can be and walk away. But she has a hold on me.

Sighing, I say, “You’re buying me breakfast this morning, poolside, and none of that pancake shit. I want eggs, bacon, and a giant fruit platter.”

Her smile stretches across her face. “Anything you want, it’s yours.”

“I’d watch what you promise,” I say, moving past her and reaching for the door. “You never know what I might ask for.”

“Can’t be worse than what I’m asking for.”

If only she knew.



“EAT ENOUGH?” Stella asks from the lounge next to mine.

I’m leaning all the way back on my lounge, shirt off, hands behind my head, soaking in the sun. “Yeah, thanks for breakfast.”

“Hope you enjoyed it. I think you spent my vacation allowance for food in one meal.”

“In that case, I really enjoyed it. Tasted like money well spent.”

“Glad the rich guy is taking advantage of the lowly teacher.”

I scoff. “I think that was the first time you ever paid for a meal for me. Every other time it’s either you mooching off my plate or putting your order on my bill.”

“Yes, well, you made up for it with your resort breakfast.”

“Good.” I tip my sunglasses over my eyes. “Glad I maxed you out.”

“Hey, newly engaged,” Gunner says as he walks up to us, blocking my sun. “Breakfast by the pool? Romantic.”

“It would be romantic if my ungrateful fiancée would stop complaining about having to pick up the check,” I say.

“You just ate me out of house and home.”

Gunner chuckles. “Smell that, Lindsay? That’s love in the air.”

Lindsay sniffs. “Ripe.”

“What are you up to today?” Gunner asks. “We have the group dinner tonight but I don’t believe we have anything else.”

“I thought we were snorkeling.”

“That’s in two days,” I say while pushing Gunner with my foot so he stops blocking my sun. “Dinner tonight, I believe, is family style. So, if you don’t mind, I’ve had enough yapping this morning and would like some peace and quiet now.”

“Isn’t he a treasure?” Stella asks. “Really dug my claws into a gentleman.”

“Hey, I’m helping you out, aren’t I? What’s more gentlemanly than that?”

“Letting her come first,” Lindsay says. “That’s more gentlemanly.”

I snort and peek up at Gunner, who’s laughing as well. “How much of a gentleman is Gunner?”

Lindsay glances at him and with a wicked smile she says, “Usually a gentleman, though last night he wasn’t.”

Gunner shrugs unapologetically. “She was wearing nothing but a flower in her hair. It was really hot. I came fast and hard.”

“Well, at least someone came last night,” Stella says as she stands and lifts her dress up and over her head, revealing a one-piece bathing suit. It has all sorts of cutouts around the bodice, making the bathing suit look more revealing than a typical two-piece. I take a second to examine the bathing suit

she chose for today and can't quite wrap my head around how she got the thing on. Her pussy is barely covered up, the bikini line is cut extremely high, leading me to believe it's a thong in the back, and the triangles covering her breasts are barely two and a half inches wide, not leaving much to the imagination.

Hell, she looks fine.

Really fucking fine, especially since she's not wearing any makeup and she's fresh-faced, gorgeous, all-natural Stella.

"Looks as though someone might come soon if you're not careful with that bathing suit," Gunner says while laughing and walking away.

I feel Stella's gaze land on me but I ignore her and instead shut my eyes, hoping she doesn't realize I was watching her.

After a bout of silence, Stella says, "This is my first time to Hawaii. I pictured this trip going differently." When I don't say anything, she continues. "When I first heard about it, I secretly hoped that we'd be cool by then. The teachers' conference really made me sad. How detached you were. I was thinking maybe we could mend things and hang out. But then I realized that wasn't going to happen so I went with plan B, and that was get drunk with Cora. Day one, I accomplished that but I also accomplished getting myself into a world of trouble, as well." She sighs. "So really, all of this is your fault. If you were only nice to me earlier on, I wouldn't have gotten drunk with Cora, and I wouldn't have claimed to be engaged when I really wasn't."

"Did you weave that story on the way to my hotel room this morning?"

"No, it's been brewing for a while. Wanted to find blame on your end somehow."

"Not surprised." I sit up and toss my glasses on the table between us. "Going for a dip."

I stand from my lounge, my guilt heavy as I walk toward the pool.

There's some truth to what she said. I was a massive dick to her at the teachers' conference a few weeks ago. I wasn't a

bully, as I've seen enough of that on the school grounds, not to mention while in college. But I wasn't myself. I was harsh, made nasty remarks—much like I've done here—and I didn't let up until Arlo pulled me to the side and told me I was better than that. That upsetting Stella continuously was uncalled for. Even at that, I didn't apologize. *I was an asshole.*

It didn't make me feel good about myself either.

Stella calling me out now is only making me feel worse. But how the hell do I broach the subject with her? Clear the air? I don't know how to be her friend without wanting her.

I step into the water and glide to the side where there's a bench seat that overlooks the ocean. Just as I get comfortable, I hear a familiar laugh and spot Ashley and Donny on the other side of the pool. Ashley is wearing a large sun hat and lathering up Donny's back with sunscreen.

From afar, they look happy. Content.

But I also get where Stella is coming from. Ashley has made underhanded comments, and if she truly cared about Donny, she wouldn't try to drive a stake between him and his daughter. Because that's what seems like is happening.

Especially after last night, a line has been drawn.

Do I think breaking them up is an intelligent, mature way of doing things? No, but I also don't actually plan on helping Stella. I want to get stubborn Stella to open her eyes and talk to her dad. Find out what it is that he likes about Ashley and how long they've been together. Find out why he didn't tell her. *Have an actual, honest conversation.*

Pot calling the kettle black, I know.

I know she'll never give me a chance if things aren't settled with her dad.

So, yeah, she might think I'm helping her break up her dad and Ashley when, in reality, I'll try to find a way to solve their differences.

Needing to relax, I start to lower my head against the edge of the pool when a flash of pink catches the corner of my eye,

I turn to see Stella's toned legs making their way into the pool, her eyes set on me.

Oh hell.

The determination in her strides means trouble for me.

Trouble for my will.

Trouble for my heart.

And yet, here I am, letting it happen, because I'm a desperate man who would do anything to be able to hold her, even if it's all just a show.

"Hey," she says, moving closer to me, her tits glistening in the water.

"Hey," I squeak out.

"May I join you?"

"Not my pool. You can do what you want," I answer as she moves closer.

Smoothly, she puts her hand on my shoulder and then walks to my front as she says, "But it's your lap I plan to sit on." I don't say anything because, fuck, what do I say? Ew, gross, don't sit on me? Fuck, no.

She takes my silence as an invitation, grips both of my shoulders, and slides onto my lap, straddling me with her knees on either side of my waist.

Hell.

My hands slide up her legs to her rear end, where I feel nothing but skin.

"Is this bathing suit a thong?"

"Yeah," she answers, shifting on my lap to get more comfortable.

I slip my hand farther inward until I reach where the string connects with her ass. "This isn't very family friendly."

"Wasn't aiming for family friendly," she says, moving her hands to the back of my neck where she plays with the short strands of my hair.

“What were you aiming for?” I move my hand down her ass and cup it.

She sucks in a harsh breath and her eyes go wide as they meet mine. “They can’t see under the water.” Good thing or else they would get one hell of a show. Clearly, Stella noticed her dad and Ashley were here as well.

“Yeah, but they can read body language.” I smooth my finger over her crack and she shifts more on my lap. “Careful with the rubbing there, babe. I might be faking this engagement with you, but I’m still a man.”

“Babe?” She lifts a brow.

“Practice,” I counter.

“And your finger that seems to be trailing over my ass. What’s that?”

“Trying to get your nipples hard.” I glance down. “Seems to be working.” I wet my lips. “Are you turned on?”

“No,” she says quickly.

I chuckle. “Liar.” I move my hand up her back and play with the tie of her swimsuit. Her eyes light up with fury.

“Don’t you even dare.”

“As your fiancé, I have a right to the goods.” I check out her tits. “You’re practically showing them off anyway.”

“I’m not about to be topless in front of my father.”

“Ah, so you do have limits. From the way you’ve been acting, I didn’t think you did.”

“Clearly I have limits,” she says defiantly. “If I didn’t have limits, we’d have already kissed by now.”

“Kissing is an odd limit. You’ll strut around in a barely-there one-piece, showing off your ass, and you’ll straddle me provocatively in a pool, but you won’t kiss me?”

Her hands continue to stroke the back of my head, and I swear it’s like an aphrodisiac. Her fingers moving over my scalp, burning me with her touch . . . yeah, it feels fucking

amazing. It's making me lose control, drop my guard, revel in the moment I've longed for, for so long.

"Do you want me to kiss you?"

"Nah," I say, even though it's a big, fat fucking lie. What I wouldn't give to have those lips on mine. "I'm not into subpar making out."

"Subpar?" Her eyebrows shoot up. "You think I'm a subpar kisser?"

"Sure." I shrug. "Then again, I've never seen you with another guy, so I don't have anything to reference. But from your stubborn behavior and cold exterior—"

"Cold exterior? Are you referring to yourself? You're the one who's cold."

"Not this again." I roll my eyes.

"You're right. We'll just keep going around in circles. Might as well just show you."

"Show me what—"

Her fingers grip the back of my head as she scoots closer, and just from that move, my entire body breaks out into a wave of heat, as if lava started flowing through my veins, igniting me into a combustible state.

Her forehead connects with my forehead, her mouth parts, and my breathing becomes labored as I wait for what she'll do next. Her nose rubs against mine, and I swear to God, a flurry of butterflies set off in my stomach as her right hand grips my jaw and her thumb pulls down on my bottom lip.

Her eyes search mine.

Her breath catches in her throat when I grip her ass tighter.

And then when she leans in the last few centimeters and her lips press against mine, I can feel every last inch of my restraint slip.

Fuck, she's kissing me.

She's actually fucking kissing me.

Tentative at first, maybe unsure of what she's doing, her mouth barely caresses mine, but when my fingers dig into her ass, her mouth presses harder, her hands grip tighter, her body grows closer. She moves her head to the side, offering a better angle, and I take advantage of it, tilting and swiping my tongue against her lips.

This isn't a friendly kiss.

This isn't a kiss you share in front of friends.

This is a passionate, can't-get-enough, I-fucking-want-you-now kiss, and holy shit it's rocking my world.

She groans against my mouth, and her tits press against my aching chest, so I feel the pebbles of her hardened nipples. A stir in my groin makes me quite aware how she's making me feel, and I don't give a fuck.

Yeah, she's turning me on.

But I know she's feeling the same way as my hand splays across her ass, dragging down the thin strip of her bathing suit. She shifts on my lap, rubbing against my hardening cock. A small gasp pops out of her mouth when she feels my erection for the first time, but it does nothing to stop her. Instead, she deepens the kiss by allowing my eager tongue to slip past her lips.

And then I get lost.

I don't know for how long. I don't know who's watching.

All I know is that I'm kissing Stella, and it's fucking amazing.

It's better than I expected it to be. So much fucking better.

Her lips are so goddamn soft, yet urgent, and the grip she has on me makes me believe that I'm hers. That this isn't fake, that I actually belong to her.

"Hey, dude," Gunner says, tapping me on the shoulder. "I think you're one second away from stripping her down in front of her father. You might want to cool it."



I pull away, my head feeling dizzy. When I blink to gain my bearings, I meet Stella's eyes, and I can only guess that my appearance is a mirror reflection of hers.

Confused.

Turned on.

Shocked.

"Do you two need a cool glass of water?" Lindsay asks, and that's when I realize they're in the pool as well, floating next to us.

"No," I say, clearing my throat. "Just . . . practicing."

"For what?" Gunner asks. "*Guinness Book of World Records*' most inappropriate kiss in front of a dad?"

Stella winces and asks, "Is he . . . looking?" I glance over her shoulder to where Donny and Ashley were resting, but they're not there anymore.

"They seem to have vacated the premises."

"Yeah, they left after the first minute of your make-out session," Lindsay says while clinging on to Gunner, letting him float her around. "They went down to the beach."

"Really?" I can see a flash of guilt over Stella's face, and I really hope that guilt doesn't turn into regret.

But there's no use in hoping because I can see the change in her demeanor, and I feel the loss of her when she pulls away.

She shifts off me and I let go of her, not wanting her to think I'm clinging on.

I don't want her to know that she just blew my mind with that kiss.

Or that she might have just ruined me for any other woman.

Instead, I play it cool and lean my head against the edge of the pool and stay as relaxed as possible.

I hear her retreat but I don't bother to look her way. I wait until she's gone and out of earshot to let out a long, pent-up breath.

And I can still smell her scent, clinging to me, reminding me that I'm completely and utterly fucked. And for what? For fucking Ashley to *believe* our lie? Now I'm fucked and angry. *Newsflash. Been like that for a while now.*



"TELL me you're drinking something heavy," Gunner says, sitting next to me at the bar.

"Not heavy enough," I answer, bringing my almost empty glass of whiskey to my lips as I feel Arlo sit on the other side of me. I set my glass down and keep my eyes straight ahead as I ask, "Where are your women?"

"They went to the table and ordered some wine," Arlo says, turning toward me. "Gunner told me what happened."

I twist my glass on the bar top. "Figured he would."

"Dude, what are you doing?" Arlo asks, true concern in his voice.

I shake my head. "I don't fucking know." I drag my hand over my face. "But I can't seem to stop." I take another sip of my whiskey. "I like her too much to stop, which makes me so goddamn pathetic that I can't do anything other than drink to make myself feel better."

"You kissed her," Arlo says, as if I don't remember.

"I don't need a reminder. It's been on replay in my head ever since it happened."

"You should have seen them," Gunner cuts in. "I don't think I've ever kissed Lindsay like that and she's my world. It was as if they were each other's air and they were desperate for it." Gunner nudges me with his elbow. "She touched her lips after."

"Did she really?" I ask.

Arlo leans over the bar. “Not helping.”

Gunner shrugs. “It’s the truth. I mean . . . call me a goddamn romantic, but what if instead of denying his feelings, what if he went for it?”

“Because she doesn’t feel the same way,” Arlo says.

“Do you know that?” Gunner asks.

“That’s what he’s told us.” Arlo nudges my shoulder. “Right? She doesn’t like you?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I mean, I do know. She didn’t show interest at the game, but all this fake engagement shit is confusing me. I catch her looking at me, and that kiss—fuck, it didn’t feel fake. Not one goddamn second of it.”

“Didn’t look fake from my perspective.” Gunner shifts and leans forward, keeping his voice quiet. *Didn’t feel fake from my perspective either. And the way she looked at me when she was on my lap last night . . .* But was that just about friendship? “Why don’t you have Greer ask Stella about her feelings? They’re best friends. If Stella were to confide in anyone, it would be Greer.”

I butt in and say, “It’s her wedding vacation. That’s the last thing she needs to worry about.”

“She’d do it,” Arlo says. “And maybe if we find out, then we can either put an end to all this bullshit or we can push forward and make something happen between you two.”

“Look at that love dove over there,” Gunner says. “Wanting to play matchmaker.”

“I don’t want to play matchmaker,” Arlo groans. “I just want a normal vacation, plus”—he looks around, as if to make sure no one else is listening—“as much as I hate to admit it, I hate seeing you like this. Unfortunately, I care about you.”

I clutch my heart. “He loves me.”

“He does. Look at that. I think he might have heart eyes for you,” Gunner says.

“What if . . . what if he’s marrying the wrong person? What if he’s actually in love with me?” I ask, finishing off my whiskey.

“Make your move,” Gunner whispers. “Now or never.”

Turning toward Arlo, I reach for his hand and say, “Will you—”

“Fuck off,” Arlo says, getting up from his chair.

Gunner and I join him as we head to the table. The girls are hovering together, most likely talking about what us guys were talking about.

“Hey,” I say quickly. “Are you going to ask Greer to ask her?”

“Obviously,” Arlo says in annoyance.

“Was it obvious? Because I didn’t think it was obvious,” I say, feeling lighter. Thank you, whiskey.

“Yeah, I didn’t catch the obvious tone either. I was still confused. But can we count on Greer?” Gunner asks.

“Glad you two are here to celebrate our wedding. You’re really making it all about us.”

I grip Arlo’s shoulder. “You’re welcome,” I say sarcastically as we reach the table. Cora and Keiko are on either side of Stella, and I wonder if they’re there for a reason, so I take the seat across from her and slouch in my chair while pulling up the menu.

“Have a nice chat?” Cora asks, a smirk on her lips as I feel her glare at me.

“Great chat. Talked about manly things like bows and arrows and sledgehammers.”

“Why would you classify such tools as manly things?” Keiko asks. “Bows and arrows as well as sledgehammers are not solely designated to the male population. If you were to keep the topic to just the male population, then you could discuss such things as the wrinkles on a scrotum and their purpose, or the length of chest hair that each of you grow.”

I look over at Gunner and then back to Arlo. “Can’t believe we missed the scrotum talk. How could we do that to ourselves?”

Gunner puts his arm around Lindsay. “Honestly, I heard rumors that Arlo irons the wrinkles out of his nut-sack like he does with his cardigans and was nervous to find out the truth.”

I snort while Arlo growls.

Greer laughs and says, “He has the smoothest scrotum you’ll ever set your eyes on. Wrinkle-free, but it’s not from ironing; I use my eye cream on him every night. Works magic.”

“I don’t see how that is scientifically possible,” Keiko says, a pinch to her brow. “The scrotum—”

“She’s joking,” Stella says, cutting Keiko off before she can go into a tirade about a man’s nut-sack.

“Ah, well . . .” Keiko tips her water glass toward Greer. “Congratulations on a well-chosen eye cream.”

I laugh and glance over at Stella, who looks away from me and down at her lap.

To be in her head. It would make this torture so much easier.

Instead, it looks as though we’re going to take a cue from our students.

Playing telephone with our feelings.

Real mature.



“ARE you okay if I join you?” Stella asks.

After dinner, which was entertaining with Keiko’s insight on wedding night rituals that made everyone uncomfortable but because the whiskey at the bar put me at ease with the evening, I decided to take a walk around the resort. It’s peaceful at night. The pathways are lit up by tiki torches, a

light hum of beautiful Hawaiian music plays in the background, and there's breeze off the ocean every once in a while, offering a cooler temperature to reduce the humidity.

Now I'm sitting just outside the lobby in a chair that overlooks the ocean.

"I don't care what you do," I say.

She sighs and instead of taking the seat across from me, she sits on the armrest of my chair and tips up my chin so I'm forced to look at her.

"I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" I ask. I love how her hair is styled tonight. It's wavy and flowing over her shoulders. Picked up in the corners and off her face. She looks so goddamn beautiful it's painful.

"I'm sorry for kissing you."

Yup, regret. Just what I thought.

Not sure we need to have the whole telephone game with Greer now. I think it's obvious where Stella stands when it comes to feelings for me.

I look out toward the midnight ocean. "You don't need to apologize."

"Brock, I—"

"You regret it, I get it."

"No." She forces me to look at her again. "I don't regret it."

Fuck.

FUCK!

She lowers herself to my lap and turns toward me, those eyes cutting through me, those lips begging for another touch.

"I'm sorry that I lost control." She twists her hands in her lap. "I didn't mean for things to get out of hand like that." She clears her throat. "I, uh, I kind of got lost in it all and I feel like you are mad because I took it too far."

Yeah, I was mad because the kiss ended.

Because I wanted so much more.

My stomach is twisting in knots as I keep my eyes trained on hers. Do I tell her? Do I just be upfront about everything? A part of me is telling me to just jump in, to let her know my feelings, but the other part of me is saying this could be an in, this could be a way to show her how good we could be together.

Guess which side wins out?

“It takes two to kiss, Stella. It wasn’t just you.” I shrug. “It was an incredible kiss, and that bathing suit was hot. You weren’t the only one who got lost in the moment.”

The corners of her lips tilt up. “You liked that bathing suit, huh?”

“Yeah, I was thinking about borrowing it.”

Her eyes widen and her hand lands flat on my chest. “Oh my God, you just joked with me.” The elation in her eyes sets off another wave of guilt. She nudges me. “You joked.”

“Yeah, I do that every once in a while.”

“Not with me.” She looks me in the eyes and tilts her head to the side. Takes a deep breath. “Brock . . . will you tell me something I don’t know about you?”

*I’m infatuated with you.*

“Why?”

She shrugs. “I’m not tired, and since you seem to be open to talking and you’re not drunk, I’m seizing the opportunity.”

*Seizing the opportunity. With me. Without any other purpose than to hang with me.* This is the girl I loved spending time with, even as a friend. She’s not scheming. She’s not angry. She’s just . . . Stella. I lean back in my chair and casually drape my hand over her thigh. She doesn’t flinch or even seem to think twice about the touch.

“Something about me you don’t know . . .” Immediately a situation comes to mind, but I’m hesitant. It’s a sensitive topic,

but if I want to win her over, make her see me as more than just a friend, I might have to dive deep. “I’m not sure anyone knows this, to be honest.”

“You’re giving me golden information?”

I nod. “But you can’t tell anyone.”

Her fingers play with the collar of my shirt as she says, “Your secret is safe with me, Brock.” And then she flashes those eyes at me again, and in this moment, I’d tell her anything. Anything she wanted to fucking know, it’s hers. Especially when she uses my real name. There’s something about hearing her say *Brock*, the way it rolls off her tongue as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. As if *we* are the most natural thing in the world.

I drag my thumb over her thigh, keeping a connection with her while I open up to her. “The day I slid into home and ruptured my Achilles tendon, they took me back for medical attention, and after they diagnosed me and wrapped me up, I retreated to my locker. The room was cleared out, because by the time they diagnosed me, the game was over and the guys were gone. I sat in front of my locker, my leg wrapped up, crutches next to me, and in that moment, I knew it was over. I knew my career was all over, even though the trainer said I could come back with intensive physical therapy. But my contract was up that year and I knew no one would take a chance on me. It was done. Everything I worked toward in my life, gone in a flash. And in that moment, I cried, alone, in the locker room. It was the one and only time I cried over my career.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you were going to share something so deep.” She tilts up my chin so I meet her empathetic gaze. “I’m sorry you had to end your career like that. I know what it feels like to have to end a career in sports. At least I knew my last game was coming. I can’t imagine how I’d feel if it ended not by choice.”

“It was a tough pill to swallow. Honestly, I’m still bitter about it. I’m not sure it’s something I’ll ever accept.”



“I can understand that. Baseball was such a huge part of your life, and to not even have a proper goodbye . . . that’s hard.”

“Yeah, it is.” I sigh and then squeeze her leg. “Your turn.”

“You want to know something about me?”

I nod. “I do. It doesn’t have to be as depressing as mine.”

“Yours wasn’t depressing. It was honest.”

“Thank you.” I encourage her with a squeeze of my hand.

She thinks about her confession and then says, “I don’t quite understand why my parents got divorced. They’re still friends, and when they’re around each other, they laugh and joke. They’re quite close, actually. They seem like best friends, so I don’t get it. To me, a great foundation of a relationship is being friends first. I’ve often thought about why they might have broken up. They seemed . . . solid. Complementary. And I think that has become more obvious to me having seen him with Ashley. He does not sound nor look nor act like my dad. Like Donald Garcia. Why the change? Why would he date someone like Ashley when my mom is the entire package? Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. Not sure what I’d do if my parents ever split,” I say. “They seem as though they’re perfect for each other. Is that how you felt about your parents?”

“Yes,” she answers. “When they told us they were getting divorced, I didn’t believe them at first. I don’t know. It almost seems as though they’ve grown closer since their divorce.” She shrugs. “They had an arranged marriage, which seems crazy since they were married in 1980, but my parents’ families were more traditional and they were happy with their choice. But I can see how maybe there was added pressure for them to get married. Maybe now that they’re divorced, that pressure is gone and they can be who they want to be.”

“And date who they want to date,” I add.

Stella shakes her head. “Nope. Dad can’t date Ashley.”

I chuckle. “Not going to let that go?”

“Not even a little. I was thinking of inviting them to hang out at the pool with us tomorrow.”

“Why would you do that?”

“To mend things. There’s no way I can break them up right now. I look like the enemy, which means they’re growing closer to fight off the enemy. Basic survival instincts. So, I need to get in their good graces again, slip in when they’re not expecting it, and then break them up.”

“You have too much time on your hands.”

“You don’t have to do anything. I’ll put in the work. I just need you to be by my side, saying lovely things like you like the hole in my bra.”

I chuckle. “It was a small hole, but an endearing one, at that.”

“Look at you, being nice to me.” Her voice softens. “I like it.”

*And I like you.*

“Figure I have to throw some compliments at you every now and then.”

“Telling me you like my bra hole is a compliment?” she asks with a cute crease in her brow.

“Not sure I can think of a better one. It’s one of the highest compliments you could ever get from a fake fiancé.”

“Well, in that case”—she clutches her chest playfully—“I’m honored.”

“You should be.”

She smiles and asks, “Can I rest my head on your shoulder?”

“Tired?” I ask her.

She nods. “But I don’t want to go to my room just yet. I want to listen to the waves and enjoy being outside.”

“Then have at it,” I say, welcoming the opportunity to cuddle with her.

She lowers down and rests her head against my chest. I loop my arm around her back and rest my hand on her side. I'm immediately comforted. Having her like this, in my arms, in a romantic atmosphere . . . hell, it's everything I could hope for.

If only she was mine.

"Are you ready for the school year?"

"Not even a little," I answer. "Usually by now I'm mentally preparing myself to take on a new class of kids. I'm gearing up for the baseball season, but I've found it difficult to get into the swing of things this year, and maybe because I knew we'd be in Hawaii leading up to the school year. So, yeah, I've been having one hell of a time mentally preparing. What about you?"

"Same. I'm copying lesson plans from last year and have come up with absolutely nothing new to offer to the foreign language department. And coaching volleyball doesn't sound appealing, like it usually does. Not sure why, but I'm not looking forward to the season like I normally do."

"Seems like we're both in a rut."

"Possibly." Her hand falls to my chest. "But I'm feeling better now." She glances up at me. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Another one?"

She chuckles. "Well, sort of. Can you stay like this for the rest of the trip? Not angry at me. I hate when you're angry at me. I feel as if my whole life is off when you're scowling in my direction."

"Damn, I didn't know my scowl held that much power."

"It does for me."

I sigh and rub my thumb over her side. *I want this.* I want this every day. And for the first time, I feel hopeful. Is this the way to get her to see me? To act on some of the overwhelming urges I have, even these simple ones? Quiet moments. Honesty. I sigh. She doesn't know what she's asking of me, but I've hated seeing her hurting. I've hated being an asshole.

So, for her . . . to keep this more vulnerable Stella . . . “I’ll try. You tend to grate on my nerves, though.”

“As if you’re Mr. Perfect.”

“I am. I’m glad you realize that.”

“Ridiculous.” She chuckles.

“I am mad at you, though.”

“Why are you mad at me?” she asks, lifting up to look me in the eyes.

Smirking, I say, “Because you stopped Keiko from going on a tirade about the wrinkles in the male scrotum. I was gearing up for a *ballsy* lesson.”

She snorts. “I saved us all.” She lies back down. “Trust me when I say, when she gets going, she goes all the way. About a month ago at our Ladies in Heat Book Club, I had to listen to her go on for thirty minutes—no joke—thirty minutes about the intricacies of the clit. The facts she spouted off . . .” Stella shakes her head. “Frankly, disturbing.”

“Want to recite any of those facts?”

“Looking for tips, *Romeo*?”

I chuckle. “Nah, just validation.”

“Of course, because you’re the holy grail of all men, right? You don’t need help pleasing a woman, because you already know how.”

“You can take a test drive and find out for yourself,” I tease.

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Fuck.

Yes.

“I know *you* would after you were all up on my dick in the pool.”

She lifts up, humor in her eyes as she looks at me with disbelief. “I was not all up on your dick.”

I lift a brow at her.

“Okay, maybe a little. But I’m chalking it up to putting on a show.”

“Uh-huh. You felt kind of randy back there.”

“Randy? What are you? An eighty-year-old man?”

“Fine. You were really fucking horny. That better?”

“No.” She laughs. “Worse. And I wasn’t horny, I was . . . making up for lost time, I suppose.”

“Oh yeah? When was the last time you kissed someone?”

“Kissed someone?” She thinks about it. “Uh . . . oh, the night we went to the baseball game with Cora.”

I tense.

My jaw turns to stone, clenching involuntarily.

Of course she fucking kissed someone that night. It’s bad enough she wound up bringing Cora, but to actually kiss another guy . . .

Fuck.

Oblivious, she says, “I kissed a rookie at the bar. Can’t even remember his name.”

My fists curl, and I can feel the anger, the resentment, and the hurt bubble up in a matter of seconds. She was there with me. It was supposed to be our first date. I was supposed to tell her how I felt. I planned it all out. I had the speech ready. And it couldn’t have gone more wrong.

“What about you? When was the last time you kissed someone?” she asks.

Hurt roars around in my head, and I can’t help the shift in my mood. Once jovial and relaxed, I’m now itching to jump out of this chair and storm up to my room, where I know there are beers waiting in my fridge.

“Long time,” I answer curtly. My mind flips and turns with frustration as my body heat increases, sending a stream of irritated tingles down my spine. I’m going to say something

I'll regret. I can feel it. It's on the tip of my tongue. Before I can let loose on my emotions, I say, "You know, I should get to bed. I'm getting tired."

"Oh, okay," she says, and when I start to get up, she shifts off me. When I start to walk away, she snags my hand. "Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?"

*No, you just reminded me why I was scowling at you in the first place. You just reminded me that I wasn't the one you saw or wanted. You just reminded me that it was easy to walk away from me.*

"Nah, just tired."

"Okay," she says skeptically. And then she asks, "What's a long time for you, Brock?"

"What?" I ask, confused, my mind still set on her answer.

"How long has it been since you kissed someone?"

Oh. Hell.

I stare down at her, wet my lips, and then say, "Over a year."

"Wh-what?" she asks in disbelief. "Over a year? Wow, I kind of thought—"

"Never assume, Stella." I move past her. "Have a good night."

## Chapter Seven

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### STELLA

“I think I’m in trouble,” I say to Cora over breakfast.

“Uh-oh. Did your dad figure out you’ve been lying to him about Romeo?”

I shake my head and set my fork on my plate. The pancakes are doing nothing for me this morning. “I think I like Brock.”

“Wait, what do you mean you like him?”

I roll my teeth over my bottom lip. “I think I *like him*, like him.”

“Oh God, was it the kiss from yesterday? Lindsay would not stop talking about it. I’m so mad I missed it.”

I shake my head. “The kiss was probably the best kiss of my entire life, but that wasn’t it.”

“Of your entire life?” Cora asks, surprised.

I slowly nod my head. “Oh yeah. It was . . . God, I can still feel the imprint of his lips on mine and the way his fingers dug into my skin where he gripped me.”

She fans herself. “That’s hot.”

“It was extremely hot. But that wasn’t what tipped me over the edge. That was the appetizer.”

“Okay.” Cora picks up her orange juice and finishes it off. “What was the main course, then?”

“Last night, after everyone went their own way, I found Brock hanging out in a chair by himself, just relaxing and enjoying the peaceful night sky. I asked to join him and we started talking. He told me about his end to baseball. There was so much vulnerability in his voice, and what he told me, he’d never told anyone before. He made me feel valued, special. It was as if he turned on a light switch I didn’t know was off, and last night, after we parted, all I could think about was him. His kiss. The way he holds me even when we’re pretending. The way he looks at me. It—it got to me, and now I feel desperate to see him again.”

“Oh God, you do like him.”

I sigh and slouch in my seat. “I do, and get this.” I look around me to make sure he’s not listening behind me or approaching. “I asked him when was the last time he kissed someone, and do you know what he answered?”

“A few weeks?”

I shake my head. “Over a year.”

“What?” Cora nearly shouts and then realizes her voice is far too loud. Whispering, she says, “But he’s *Romeo*. He got that nickname for a reason—romancing all the ladies.”

“I know. I honestly didn’t believe him at first, but when I looked him in the eyes, there was truth beating through them. It’s been over a year for him.”

“How is the man surviving? I mean, can you have sex without kissing?”

“Yes.” I laugh. “But Brock doesn’t seem like the kind of guy that would have sex without kissing.”

“No, he doesn’t.” She lets out a low whistle. “No wonder your kiss was so hot and heavy. The boy is desperate.”

“I think we were both desperate and that’s why it got out of hand.”

“Understandable. So, what do you plan on—”



“Outrageous,” Keiko says, taking a seat at our table. “Who designed this establishment?” She scoots her chair in, places her napkin on her lap, and then picks up her spoon. She starts digging into her oatmeal.

God, I forgot she went to the bathroom.

“Everything okay, Keeks?” I ask.

Her face is flushed and her brow is pinched together.

“No,” she answers and keeps it at that.

Cora and I exchange glances, and she nods at me to take the lead on this.

“Uh, what happened?”

She looks up from her oatmeal, which is easily cold by now, and pushes her glasses up on her nose. “As you are aware, I excused myself from the table because I had to relieve myself in the bathroom. I’ve been drinking two glasses of water every morning before I depart from my room. Hydration is key while on vacation.”

“Totally,” Cora says, humoring her.

“Naturally, after consuming two glasses of water, it was only in due time that my bladder would need relief. As you are both aware, I excused myself and found the nearest bathroom.”

Where is this going?

“I situated myself in a stall and realized there were no locks available for privacy. At a five-star resort, no security in the water closets,” she shrieks.

Oh God.

“Being able to pee faster than the average Homo sapiens, I decided it would not be an issue. So, I undid my shorts, pushed them down with my underwear, and then as I was about to sit down, the door to my stall swung open, and there was an illegal adolescent who pointed at my vulva, laughed, and said, ‘look at her pee-pee.’”

I snort so hard my nose actually stings. Cora tries to hold back as well but she laughs out loud and then covers her mouth.

“I don’t see how this is the least bit humorous. That child is illegal. They said there would be no youth at the resort, and yet, there is a peeping Tom in our midst, willing and ready to point out unsuspecting vulvas.” She leans forward and whispers, “I exposed my crotch to a child. I could be arrested.”

Tears well up in my eyes, and I can’t contain it, I laugh even harder.

“Excuse me, this is no laughing matter,” Keiko says firmly. “There was a wave of crime in that bathroom, and it started with the child’s improper classification of the human anatomy.”

“Would you have preferred her to call your pee-pee a vagina?”

“I would have been far more comfortable with that vernacular.” Keiko takes a sip of her water. “At least the term *vagina* doesn’t make me feel like a buffoon. Pee-pee has me feeling ridiculed and subjected to playground bullying.” She shakes her head. “The parenting in this country is disappointing. Educate your children to use the proper term.” Keiko holds up her fist and says, “It’s not a pee-pee.”

Dear God.

“You know, I could see how that’s true,” Cora says just as I spot my dad and Ashley walk into the restaurant.

I place my hand on Keiko’s shoulder and say, “I’m sorry an illegal adolescent encroached on your privacy and called your vagina a pee-pee.”

“Thank you.” She holds her chin high.

“But I need to go talk to my dad. Cora, can you please coddle our friend? She’s been through a traumatic experience.”

“I got it covered.” Cora offers me a wink as I take off toward my dad’s table.

He's the first one to spot me, and I'm greeted with kind eyes, but when Ashley sees me, it's nothing but fire. Here goes nothing.

I close the distance between us and place my hands on one of the chairs at their table of four. With a deep breath, I ask, "May I join you for a second?"

"No," Ashley says right away.

But thankfully my dad places his hand on hers and says, "Yes, please take a seat."

"Thank you." I slip into a chair and carefully fold my hands in front of me. "I want to apologize for my behavior the other night. It was uncalled for and I think I projected some of my issues onto you as a couple."

"See, I told you she wasn't really with Romeo," Ashley says, nudging my dad.

I run my tongue over my front teeth and take a deep breath. "No, that's not what I mean. Romeo and I are very much together and engaged." Lies, big fat lies. "I'm talking about my dad's divorce from my mom. I'm not sure I've truly accepted the split, and I took it out on you two, when, really, it's something I need to deal with on my own." Now that's the truth. Granted, I don't want Ashley engaged to my dad because she's the devil, but I do think I'd have a hard time if I found out my dad was engaged to anyone.

Speaking softly, my dad reaches out and takes my hand in his. "I didn't realize you were having trouble with the divorce. You never acted as though it bothered you."

I shrug. "I guess I always thought at some point you two would get back together. But I see where I thought wrong." I give Ashley an embarrassed smile. "I'd like to make it up to you. We're going snorkeling tomorrow, and this afternoon we're hanging by the beach. There's room for another couple, and it would be great if you could join us."

Ashley folds her arms over her chest, looking like the ever-present petulant child. "We had plans to go for a walk this afternoon."

Dad glances at her. “I think we could do that another time. I’d like to do this with Stella. That sounds good.”

Weirdly, I watch as Ashley looks at my dad and slowly nods. “Yes, you’re probably right.” She takes a deep breath and turns to me. “That would be nice, thank you.”

Uh . . .

That was a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde situation.

But, hell, I’ll take it.

“Perfect. I’ll text you the details, Dad.”

“Great, and thank you for reaching out to us. We appreciate it.”

Guilt washes over me, but I swallow it and put on a smile. “Of course.”

When I walk away, for the first time, I actually feel icky about my plans. Dad seems so eager to mend things. Ashley, on the other hand, reluctant. She’s always been perceptive. Can she see right through me?

I glance behind me and catch them holding hands and talking quietly with each other.

Are they really in love?

Because if they weren’t, wouldn’t Ashley be leering at me now? Angry that I thwarted *her* plans?

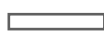
I shake my head.

No.

There’s no way.

Dad is in some type of mid-life crisis. That’s it.

No. Love is not involved.



“WHY DO YOU HAVE WHITE GLUE?” Cora asks me as I stuff it in my purse.

“Craft project,” I answer.

“Liar.” She nudges my shoulder. “What are you doing with that?”

Rolling my eyes, I press the button for the elevator, needing to speak with Romeo, and then whisper, “I put some in a bottle of lotion. I’m giving it to Ashley and telling her it’s a special kind of tanning lotion. When it dries, it’ll look as though her skin is peeling. I have two bottles, one for me, one for her.”

Cora slowly nods her head. “I see you’re taking the low road. Not sure that’s the right journey for you, but I’ll support it either way.”

“It’s appreciated.”

“Aren’t you going to the beach?”

The elevator dings, and I say, “I have to talk to Romeo.”

“Going to tell him you like him?”

“Shhh,” I say, looking around. “Jesus, Cora.”

She shrugs. “No one is here.”

I get in the elevator without her and say, “No, that’s not what I’m going to say.” I press the button to his floor and step back. “See you at the beach.”

The doors close and the elevator takes me to Romeo’s floor, where I exit and quickly make my way to his room. I texted him earlier to ask where he was, and when he said he was in his room, I headed right there, after I picked up some glue, of course.

When I reach his door, I knock on it and wait. After a few seconds, he opens the door and stands there, in a towel, water dripping off his chest.

*Lord above, why do you do this to me?*

“What do you want, Stella?” he asks, a slight hint of annoyance in his voice.

“Well, hello to you too.” I push past him and move into his space. ESPN is on in the background, there’s an empty plate on the coffee table with an open can of Coke Zero next to it, and the door to his patio is open, offering a nice breeze from the ocean. “Hanging out by yourself?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He shuts the door. “Trying to get a moment of peace before we head to the beach.”

“Which is what I came to talk to you about,” I say, turning toward him. I set my purse down on the dresser.

He pushes his hand through his wet hair and then sighs and leans against the hotel door. “What now?”

“I can see you’re in a good mood.”

He pushes off the door and moves around me to grab a pair of board shorts, and knowing what happened last time he was in a towel, I turn away just in time to miss the booty show. It’s for my own sanity, even though I’m itching for another glance.

“I’d be in a good mood if you weren’t constantly badgering me.”

“What happened to our agreement last night? You were going to be nice.”

“Don’t remember,” he says, and when I turn around, I catch the tension in his shoulders.

“Why are you so tense?” I give it a second and when he doesn’t answer, I ask, “Is it from the pool? Have you masturbated? That eases a lot of tension, I know it did for me.” His eyes snap to mine.

“You masturbated after the pool kiss?”

“Uh, yeah,” I answer as though it’s no big deal. “You can’t have that kind of unexpected make-out session and not masturbate.” As a joke, I reach into my purse, grab the non-glue lotion, and toss it to him. “Go to town. It’ll help you relax.”

He rolls his eyes and tosses the lotion onto his bed. “I don’t need to masturbate.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem, Stella. Just wondering what kind of fresh hell you have planned for me today.”

Ignoring his attitude, because I’m not sure that’s going to change, I go into my plan. “So, Dad and Ashley are going to be at the beach with us; I invited them. Greer wants to play volleyball. I thought it would be fun if we teamed up with Ashley and Dad and then I can swoop around her and make sure she doesn’t get any balls.”

“Why is that fun?” he asks in a monotone voice.

“Uh, because she thinks she’s God’s gift to volleyball when she didn’t even get a scholarship. I need to show her, even though she bullied me, I was still better.”

“Seems mature,” he says in a sarcastic tone while grabbing his phone and wallet.

I pick up my purse. “So, you will help me out?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Unfortunately, no,” I say in a sad voice. “Sorry.”

“Figured,” he sighs, and together we walk down to the beach.



“○○○, I can already feel this lotion working,” Ashley says and then gives my shoulder a nudge. “Thanks, girl.”

Controlling my happy smile, I say, “Of course. I know you’re going to love it.”

Didn’t think she was going to use it right away, but life just seems to be working in my favor. Maybe I won’t have to show her up on the volleyball court, after all.

“Okay, are we ready?” Greer says, tossing the volleyball in the air.

We split the teams up so Gunner and Lindsay are with Greer and Arlo. Dad and Ashley are with me and Romeo, while Keiko and Cora have taken the sidelines as line judges.

“Ready,” I call out while I adjust the straps to my bathing suit. I went with something a little more modest for two reasons—one, my dad is here, and two, I don’t want to be diving around the sand in a flimsy two-piece. I glance at Ashley, taking a look at her skin and slightly disappointed it’s not peeling yet. “Ready?” I ask her.

She claps her hands. “So ready.”

I’m sure you are.

Despite Romeo being annoyed with me earlier, whenever sports are involved, he immerses himself in the game. From the side of my mouth, I say, “Remember the plan?”

He nods. “She doesn’t get the ball.”

“Such a good listener.”

Greer serves, and Romeo and I instantly go into action. Together we maneuver the ball back over the net, only for Gunner to return it on one hit. The ball sails toward Ashley, but I quickly step in front of her and hit it to Romeo, who tosses it over and scores us a point.

“Nice,” I say, giving Romeo a high five.

“I was going to get that, you know,” Ashley says.

“Sorry.” I smile. “Got a little ahead of myself.” Greer rolls us the ball. “Here, you can serve.”

“Thanks.” Because she needs to show off, she tosses the ball in the air, jumps, and serves. Thankfully, Gunner steps in front of Lindsay, their weak player, and connects with the ball. Arlo pops it up and Greer sends it over the net right toward my dad, who pops it with one hand to Ashley, but I come in and backwards hit it over the net.

“Hey,” Ashley says, but I’ve no time to respond as we keep volleying back and forth, Romeo and I moving around and taking care of our team, finally winning another point.



“Well done,” Dad says with a clap. “It’s great seeing you play again, Stelly.”

“Like riding a bike, right, Ashley?” I ask as she fumes at me.

Yeah, there were quite a few balls that were hers, but I took it upon myself to make sure she didn’t touch them.

“I wouldn’t know,” she says in a snarky tone. “You keep stealing the balls from me.”

“Just want to make sure we win.” I wink, and her eyes narrow in anger. She digs her feet in the sand and gets in position while Dad goes to serve. Oh boy. I have a feeling she just silently announced “game on!”

Dad serves the ball, Greer sets it up for Arlo, who knocks it over toward the middle of our court. I run to the center and bump the ball to Romeo before Ashley can get it. Romeo sets, and I jump up and attempt a spike despite my small stature. Gunner returns, Arlo helps knock the ball over, and it sails over my head. I backtrack and get knocked over by Ashley, who volleys the ball back. When I glance up at her, she smirks and then gets ready for the ball to come back. Oh yeah? Two can play at this game.

In a matter of seconds, the game becomes a bloodbath of Ashley and me shoving each other, trying to get the ball. She’s taller than me and has a better shot, but I’m quick on my feet and I’m not deterred by the sink of the sand. I maneuver my way around, knock the ball over the net before she can, and score another point. I fist-pump the air and shout, “Yes!”

I turn to Romeo, whose eyes are wide. He offers me a drink of his water and quietly says, “Might want to calm down there, Garcia. You’re looking a little crazed.”

I hand him back his water and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “No, I have her just where I want her.”

“And where’s that?” he asks. “Because your dad and I have both taken elbows to the stomachs from you two insanely trying to get the ball.”

I glance over at Ashley, whose skin is pristine. Why isn't she shedding? But that's the least of my concerns. I'm winning. She's tired, bent over and gasping for air. I'm hanging in there, a little out of breath, but still ready to go.

"I'm the better athlete," I say to Romeo, who grips my shoulder and nods.

"Yes, Stella. You're the better athlete. Now, can we please end this competition before you hurt somebody, like me? Your head almost collided with my dick on one of those dives."

"You're exaggerating."

"I'm not."

"Whatever. If you get knocked in the dick, it's only payback for the time you pantsed me while we played volleyball in the teachers' league."

"That was on accident. I was trying to win."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" I ask.

"Make an ass of yourself?"

I look at him angrily and he lifts his hands in the air in defense. I point my finger at him and say, "If you get the ball, knock it to me. Got it?"

He sighs heavily. "Got it."

Clapping my hands, I get back in the game and say, "Let's go." Greer looks at me, a little confused, while she tosses the volleyball to Romeo, who serves.

Yes, I might be acting a little deranged.

Maybe spit is flying out of my mouth.

And, yeah, so my hair is sitting lopsided on my head.

But I'm beating her.

I'm winning this battle of wills.

Just look at her, slumped over, hands on knees, sweat dripping down her neck. I'm no spring flower over here, but I know I don't look like that.

I have her right where I want her . . .

Romeo serves the ball, Gunner returns it with one hit, I step forward, hit it back to Dad, who bumps it with his arm over to Ashley, and before she can hit it, I scoop in with a one-handed bump over my head. Ashley pushes me and I push her back, but then quickly turn around and retrieve the short shot from Greer. Sand fills my bathing suit top but I get up anyway, as Dad hits the ball and accidentally reflects it to the side. Ashley and I both go running toward the ball, and at the last minute, she pushes me to the side. I lose my balance, trip over the divots in the sand, and reach for the first thing I can find as I tumble toward the ground.

My hands snatch a blue piece of fabric and grip hard as I plummet toward the ground.

Ashley cheers about the point she scored, but everyone else gasps as I hit the sand with a plop, the hot grains sticking to my sweaty body.

Ooof.

“What the actual fuck,” Romeo yells as the fabric jerks in my hands.

“What?” I ask, turning over and looking up, where I get a perfect between-the-legs shot of Romeo’s bare balls. “Oh my Jesus.” I scramble out from under him as he bends down and pulls up his board shorts. “I saw your balls. Oh my God, I saw your balls.” I crawl away and then stand up, hand to my forehead, trying to replay how that all just happened.

“Don’t you usually see his balls?” Ashley asks. “Since he’s your fiancé?”

Oh shit.

That’s right.

Probably at this point, I should have sucked on his balls.

“Uhh.” I slip my hand from my forehead and scan the beach. Gunner and Arlo are hanging on to each other, laughing hysterically. Lindsay, Greer, and Cora all have their mouths dropped to the ground. And Keiko is too busy writing about

the score in her notebook to notice that Romeo gave the beach a full moon. “Well, I have seen his balls,” I say as my father slowly steps away.

Wow, this is uncomfortable.

“Just, uh, not from that angle before.” I nod. “There’s something about seeing the taint that belongs to the man you’re about to marry, you know? Like . . . save it for the wedding night.” I awkwardly elbow Romeo, who has steam metaphorically blowing out of his ears.

Pretty sure I’m going to pay for this, and pay for it hard.

“We haven’t saved anything for the wedding night, right, Donny?” Ashley says.

And there it is, my penance in the form of bile rising up my throat.

At least I learned two things from this debacle.

One: I’m still better than Ashley at volleyball.

And two: Romeo has a pair of balls I wouldn’t mind putting in my mouth.



“HE’S AVOIDING ME,” I whisper to Cora as we rock along on the boat that’s taking us to the perfect snorkeling spot.

“Well, you did pants him in front of the entire beach yesterday, and all I have to say is . . . I hope you get a chance to stroke that pogo stick in his pants, because WOW!”

“Shhhhut up,” I whisper.

Cora laughs. “Seriously, that boy is hung. If this fake fiancé thing doesn’t work out, I’m not ashamed to admit that I have no problem offering him my services.”

“Can you not, for the love of God, Cora?”

She laughs some more and then says, “He’s not avoiding you. He’s hanging out with Arlo and Gunner. He sat next to

you in the car, and I saw him hold your hand when we started making our way around the island on the boat. What more do you want?”

“He’s barely said a word to me.” He’s barely said anything to me since the beach. He’s glared. So much glaring that I don’t think I can take one more cross look from him.

“Maybe he gets motion sickness like Greer. Did you know she’s thrown up three times since we’ve been on this boat? How is she going to fare with the sunset tour?”

“I heard Arlo say she forgot to take her seasick medicine. I don’t think she’s going to forget that again.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that.” We both look over at the bench where Greer is lying down, looking pale and miserable.

Cora nudges me. “Forget about Romeo for a second. What are you going to do with Ashley today? What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know.” I wring my hands together. “I’m really not good at this. I gave her the glue lotion and it did nothing. When we were pranking Arlo, Keiko was the one who came up with all the good ideas, but I don’t think this is in her repertoire.”

Cora shakes her head. “She’s pretty versatile in everything, but I don’t think she’d have much to add to the topic of *Parent Trap*-ping your dad, and I think if you brought it up, it would be more of a headache than anything. She’d ask far too many questions.”

“You’re right about that.” I glance around as we start to pull up to the snorkeling spot. “Since you brought it up, do you know what I watched on my phone this afternoon?”

“What?”

“*Parent Trap*.”

“Hayley Mills *Parent Trap* or Lindsay Lohan *Parent Trap*?”

“Lindsay, obviously,” I scoff.

“Smart. Did you reference the camping section?”

“Yes.”

“And did you come up with any good ideas on how to split your dad up from the evil witch?”

I chuckle and shake my head nervously. “No. I mean, there were great ideas in the movie, making her look like a privileged nitwit with the clacking of branches, but . . .” I pause and a smile spreads across my face. “I think I just came up with an idea.”

Cora smiles as well. “Oh man, from the look on your face, it’s good.”

I nod. “It is.”

The boat floats to a stop and one of the attendees hands out snorkeling gear. Romeo splits from the guys and walks over to me. He slips his hands around my bare waist and leans down to my ear to whisper, “Why do you have that maniacal look on your face?”

His closeness, the softness of his voice, sends a thrill all the way down to my toes. Okay, maybe he’s not all sneery today. He can feel up my waist anytime, especially when it makes me feel all warm and wonderful inside.

“No reason.” I look him in the eyes. “Hi, stranger, by the way.”

“Ah, you missing me, babe?”

*God, yes.*

After not seeing him all morning and afternoon, I caught him walking out to the shuttle in his hot pink swim trunks, white tank top, and hair a sexy mess, and all I could think about was going back to that chair where I was on his lap, resting against his chest.

I want more of that.

I want him.

“In your dreams, Romeo,” I say, even though I know it’s really in my dreams.

Clearing his throat, he holds up his snorkeling gear and asks, “Have you ever snorkeled?”

“Avid snorkeler,” I lie. I watched a YouTube video on it earlier so I didn’t look like an idiot in the water. “Have you?”

He shakes his head. “Nope, first-timer. So you’ll help me?”

“Of course. Can’t have my fiancé looking like a fool out there.” I hand him his life jacket and say, “Put this on first.” He shuffles it over his thick shoulders and tries to close it over his expansive chest, but struggles, causing me to laugh. “Here, let me help.” I adjust the straps on the life jacket and then clip it together, my fingers casually brushing over his bare chest every once in a while. “There, it’s not too tight, is it?”

“Nah, it feels good.” He lifts up my life jacket and holds it out to me to put on. I slip into it and turn to face him. “Let me get that for you,” he says with a wink and starts clipping it together, the backs of his hands brushing against my breasts.

“Having fun?” I ask dryly.

“Plenty.” He smiles and then steps away. “All strapped in. Now what?”

I give him a crash course of the snorkeling techniques even though the instructors already gave us one.

“I didn’t know you had experience snorkeling, Stelly,” Dad says, walking up to us with Ashley.

“Oh yeah. Lots,” I say, lying. “I’ve never been snorkeling in Hawaii, but what I do know is that there are eels in the water you need to watch out for.”

“Eels?” Ashley asks.

“Like water snakes?” Romeo frets.

Oh Jesus.

I glance at him for a second and then turn back to my dad and Ashley. “Yes. You have to be careful around them. They’re beautiful, but they do like toes.”

“Oh God, really?” Ashley hugs closer to my dad.

“You’ll be fine. Mind your own business, but whatever you do, don’t pee in the ocean. They’re attracted to that. But if you do happen to pee in the ocean—because we know that’s going to happen—just bubble your water and you should be good.”

“*Bubble your water*, what does that mean?” Ashley asks.

Trying to hold back my smile, I say, “Remove your snorkel, put your face even with the water, and start blowing bubbles against the water. The vibrations and bubbles will deter the eels from coming near you.”

“Like this?” Ashley demonstrates without water, and I nearly die holding in my laugh.

“That’s positively perfect. You’re a natural.”

“I’m pretty good at blowing,” she counters.

Okay . . . well played.

But, ew, gross, let me go vomit.

“Everyone ready?” the captain asks. “Line up at the back and hop in when you’re ready.”

Gunner and Lindsay are the first to jump into the water, followed by a wetsuit-wearing Keiko. Cora is right behind her, then Ashley and Dad. Greer isn’t geared up and is trying to convince Arlo to go, but he won’t leave her side. Not surprised.

Romeo takes my hand and asks, “Ready?”

“Yup.” We walk over to the back of the boat and jump into the water. It’s not as cold as I was expecting, thankfully. I slip my goggles on and put my mouthpiece in my mouth. Once my head is in the water, I’m blessed with the beautiful sight of a school of bright orange fish. They dip and dive around us, sprinkling the blue ocean in a gorgeous array of color.

Romeo reaches out and takes my hand, which only adds to the magical experience. At first, I enjoy the moment of being next to Romeo and soaking in all of the marine life. But as we grow closer to Ashley and my dad, I realize I have a task at hand to accomplish.



Letting go of Romeo, I swim toward them, but stay back just enough that they can't detect me, and on a quick swim by, I stroke my finger along the back of Ashley's leg. She whips around and I quickly lift up and start blowing bubbles against the water. Through her goggles, I can see her eyes widen, and she lifts up and blows bubbles frantically while looking around.

"Did you see that huge eel?" I ask her.

"No, but it brushed against my leg."

"Seriously?" I ask. Academy Award winner over here.  
"That's crazy. Did you pee?"

She winces. "I couldn't hold it in." EWWWW, *I just swam through Ashley's peeeeeeee.*

"Oh crap. Okay." I look around. "Swim over there and get away from the scent of your pee. You should be safe over there."

She nods and tugs on my dad's hand to get him to follow her. He keeps his head under the water and tags along. I give her a few minutes in her new space before I start to follow her over, but that's when I see Romeo lift out of the water and start blowing frantically at the surface, forming bubbles. When he makes eye contact with me, he says, "Giant fucking eel. Holy shit. I saw it wanting my toes."

Hold it together.

Hold it the fuck together.

"Well . . . keep blowing!" I say in panic.

With a nod, he starts blowing more bubbles, and I have to turn away so he doesn't see the cackling I'm desperately trying to hold back.

Oh, this is too good.

After a few minutes, I drift toward Ashley with a piece of loose seaweed I found. I time my attack perfectly, and as she's pointing at something in the water to my dad, I swipe the seaweed across her leg and then quickly tuck it away.

She whips around with a watery scream and surfaces. She starts blowing frantically again, her cheeks puffed, her face practically motorboating the water.

I turn to face her, act shocked, and lift out of the water. “Another eel?”

“I keep peeing,” she whines. “I don’t know what’s going on. The water is doing something to me.”

“Blow. Blow!”

She dips her head in the water and creates bubbles, eyes wide, panic searing through her.

My job here is done.



“DUDE, why were you blowing in the water so much?” Gunner asks Romeo as we sit around a fire pit, enjoying beers and a mellow night. “It was distracting as fuck.”

I lift my beer to hide my grin.

“Eels,” Romeo says. He’s sitting in a chair next to me, shirt off, wearing a pair of black board shorts and looking so impossibly good, that I have to keep my distance so I don’t do anything embarrassing. Like run my tongue up and down his chest.

“What?” Gunner asks, confused.

“The eels. Apparently they’ve been taking the toes off tourists recently.” So not what I said, but I’m loving every second of this. “If you blow bubbles in the water, they won’t bother you.”

“What origin of eel are you speaking of?” Keiko asks, leaning forward. And I know my cover is about to be blown in seconds.

“Uh, any type of eel,” Romeo answers.

“I’m unsure of where you’ve procured your facts, but eels are genuinely known to retreat into the sand when approached

by anything threatening. Blowing bubbles in the water would not be a technique to scatter away the eels because the human body would be threatening enough.”

I hold my beer over my mouth as I slink into my chair. Romeo casually turns toward me and says, “Is that so? Stella, care to tell me why you suggested pee attracts eels and that I should blow bubbles into the water if I do?”

“I’m equivocal as to why eels would be enthralled by human urine. I fail to summon any scientific proof of an alluring scent or base in any discharge from the fellow person.”

“I don’t think there is either, Keiko,” Romeo says, eyes trained on me. “I think your friend was making a fool of me.”

“Dude,” Gunner laughs. “Were you really trying to keep eels away from you? You were blowing a lot of bubbles.”

I can’t help it. I let out a loud laugh.

“Real funny,” Romeo says, leaning back in his chair and taking a sip of his beer.

“In my defense, I was telling Ashley that, not you. You just seemed to listen in.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me you were only kidding before we got in the water?” he asks.

I shake my head. “It was more fun this way.”

“I think it was fun for all of us,” Gunner says, lifting his beer in my direction.

“I’m just glad it wasn’t me blowing bubbles around the water,” Cora says. “I heard the captain on the way back saying we were the weirdest group of tourists he’s ever taken out.”

“Great,” Romeo bemoans. “The guy knows who Gunner and I are. He probably thinks we’re freaks who like to blow bubbles in the water.”

“Not us,” Gunner says. “You.” And then he laughs. “Isn’t blowing bubbles a way to teach kids to be comfortable in the water?”

Romeo looks at me and I slowly nod, trying not to bust out in laughter again.

“Wow. Just wow.” He stands from his chair, tips back the rest of his beer, and sets his empty glass on the side table. “I’m going to bed.”

“Don’t be sour,” I say, standing as well. He heads toward the elevators, so I chase after him. “Come on, you can’t really be mad.”

He hits the button for the elevator and stands there, shirtless, handsome, a crinkle in his brow.

I poke his flat stomach, and his abs contract from my touch. “Seriously, you can’t be mad.”

“I can be mad if I want,” he says. “You can’t tell me how to feel.” The elevator doors open and he gets in. I follow him.

“I can only tell you how to avoid the eels.”

He punches his floor number and looks me in the eyes. “You want my help?”

“Of course.”

“Then let me in on your little secrets instead of subjecting me to them.”

I tilt my head to the side. “You’re seriously mad?”

He folds his arms over his chest and turns away from me. Once the elevator doors open, he stalks out of the small space and heads toward his room, me trailing behind him.

“Romeo, come on.”

He reaches his room, unlocks the door, and walks in. Before the door can shut, I slip in behind him, and then, at the click of the door, he looks over his shoulder as if to check to see if I followed him. When he makes eye contact, he almost looks relieved.

“Are you really mad at me?”

He takes off his sandals and then sits on the couch.

“Nah,” he answers casually and drapes his arm over the back. “But see how it feels to be tricked?”

“Really? Teaching me a lesson?”

“More than just a physical education teacher. I can teach life lessons, as well.”

I slowly clap my hands. “Well done, Mr. Romero.”

He smirks. “Don’t you mean Mr. Roams His Hands All Over My Body?”

My jaw drops and I nearly fall backward from the shock of him knowing about his nickname. “How . . . how did you hear that?”

“Greer,” he says with a smirk. “We’re closer than you think. A few months back, we were having some drinks at their house and we were talking about how Arlo is referred to as Mr. Turns Me On. I wanted to know if the female staff gave me a nickname. I have to say, I like it.”

“I didn’t come up with the name.”

“Not what I heard,” he counters in a cocky tone.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Sure,” he says casually. “And you also didn’t come up with Gunner’s name, either? Mr. Klein is Fine?”

I shake my head. Deny, deny, deny.

“I have better things to do with my life than come up with nicknames for you three.”

“Uh-huh.” He smirks and, God, if I wasn’t irritated with him, I might find myself gravitating toward the couch, where I’d straddle his lap and roam my hands over his amazing body.

“Well, if that’s all, I’m going to retreat to my room because I don’t need to take this sort of ridicule.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he says and then motions for me to take a seat. “Sit.”

“Sit?”

He nods. “Yup.”

“Why?”

“We’re going to talk.”

“About what?”

Growing irritated, he says, “Stop asking questions and just sit, for fuck’s sake.”

Giving in, I take a seat next to him on the couch, and he turns toward me, so I do the same. “You’re still shirtless,” I say, feeling awkward all of a sudden.

He looks down at his chest and then back at me. “Is that a problem for you?”

“No.”

“Then why point it out?” he asks.

I fidget with my hands. “Because I didn’t know what else to say.”

“Are you nervous, Stella?”

God, the way he says my name, all dark and dreamy . . . it makes me want to do wicked things to him.

“No,” I scoff. “Why would I be nervous?”

“You tell me.”

Umm . . .

*Maybe because, all of a sudden, I can’t stop thinking about you.*

*Because I think you’re so freaking hot that I find my hands growing sweaty just being near you.*

*Because I want to taste your lips again, but not just a swipe. I want to spend hours tasting them.*

“Well?” he asks, a lift to his brow.

Oh crap.

## Chapter Eight

### ROMEO

This is really fucking stupid.

She shouldn't be here, not when I'm this ramped up.

Not when I'm seconds away from taking her mouth again.

Was I mad about the whole bubbles thing?

Fuck, no.

Do I wish she told me what she was doing?

Yeah. I don't appreciate being blindsided by her plans.

But did it make me want to pull her close to me and tell her how funny I think she is, how cute I think she is, how much I want her?

Yup.

It's why I left. I didn't expect her to follow me.

Hell, who am I kidding? Of course I wanted her to follow me. I wanted this exact scenario. I wanted her in my room, the lights down low, just me and her on my couch.

Everything is the way I want it. The only problem is I can't make a move.

So now I'm just torturing myself.

But this entire trip has been torture, so I'm used to the abuse. At least, that's what I try to convince myself of.

Clearing her throat, Stella says, "I'm not nervous, therefore there's no reason to act nervous."

"I see." I give her a slow once-over, taking in the light blue sundress she's wearing. It ties in the back around her neck and cuts low on her cleavage. I've been trying not to stare the entire night, but I'm giving myself a second of permission. "I like that dress," I say.

Caught off guard, she glances down at it and then back at me. "Uh, do you like it like you like the hole in my bra?"

I wet my lips. "Better."

"Oh . . . uh . . . thanks." She points at my shorts. "I like your shorts."

"You're being weird."

"I'm being weird?" She clutches her chest. "You're being weird. You complimented my dress."

"You told me to be nice to you. That's what I'm doing," I counter, loving her squirming.

"Not that kind of nice. You know, just like friends nice."

"Friends compliment each other's clothes."

She motions her two fingers at my eyes. "Not while staring at said friend's breasts."

"I wasn't staring. I can stare if you want me to."

"No," she says quickly. "Don't stare at them."

"Okay." I shrug casually. "Remember that time you brought in tamales to work?"

"Yesss," she drags out, sounding confused.

"I'd never tell my mom this, but they were the best tamales I've ever had."

"Really?" she asks.



I slowly nod. “Yup, and like I said, I’ll deny I ever said that, take it to the grave, because my mom prides herself on making the best tamales. But yours took the cake.”

“What made you think to say that?”

I roll my eyes. “You told me to be nice, so I’m thinking of nice things to say.”

She chuckles and then nudges my leg with her foot. “I meant like, don’t scowl, not throw me compliments so I feel like an accomplished woman.”

“Do you want to feel unaccomplished?” I laugh.

“Already have that feeling most of the time, so feeling accomplished is throwing me off.”

My brow creases. “Why would you say you’re unaccomplished?”

She sets her arm on the back of the couch, so close to mine, and then sinks into the cushion, getting more comfortable. “I don’t know, just pretending to have a fake fiancé would be clue number one.” Sighing, she adds, “You know all those grown-up things people talk about at parties? Like, who are you dating, and how do you like being a homeowner—those things? I check none of the boxes.”

“So, because you’re not married and don’t own a home you don’t think you’re accomplished?”

“It sounds stupid, I know, but I can’t help but feel a little behind, especially with my friend getting married in a couple of days.”

I shift more toward her and ask, “Are you having a mini mid-life crisis?”

She chuckles. “Maybe. I mean, instead of actually being engaged, I’m faking it. Next thing I know, I’m going to start boasting about my Tudor-style home in Forest Heights with a large backyard that offers play space for my Goldendoodle named Mustard.”

“You’d name a Goldendoodle, Mustard?”

“You wouldn’t?” she asks, shocked.

“Goldendoodles are pretty dogs, and yet you’d name it after one of the subpar condiments offered at a baseball game?”

“Subpar?” Her mouth falls open. “Uh, you do realize that in Chicago, ketchup is a sin?”

“Never said ketchup was number one.”

“So, you’re going to name our Goldendoodle, Relish?”

A smile creeps over my face. “When did this turn into our dog?”

“It’s our fake life, duh,” she says casually, but for a second, I thought I caught a glimpse of surprise in her words.

“If that’s the case, I’d like two dogs.”

“Two Goldendoodles?”

I shake my head. “A Goldendoodle for you and a Dalmatian for me.”

“I see,” she says as her hand grazes against my arm, sparking a fire deep in my veins. It was an innocent brush of her hand, but it’s anything but innocent inside of me. “And what would you name your Dalmatian?”

“Spot.”

She lets out a roar of a laugh before saying, “That is the least creative name.”

“Who says it has to be creative?” I ask. “It’s better than Mustard.”

“No way. Mustard is original. Mustard has pizzazz. Mustard offers fellow dog walkers a smile when I call after him. Or when he runs off to fetch a ball, I can turn to an onlooker and say, ‘he had a little mustard on that sprint, didn’t he?’”

I study her for a few seconds and say, “You know, I always assumed you floated on the cooler side of life. I never realized how corny you actually were until this moment.”

“I’m the corny one?” She points to her chest, so much joy on her face that it makes me want to pull her closer and kiss her. “You’re the one who named his Dalmatian Spot.”

“It’s ironic.”

“You’re not an ironic guy.”

“There’s always time to start.”

She shakes her head. “Please don’t. I like you the way you are.”

That makes me raise my brows in surprise. “Did you just pull a Bridget Jones on me? You like me just the way I am?”

“First of all, how do you know that movie?”

“Don’t look so shocked. I have a large palate when it comes to movies.”

“You watch romantic comedies?” she asks.

“Yeah, they’re some of my favorites. Right next to all the Marvel movies.”

She groans. “You would like those.”

I reach over and tug on her hair, pulling an even deeper smile from her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, you’re just that guy.”

“*That* guy? I can’t tell if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“Good thing,” she says.

Our gazes lock and our smiles mirror each other. “Are you hungry?” I ask. “Kind of craving dessert.”

Her eyes light up. “I could go for dessert.”

I stand from the couch and hold out my hand, and when she takes it, I pull her to her feet. “Let me get a shirt on. I think they sell ice cream in the souvenir shop.”



“DRUMSTICKS ARE SO GOOD,” Stella says while licking the vanilla ice cream off the cone.

“Yeah, it’s totally hitting the spot.” I adjust the towel underneath me and ask, “Do you need more towel?”

She shakes her head. “I’m good.”

After we got our ice cream, we decided to go to the beach and eat it there so we could enjoy the ocean at night. There are a few people milling about, but nothing like during the day, which grants us some peace from the crazy that’s been the last few days.

“Would you ever have a destination wedding?” Stella asks and then backtracks. “Well, I guess, are you someone who sees yourself getting married? Given your nickname, makes me wonder if you’re the marrying type.”

I take a bite from my cone and say, “I think if you had asked me that question my first two years in the minor leagues, I’d have said no. But once you travel all around the country and start realizing how lonely it can be when you get home, your way of thinking starts to change. I could see myself getting married. To the right person, of course. I’m not going to rush things just because I feel as though I need to get married. If I put a ring on it, it’s going to be a forever ring.” I take another bite of my cone, getting near the end. I chew, swallow, and then say, “And if I do find a person I could see marrying, my mom would kill me if I get married anywhere other than their backyard.”

“Backyard? Really?” Stella asks. “When you started that sentence, I for sure thought you were going to say church.”

I shake my head. “Nope. Backyard. My parents live on ten acres in Idaho. They’re surrounded by huge ponderosa trees, and there’s a small lake on their property. My mom has already said it would be the perfect place to hold a ceremony. She has it all mapped out in her head.”

Stella laughs. “Well, if it’s in Idaho, I guess that would be a destination wedding to you.”

“I guess it would be.” I pop the rest of my ice cream into my mouth and then sink my hands into the sand behind me. “I didn’t grow up there. They moved when I graduated from high school and went to Brentwood to play ball. They love Idaho and they’ve found peace there. I, uh, did this endorsement with Doritos a couple of years back—”

“I remember it. You were pretending to hit bags of chips into the stands for fans.”

I chuckle. “Easiest money I ever made. But, yeah, I took that endorsement and paid off my parents’ house with it. They’ve done so much for me over the years, carting me around to all my practices and games and making sure I stayed sane. I felt as though I owed them something.”

“Wow, that’s . . . that’s pretty amazing of you.”

“It was the least I could do for them,” I say, remembering the look of utter shock on my parents’ faces when I gave them the deed to their house.

“How often do you visit with your parents?” Stella asks, finishing off her ice cream, as well.

“Not as much as I wish I did.”

“Why not?”

I shrug. “Not sure, honestly. I think after traveling so much while playing baseball, and then visiting my parents in the off-season, I’m happy with where I am. I like my place, and I’m a bit of a homebody when it comes to holidays. I know I should visit them more, but I fly them out to Chicago a lot and they like that just as much. What about you? Is it hard splitting time between your parents?”

Stella shakes her head. “Ever since my parents’ divorce, we still get together as a family. One of my sisters hosts a family gathering since they have kids and houses—my family wouldn’t really fit in my small apartment—and everyone comes together, and it feels . . . normal. I’ve never felt as though I’ve had to juggle two different families, but I feel as though that’s all going to change with Ashley.” She sighs and turns to look at me. “I don’t want to talk about that, though.”

“Then what do you want to talk about?”

A smile spreads over her lips. “Do you really think the Bobbies have a chance at the World Series this year?”

I smirk, feeling our old selves coming back to life.

“How could they not with the lineup they have?”



“YOU’VE BEEN this close to my hotel room and you never said anything?” I ask, as we stop in front of Stella’s door.

She unlocks it and opens her door. “Never found a reason to show you where my room was.”

“And now you have a reason?” I ask her, gripping the door casing, half in, half out of her room.

“No, but you offered to walk me back and I took it.”

It’s past midnight and the only reason we left the beach was because the hotel staff caught us and said we weren’t allowed there past ten at night. I think we would’ve stayed out there all night talking if we had the chance.

And that’s terrifying, because I’m supposed to be keeping my distance—well, emotionally, as I did promise her I’d make more of an effort to be kind—but all tonight has done is remind me of why I fell for her in the first place. Tonight has solidified why I like Stella so much: she’s funny, she’s endearing, she shows vulnerability without looking for sympathy, and she’s thoughtful and intentional with what she says. She also knows baseball, which is a huge turn-on for me. The fact that she could list off stats for every single player on the Bobbies had me wanting to strip her down right there on the beach.

Now that we’re at her room and I should be saying goodnight, I can’t find it in me to part from her.

Standing in front of me, she wrings her hands together and asks, “Want to come in for a bit?”

“I do,” I answer honestly.

I really fucking do.

I want to spend the night here.

I want to hold her in bed, where I can move my lips freely over her body.

I want to strip her down and show her how much I fucking like her.

“I don’t have a fancy room like you, didn’t go for the upgrade, but we can sit on my bed.”

Yup, no problem with that.

I walk over to her bed, take off my sandals, and flop down.

“Make yourself at home,” she says sarcastically as she climbs onto the bed, but instead of lying down like I am, she sits up, close enough to me where I reach out and place my hand on her leg.

She doesn’t flinch.

She doesn’t move.

Nor does she look at me any differently.

“I had fun tonight, babe,” I say, the term of endearment slipping past me before I can stop it.

“I did too.” She rolls her teeth over her bottom lip. “It reminded me of what it was like a few months ago, our relationship.” She places her hand on top of mine. “I missed this.”

I rotate my hand so my palm is up and our fingers lace together. “I missed it, too.”

“So, let’s promise our disconnect won’t happen again. I realized you’re really important to me, Brock.”

What I wouldn’t fucking do to hear her say my name when I’m deep inside of her, thrusting, taking all that she’ll give.

“You’re important to me too, Stella. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t be going along with your harebrained schemes.”

She chuckles. “I thought you were going along with it for the free kisses and body grabs.”

“Body grabs? I haven’t experienced any of those yet. What’s a body grab?”

“You know.” She leans over, places her hand on my pec, and squeezes. “Body grab.”

“Uh, are you saying I get free boob grabs with you?”

“No, that was just an example.”

I shake my head. “No way, you went straight for the chest.” I release my hand from hers and move it up her thigh. She intakes a sharp breath, and then I glide my hand to her hip.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting in my free body grab, whatever the hell that is.”

She rolls her eyes and then lies down next to me so her head is on my shoulder and her hand rests on my chest.

“I don’t recall me handing out free snuggles as part of the contract.”

“You need to read the fine print more closely.”

“Apparently.” I loop my arm around her and rest my hand on her hip. Her sweet, flowery scent wafts up from her hair and I let myself soak her in. I let my heart have this moment, this quiet, peaceful moment with her. “Think you’ll save a dance for me at the wedding?” I ask her.

“Who else would I dance with? Keiko thinks we’re engaged, after all.”

“Oh, yeah.” I laugh. “I forgot about that. You know, she hasn’t said much to me about the engagement. Should I be insulted?”

Stella shakes her head lightly against my chest. “I don’t think Keiko contains that kind of excitement inside of her. She wasn’t overly thrilled when Greer and Arlo were engaged. Instead, she went over the tax benefits of a marriage.”

“Were they good benefits?”



“I wasn’t there. Greer told me about it. I’m sure I can have her list them for you tomorrow, though.”

“I’m good.” I squeeze her side. “Since we’re just hanging out, how about we confess something to each other?”

“Have some things you need to get off your chest?”

“Nah, just thought it would be fun.”

“Okay.” Her fingers lightly move up and down my shirt. “You go first.”

“Easy. When you first came to Forest Heights to teach, I looked you up to see if you were actually good at volleyball.”

She lifts up to meet my eyes. “Seriously?”

“Oh yeah. I had the teachers’ league to consider, and if you were any good at sports, then I wanted to recruit you.”

“And a full-ride scholarship doesn’t prove I’m good enough?”

“Not necessarily. Could’ve been a lie.”

“Uh-huh, and what did you find?” She settles back on my chest.

“Well, a lot of photos of you in really short spandex.”

She chuckles.

“I also found some clips of you doing some killer digs on the court. Might have watched them a few times and showed them to Gunner. It was confirmed after that. You were a solid pick for the teachers’ league.”

“Glad I passed your test.”

I give her another squeeze. “Your turn.”

“Hmm, a confession?” She gives it some thought. “You know, when I first arrived at Forest Heights, I was really intimidated because I was a newbie and everyone seemed so seasoned. My second day, at lunch, I was hanging out with Mabel Maxwell.”

“The old Algebra teacher?” I ask.

“Yeah, she’s retired since, obviously, but she welcomed me to her table and was giving me the rundown on all the teachers.”

“Did she give you the rundown on me?”

“Yes,” she says with a regretful tone.

“And what did she say to you?”

“Well, she said all the female teachers thought you were hot, especially when you wore your tight athletic shirts.”

I chuckle.

“But she said no one would go near you because you had a reputation for romancing the ladies and then sending them on their way. Hence the name Romeo.”

“You realize that makes no sense, right?” I ask. “Romeo wasn’t someone who went from girl to girl. He was passionate and loyal to one, so the nickname really isn’t applicable.”

She pauses and then says, “You know, you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. Also, you do know that’s not the kind of guy I am, right? Yeah, in college, I flirted around. But I’m not the guy who gets what he wants and leaves.”

“That’s obvious from your confession of not kissing anyone for a long time. But I swear the guys said you were dating.”

“Last year I went on a few dates, but never kissed anyone. What’s the point of kissing someone if you don’t mean it?”

“You kissed me in the pool,” she counters with a laugh.

“Yeah . . .” I say awkwardly, letting the silence sink in. *I kissed you because I meant it. Because I’ve been wanting to kiss you for years. Because I’m fucking infatuated with you.* It meant something. That kiss meant so much. “Anyway, I’m not the guy everyone thinks I am.”

“I don’t think that of you,” she says quietly. “I think you’re honest and fun. You like a good time but you’re also very serious. You’re loyal, but you’re also very temperamental.”

“Not temperamental, just don’t like to be bothered, and I know what I want. And that’s to be left alone when I want to be left alone.”

“Do you want to be left alone right now?” she asks.

“Think I’d be here, in your bed, if I did?”

“I guess not,” she answers. Her hand smooths over my chest. “I’m glad you’re here, though. Things have been kind of crazy the last few days. It’s good to take a step back and reconnect our friendship.”

Friendship.

The one word that can wash a moment away.

Fucking friendship.

Like a goddamn dagger right to my heart. Here I thought that maybe we were crossing over into something else. Hell, I’m lying on her bed, in her hotel room, with her resting on my chest, and she still throws down the friendship card.

The excitement I was feeling, the relief, all comes to a crashing halt as I’m put back into my place.

Romeo, the friend.

The fake fiancé.

Hell, what does a guy have to do?

Swallowing back the emotions that I feel bubbling inside me, I say, “Yeah. It’s nice.”

She snuggles in closer and I can feel myself start to detach from the moment, as if my heart and soul are floating out of me and are watching from a distance, commenting on what a fool I am.

I might be a fool, but this fool can’t seem to pry himself away, either.

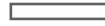
Because even though she wants to be friends, at least I have this stolen moment with her, right now, holding her close.

I’m a lost man.

A pathetic man.

And a man who'll take any moment handed to him when it comes to the girl he likes. Even when she seeks time with him. Even if she looks at him and touches him as if he means something to her—yeah, I felt that back in my room. At the beach. *Now.*

Even if she just means it as friends.



**GUNNER:** *Dude, where are you?*

**Arlo:** *You missed breakfast. You know we're golfing in half an hour, right?*

**Romeo:** *Yes. I'm aware of all those things.*

**Gunner:** *Then where the hell are you?*

**Romeo:** *In my room.*

**Arlo:** *Why are you in your room? Thought we were having breakfast together.*

**Romeo:** *Something came up.*

**Gunner:** *Is that innuendo?*

**Romeo:** *No.*

**Arlo:** *Are you going to eat breakfast?*

**Romeo:** *Will you shut up about the damn breakfast?*

**Gunner:** *Ooo, yelling at the Groomzilla. Not sure that's a smart move.*

**Arlo:** *It's not.*

**Romeo:** *For the love of God, I don't need this right now.*

**Gunner:** *Hmm, you're in distress. Is something happening?*

**Arlo:** *It better be good if there's something going on.*

**Romeo:** *Jesus. Yeah . . . something is going on.*

**Gunner:** *Care to elaborate?*

*Romeo: I'm having a bit of a . . . man issue.*

*Arlo: What do you mean man issue?*

*Gunner: Ooo, I love man issue text chains. Tell us all about it.*

*Romeo: My uh, my dick is shedding.*

*Gunner: [Blinks emoji]*

*Arlo: Did I read that right? Your dick is shedding?*

*Romeo: This was a bad idea. Never mind.*

*Gunner: Oh no, you don't. We're already in the elevator coming up to your room. I'm going to need a look at that willy.*

Groaning, I toss my phone on the bed and stare down at my shrinking cock, which was hard only moments ago as I was jacking off, trying to get the feel of Stella out of my mind. Little good that did.

There's a knock on my door, and I stuff my dick back in my pants and open the door to admit Gunner and Arlo. I don't wait for them to enter. Instead, I sit on the couch as they filter into my room. Gunner has a jovial look about him while Arlo's brow is pinched in annoyance.

Gunner motions to my crotch. "Whip it out. Let's see."

"I'm not showing you my dick," I say, even though I didn't bother zipping my pants back up.

"How long is this going to be?" Arlo says, hands on his hips.

"Dude." Gunner smacks Arlo in the arm. "This is a man issue. We need to give our best attention to every man issue that comes across this group. We helped you with your blue pee, didn't we?"

"No. You didn't. Keiko did."

Gunner scratches his chin. "Huh, you're right." He shakes his head. "Either way, our friend is suffering, and therefore we should be there for him. Now, tell us about your man issue." Gunner crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at me.

Sighing, I stand up and whip out my penis, only for Gunner and Arlo to back away in horror.

“Dear fuck, what is happening to your cock?” Gunner asks, his fist to his mouth.

“That’s . . . not normal,” Arlo says while wincing.

I pull my pants back up and take a seat. “Is this what happens when you don’t have sex in over a year? Your dick gets new skin?”

“I mean . . . snakes shed skin, and our dicks are sort of like snakes, so . . . maybe?” Gunner says.

“He’s not shedding skin,” Arlo cuts in, his thought processes starting to kick in. “Have you used any new soap or something? Maybe it’s an allergic reaction.”

“Been using the same shit since we got here and haven’t had a problem.”

“Have you been whacking off more since hanging out with Stella?” Gunner asks. “Maybe you’re wearing your tube down.”

I press my teeth over my bottom lip and look away.

“You have been whacking off more,” Gunner accuses slyly. “How often, man?”

“Once a day. Not a big deal.” Seeing Stella in a bathing suit every day is destroying me.

“Once a day doesn’t seem like it would be chafing your skin off,” Gunner says.

“He’s not chafing his skin off,” Arlo says, exasperated. “Although, are you using lotion, man? Looks as if your dick is all dried up.”

“Yes, I’m using fucking lotion. I’m not an amateur at whacking my own dick.”

“What kind of lotion?” Gunner asks.

“Regular, I don’t know.” I motion to the bottle on the nightstand. “Stella left that in my room the other day.”

Gunner peers over at the lotion and then back at me. Then back at the lotion . . . then back at me.

His mind racing.

His eyes dancing in humor.

And then, his head falls back, he grips his chest, and he lets out an uproarious laugh that practically shakes the walls of my hotel room.

“What?” I ask, feeling intensely annoyed.

“Oh shit.” Gunner wipes at his eyes. “This could not be any better.”

“Someone tell me what the fuck is going on,” Arlo booms, unsurprisingly, not finding any humor in the situation.

Gunner collects himself and says, “Stella made a glue lotion for Ashley to make her look as if she’s shedding her skin when using it. Stella must have gotten the bottles mixed up, because she was complaining to Lindsay that her plan didn’t work. Oh, hell, I didn’t realize she gave it to you, though.”

“What?” I ask, standing again. “Are you saying I have glue on my dick?”

Gunner laughs some more. “Yup. You jacked off with glue.”

*What the hell?*

“Bit of a *sticky* situation you got there?” Tears. Gunner has tears from laughing. Arlo . . . is that a smirk?

“Did you get too *attached*?”

Nostrils flared.

Irritation creeping up the back of my neck, I give Arlo one glance, and he’s smiling, finding humor in the situation, and then I push past both of them and head for the bathroom to rinse the glue off my cock.

*My fiancée* will pay.

No. Fuck. I can't tell her I used the glue to whack off. I can't even give her half the tube back if she still wants to use it.



## Chapter Nine

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### STELLA

“Two more days,” I say to Greer as we sit around a table drinking mimosas. The sun is clouded over this morning, offering some reprieve from the blasting heat, but still gracing us with a nice tropical temperature. The guys are out golfing and they left early, because I woke this morning to an empty bed.

I’m not sure when I fell asleep, but I know it was in Romeo’s arms while he stroked my hair soothingly.

After I was woken up by my hotel phone—Cora telling me to get my butt down to breakfast—I quickly took a shower and dressed in a pair of navy-blue lace shorts and a simple white bikini top. I pulled my hair up, tossed on some sunglasses, and headed down to the restaurant.

The entire time I was getting ready, all I could think about was last night with Romeo. It was unexpected. Different. Almost as if we crossed a line, one I never thought I’d ever cross with him. But as we kept talking, I knew I didn’t want the night to end. I didn’t want him to leave.

And when I woke up this morning, I was hoping to find a note, a text, anything, but came up empty, which only made me realize that maybe we didn’t actually cross the line together. *I did.*

“Are you nervous?” Cora asks Greer, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Not even a little,” Greer answers, almost in a dream-like state. This is going to sound cliché, but she’s glowing. Truly glowing. And she looks at peace, comfortable, not like any other bride I’ve seen. “I’m excited to be married to Arlo. I can’t wait to call him my husband.”

“I can’t wait to call you my sister,” Cora says while holding up her mimosa. “To Arlo and Greer.”

We all hold our glasses up and clink them together.

“You’re quiet this morning,” Greer says to Keiko, who really hasn’t said a word at all. “Is everything okay?”

“I shall not bother you with my woes. We are celebrating your pending nuptials.”

We all give each other concerned looks, and thankfully Greer takes the lead on this one. “Keeks, did something happen?”

She takes a sip of her orange juice, having opted for no champagne in hers. “Nothing to fret over.” She tries to smile but it falls flat.

That’s not good at all.

“Keeks, talk to us. Does this have to do with Kelvin?”

Her lip trembles.

Her head tilts down.

Her body starts to shake.

Oh God, is Keiko going to cry?

She sniffles.

She wipes her nose.

My heart immediately starts to ache for her.

“Kelvin and I had a disagreement last night,” Keiko says in a shaky voice.

“What was the disagreement?” Cora asks.

She sighs heavily. “We were on the phone last night, discussing his packing list, and I heard voices in the background.”

Cora presses her hand to her chest. “Oh God, was it a girl’s voice? Is he cheating on you? Does he realize who he’s messing with? Kelvin is in for a world of pain when he gets here. I will not have him messing with our Keeks.”

Keiko looks at Cora, confused. “Why would he cheat on me?”

“I don’t know. Because he’s a moron like all men,” Cora says. “God, who is it? If it’s another teacher, I’ll scream.”

Greer touches Keiko’s arm. “Was he really with another girl?”

“No,” Keiko says, looking entirely too confused. “Do you believe Kelvin would be with someone else?”

“Ehhh . . . no?” Cora asks, joining the bout of confusion.

“So, Kelvin didn’t cheat?” Greer asks.

“Not that I’m aware of, although we did take a vow of monogamy with each other, so the notion of him fornicating intellectually and physically with another woman never crossed my mind.”

I lean back and hold in my smirk as Greer and Cora try to wrap their heads around what’s happening.

“So, what were the voices, then?” Cora asks.

“He was watching *Pirates of the Caribbean*.” The table falls silent while Keiko apparently gathers herself. She takes a deep breath and says, “He knows how historically inaccurate that movie is and my feelings toward its portrayal of the golden era of pirating.”

Oh my God.

Don’t snort.

Be a good friend.

Don’t laugh. She won’t appreciate it.

*This matters to Keiko, so it matters to you.*

“You’re . . . you’re upset about him watching *Pirates of the Caribbean*?” Cora asks, her voice tentative, unsure.

“Yes!” Keiko fidgets in her chair and then mutters something under her breath before she takes Greer’s mimosa and downs the rest of it. When she sets the glass down, she wipes her face with a napkin, and then in a controlled voice says, “We had a tenuous conversation over homemade chili and cornbread one night about how inaccurate *Pirates of the Caribbean* is and how the Walt Disney Company should be ashamed of themselves for producing such a sham of a portrayal. And then to my horror, Kelvin attends to a viewing in his own home?” Keiko throws her arms up in the air. “I don’t know the man at all.”

Greer reaches over and takes Keiko’s hand. “I can see how that might hurt you. It’s quite devastating.”

“It is earth shattering.”

“There, there,” Greer says.

God bless our patient friend. I’m not sure I could be as empathetic as Greer.

Thankfully, I spot my dad and Ashley, and I take that moment to excuse myself from the table. Greer and Cora have this handled, plus I feel as though Keiko is a few seconds from going into a full-on presentation as to why the movie is historically inaccurate. I love her, but I don’t think I can sit through that this morning, especially with everything that’s rolling around in my head.

I make my way through the outside seating area and to the pool area where Dad and Ashley seem to be setting up for the day.

“Hello,” I say with a wave.

“Stelly, I didn’t think we’d see you today.” He glances around. “Where’s Romeo?”

“Golfing with the guys this morning,” I answer, taking a seat at the end of Dad’s lounge. “Did you two have

breakfast?”

“Breakfast in bed,” Ashley says while fluffing her hair. “Are you going to talk to her, Donny?”

“Talk to me about what?”

Sighing, Dad says, “Ashley did some research about the eels. Seems as though you might have been tricking us?”

Damn it.

“What? Really?”

“Stella, tell us the truth,” Dad says in his stern voice.

God, I’m shit at this. “It was a joke I played on everyone,” I say innocently. “Didn’t you see Romeo doing it too?”

“I told you it wasn’t just against us,” Dad says with a little laugh. “Ashley was really upset about it but I told her it wasn’t malicious toward us. That you tricked everyone.”

“I did,” I say, thankful Romeo fell for it too. “Sorry, just a little fun and games.”

Ashley glances at Dad and then at me. “So, you consider me to be your friend now?”

Oh God.

“Uh, yeah. Of course. You’re marrying my dad, after all.”

“Well then, in that case, good one, Stella. I’m going to have to get you back for that.”

“Watch out, I’ll come back at you harder,” I say, wanting to gag from the jovial banter.

“Oh, a little prank war. I love that.”

I don’t.

I hate every second of that idea. Nor do I like this buddy-buddy thing. Time to kick things up a notch.

I turn to Dad and say, “I was talking to Romeo yesterday about what we’re going to make when we get back home, and he begged me to make tamales.”

Dad makes a groaning noise. “Same recipe your mom used to make?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, I haven’t had those in quite some time. They were my favorite meal she made.”

“I know,” I say, loving that Dad is falling right into my trap. “You’d request them every Sunday and on your birthday. Dare I say, I make them better than Mom?”

Dad shakes his head. “No. I’ll fight you about that statement. Your mother, hands down, makes the best tamales out there.”

“You’ve never even tried mine. How would you know?” I ask.

“Because, I know your mother. She does something special to them that makes them irresistible.”

“I made tamales,” Ashley says, butting in. “Donny, you said they were good.”

Dad winces. “They were.”

“But they weren’t better?”

He clears his throat, and I actually feel a little bad right now, seeing my dad squirm. “Just different.”

*Different.* Ooof, that’s never a compliment. That’s just a nice way of saying they weren’t great.

Before Ashley has a meltdown, because I can see it coming, I cut in and say, “Remember the time Mom decided to change things up and use chicken instead of pork and then added jalapenos?”

Dad laughs. “We were all running for the milk that night. I’m usually okay with spice, but I was breathing fire after those tamales. She learned her lesson pretty quickly not to change up the recipe.”

“And she never has. She was over at my place a few months ago and I made her some of my tamales.”

“You, uh, you had her over?” Dad asks, a little shocked.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile, and then open my phone and pull up a picture I took of me and Mom. “She’s lost about thirty pounds. Looks incredible.” I flash the picture at Dad, and I watch his eyes widen.

“Wow, she does look great.”

“Uh, excuse me,” Ashley says in annoyance.

“Oh, sorry.” I hold the phone up to her so she can see, as well. “Mom is the one on the right. Sometimes it’s hard to tell because we look so alike, and because she has an amazing skin care regimen, she doesn’t look her age.”

“I don’t want to see a picture of your mom. I was trying to let you know I feel uncomfortable with you talking about her.”

“But she’s my mom,” I say, acting confused. “Of course I’d talk about her with my dad. That’s what having a mixed family from previous marriages is all about. Coming together.”

Realization flashes through Ashley’s eyes and the annoyance turns to apology. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Let me see the picture. I’m sure she looks great.”

Uhh . . .

What just happened?

Where’s the snotty comments?

Where’s the temper tantrum?

Where’s the jealousy?

“Oh, wow, she does look amazing. Good for her,” Ashley says and hands me back the phone. “Maybe when we all get back to Chicago and settled, you can teach me how to make the tamales properly.”

What kind of fresh hell is this?

“Um, sure,” I say hesitantly, not really comfortable with the complete one-eighty she just made. Clearing my throat and trying to gain my bearings, I say, “I actually spoke with Mom

on the phone the other day. Get this, Dad. She signed up for an old lady volleyball league.”

“No kidding,” he says. “Unlacing the tennis shoes and giving it a go again?”

“Your mom used to play?”

“Yup. She was the one who first taught me about volleyball. We’d spend so much time in the living room, volleying the ball back and forth. She was the one who made me dig the balls. I’d slide over the carpet, saving the ball before it hit the ground. I accidentally hit Dad’s collection of records once and thought my life was over. Thankfully, Mom covered for me.”

Dad smiles. “I knew it was you who messed them up, but your mom convinced me that it was more important to focus on your determination to practice than to scold you for an accident. Your mom was good like that. It took me some time to loosen up to the idea of playing ball in the house, but I’m glad you did, because your determination and goal-setting took you places.”

“It did,” I say, surprised. I don’t think my dad has ever said anything like that to me. Nor has he been this friendly, this loving. “I, uh . . . I was talking about high school volleyball with Romeo last night, telling him how Ashley and I used to play together.”

“We had some good times.”

“Did we?” I ask, shocking myself, but this entire conversation has thrown me for a loop. Ashley being nice, Dad complimenting me—that wasn’t the goal of me coming over here. I was supposed to make Ashley jealous of my mom. I was supposed to reminisce with Dad about how great Mom is, and yes, I might have accomplished that, but he’s still looking at Ashley as if she’s God’s gift to the universe, and Ashley is being . . . nice.

I’m failing.

“What do you mean?” Ashley lifts her glasses now and her eyes speak of not understanding.



Do I let it rip right now? Do I let out all of my feelings, get it out in the open and just be done with it? This entire half-witted plan of trying to make Ashley look like a fool, attempting a poorly planned *Parent Trap* situation, is not working. Clearly. Maybe it's time I just come clean. Maybe I ACTUALLY try acting like an adult rather than a petulant teenager. Glancing at my dad, his brown eyes looking for answers, I figure now or never.

"You were a bully to me," I say, holding my breath. There it is. I spoke my truth. It's out in the open now, and hopefully . . . hopefully Dad will see Ashley for who she truly is—the mean-spirited girl I went to high school with.

Ashley and Dad exchange glances, and they both sigh together. Carefully, Dad reaches over and takes my hand in his. With a sympathetic look in his eyes, he says, "I know."

He knows?

He . . . KNOWS?

Okay, now the sky really is falling.

My dad knew about the bullying? And he's still engaged to this woman? How is that possible? How could he possibly love her knowing that she made my first two years in high school a living hell?

"You know?" I ask, completely bewildered.

Dad nods and Ashley cuts in. "I told him about how I wasn't the best human back in high school. And that you might have taken the brunt of it at times. I was insecure about my own shortcomings and rather than focusing on myself mentally, I took it out on those around me to make them feel inferior, like the way I thought about myself. Honestly, I was hoping you'd forgotten."

"Forgotten?" I ask while standing. "How could I forget getting bullied in high school? That left a lasting impression on me." I take a step back and look at my dad. "I can't believe you knew and you still went out with her."

"She explained everything to me," he says.

“Oh, glad to hear it. Glad to hear she could explain her way out of being an asshole to your daughter and you’re still okay with it. And not only that, you didn’t even bother to tell me you were dating, let alone engaged. Unbelievable.” I mutter the last part and step away.

“Stella, let’s talk about this.”

“I’m good,” I say with a wave behind my back.

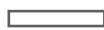
“Stelly . . .”

I take off toward the lobby, hurt filling me more than anger. Growing up, my dad was the buttoned-up father who checked the boxes to make sure his family was taken care of. He was proper, stuffy, and loved us, but not in a touchy-feely way. He cared for me—I know he did. Did he sit on the end of my bed and ask me about my feelings? Did he take my hand on walks and reassure me of his love? Not so much, but that was what I thought my mom was for. Dad wasn’t by any means an uninvolved father, he was just involved in other ways.

But for him to actually know someone hurt my feelings, someone made my life harder during a time that was hard enough . . . you’d think he wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—want to live with someone like that. How can he know that *and* ignore her comments to me on this trip? Not once seek *me* out to explain that he knew I’d been hurt all those years ago . . .

He’s called me Stelly for as long as I can remember, and it used to make me feel so . . . cherished. And yet, he did *not* see the damage that was done to me. Was I wrong? Did he never really cherish me at all?

*How do I still matter so little to him?*



“HEY, SWEETIE,” my mom says over the phone. Hearing her voice is just what I need right now.

“Mom, did you know Dad is engaged?” I ask, cutting right to the point as I sit by the ocean, trying to find some peace, but

coming up short. Instead, I've spent my entire afternoon stewing.

I went with the girls to get our nails done and put on a good face for that, but once we parted ways, I came to the beach, where I've been staring out at the ocean, wondering what I should do next.

Nothing has come to mind, and my plans for breaking up the "happy" couple have come to a crashing halt.

What's the point? If the knowledge of Ashley bullying me doesn't break them up, a little blowing in the water prank is going to do jack shit.

Mom sighs on the other end of the phone. "I do." *Right. She knew he was engaged.* I'm hoping she only just found out, but I can't even ask that yet.

"Okay. Right. You'd told me Dad was dating, but I hadn't taken it seriously, hadn't even asked him about who he was seeing. I thought it was just occasional dates. And I know you've been divorced for a while, but I never thought of the possibility of you guys dating for real. We've talked on the phone, Mom, and he didn't even tell me he was dating seriously, and now I find out he's engaged."

"The engagement's only recent, Stella, but I don't think he's kept it hidden that he was falling in love, sweetie. They've been—"

"Did you know it was Ashley Broome? The girl who used to bully me in high school?"

"Yes, I did."

*What the actual hell? She knew who he was dating—falling in love with—and didn't give me a heads-up?*

"How did you find out about *her*?"

"Marguerite told me."

"Marguerite knew? You knew? And no one cared to tell me that he was dating someone who bullied me relentlessly?"

“You never said anything about the bullying, Stella girl,” Mom says gently, “so we had no idea it was such a big deal. Look at how far you’ve come. What you do now. So, Dad called you? I’m glad. He called your sisters too.”

“He’s here in Hawaii, at the same resort . . . with Ashley. It’s been a ball of fun.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah, imagine my shock when she told me she was going to be my new mommy.”

Mom laughs. Actually LAUGHS. “She said that?”

“I don’t see how that’s funny.”

“Your father did say she had a sense of humor.”

“Um, pardon me? Did you just reference having a conversation with Dad about Ashley? He made it seem as though you two haven’t spoken in a while.”

“He called me the day before he was going to propose. He asked me how I was and told me all about Ashley. He had a lot to say, things I didn’t know about. I hadn’t realized that things were strained between you and your father.”

“They’re not strained, Mom. They’re broken.”

“I don’t agree.”

“But, Mom—”

“Hear me out. Things are strained because you haven’t yet worked out who he is outside of our family home. He said he’s tried to reach out, phoned you, but you haven’t been receptive, and that’s sad, Stella girl. Even if he’s not my husband, he’s still your dad. And I want you to put as much effort into that relationship with him as you do me.”

My mind is literally exploding right here on the beach. Poof. Brains everywhere. If tourists aren’t careful, they might think I’m a mini volcano, erupting by the water.

“I honestly don’t think I can breathe right now.”

Mom's voice sobers as she says, "I know this is a lot to take in, sweetie, but he asked for my blessing."

"And you gave it to him?" I roar. Un-fucking-believable. Where's the goddamn loyalty in this family? *And why did no one tell me, knowing how I'd perceive this?*

"It's not my blessing to give. I did tell him we'd always be friends and that I wish him the best with his new fiancée."

"Why on earth would you say that?"

Mom is quiet for a second, and then she says, "There's something you need to realize. Although your dad and I are good friends now, we weren't when we were married. We shared a lot of different values, and it really hurt us in the long run. Those differences gnawed at our relationship and broke us. When we decided to divorce, it was as if a weight lifted off both our shoulders. We didn't have to pretend. We could be who we wanted to be. And because of that, we can now be in the same room and not hold disdain in our hearts for each other. We can appreciate the years we had together, the family we shared, and be proud of the young women we raised. Like I said, his story isn't mine to tell and if you want to understand him, you're going to have to talk to him."

Tears threaten to fall as I suck in a sharp breath of air. "He's not the same man."

"He isn't. But I'm happy for him. Maybe you can find it in your heart to be happy for him, as well."

I shake my head as a tear falls down my cheek. "I don't think I can."

"You know I love you, Stella girl, but at some point, you're going to have to face the fact that your dad and I are divorced."

"I know you're divorced."

"Do you?" she asks. "Because whenever we're around together, you're always saying how we're the best couple, how great we were married, asking us if there's a chance that we'll ever get back together."

I wipe away at my tears. “Because you two don’t act like a divorced couple. It’s confusing.”

“Just because we’re not screaming at each other, or fighting whenever we’re in the same room, doesn’t mean we’ll get back together. We have our differences. We’ve seen each other together and we’ve seen each other apart. I appreciate your father for who he is, but I know we’ll never share the same house again, the same love we once had. We’ll never be romantically involved, either, but our friendship is better. I think it’s time you come to terms with that.”

More tears roll down my cheeks.

“Are you still there?” Mom asks.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice tight.

“Talk to him, Stella. You might just learn something more about your father that you never knew before.”

## Chapter Ten

### ROMEO

“When did you get so good at golf?” Gunner asks Arlo, who’s sipping a celebratory beer.

“While you buffoons parade around trying to recruit teachers for your stupid teachers’ league.”

Gunner slaps the table and then points at Arlo. “I knew you were practicing behind our backs. Did you get lessons?”

“I wouldn’t be myself if I weren’t thorough and paid for the best lessons money could buy.”

“Damn. I freaking knew it.” Gunner leans back in his chair and shakes his head. “After your first drive off the tee, I knew we were in for it.” Gunner pulls out his wallet and slaps some money on the table. “You hustled me.”

Arlo picks up the cash and casually counts it. “Should have been like Romeo and skipped the bet.”

“Always be like me,” I say, lifting my beer.

“If I were like you, I’d have a glue dick. I wouldn’t be with Lindsay right now, because I’d be harboring feelings for her and doing nothing about it.”

“Low blow, dude,” I say.

“Come on.” Gunner looks around. “Are we just going to ignore the elephant in the room—that we caught you walking

back to your room this morning in the same clothes as last night with nothing to prove for it? Well, besides a solid friendship, once again.”

“Maybe we should focus on something else.” I nod toward Arlo. “Any pre-wedding jitters?”

“No,” he answers. “But I did speak with Greer, and she said Stella is pretty tight-lipped when it comes to you.”

“See? There’s nothing there,” I say, tossing my arm up.

“But it leads me to believe that there’s something there,” Arlo says.

“What?”

Gunner nods. “Denial means everything.”

“Denial means there’s nothing there,” I counter.

Arlo shakes his head. “Greer denied her attraction at first, but her interest was palpable. Same with you and Stella.”

I smooth my hand over my forehead. “Why the fuck do we keep talking about this? It’s your wedding week. We should be focusing on that.”

“Nothing to focus on. We’re here, our wedding is organized, and I’m marrying the best woman in the world, so I’m happy. You’re the one who’s miserable.”

“He has a point,” Gunner says. “You’ve been sucking the joy whenever she’s not around. And then when she is around, it’s uncomfortable for everyone with how much you long for her.”

“I do not fucking long for her. Jesus Christ.” I glance out toward the golf course, avoiding eye contact with my buddies, because a little piece of me believes them. That I do long for her.

Okay . . . yeah, I long for her, but I thought I was less conspicuous. Apparently not.

“Just tell her.” Gunner tosses one of his fries at me. “Just fucking tell her. You spent the night with her—”



“And she told me what a great friend I was.”

“Ouch.” Gunner winces.

“She could’ve said that just to cover up her own feelings,” Arlo points out.

Gunner waggles his finger at me. “Turner has a point. She could’ve said that just to cover up, because let’s be honest, you two crossed a line last night. Maybe she was nervous you weren’t feeling the same way so she said that to mask whatever she might have been feeling.” Gunner leans onto the table. “She was the one who invited you into her hotel room, after all. She could’ve just said goodnight. And then she cuddled you. Dude, this could be your chance. She’s warmed, primed . . . I say you lay it all out there.”

“And then what happens when she says she just sees me as a friend? We have to get through the rest of the time here and the wedding. It’s bad timing.” I shake my head. “Not going to happen.”

“And what if she says yes?” Arlo asks, growing serious. “What if you tell her you have feelings for her and she says she feels the same way? You have everything to gain and nothing to lose.”

“Nothing to lose?” I ask incredulously. “I have everything to lose.”

“No, you don’t,” Gunner says, “because she’s your friend now that you pine after. At least you could stop pining and move on if she says no thanks to your dick.”

“Poetic,” I mock.

Ignoring me, he continues, “I took a chance with Lindsay. And fuck was it scary, but it was worth the leap.”

“Same,” Arlo says. “With Greer, I had no clue what the hell I was doing, but I took the leap because I didn’t want to lose her. I tried to ignore the feelings I had for her, I tried to brush them off, but every time I saw her, I ached. You need to at least try and stop living in limbo, and then maybe we can start talking about something else. Until then, this is our topic of choice.”

“Agreed,” Gunner says.

“Great.” I roll my eyes. I let out a long breath and ask, “So you really think I should say something?”

“Yes,” they say at the same time.

“For the love of God, yes,” Gunner adds.

“Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

I drag my hand over my face. “Fuck, I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

Gunner laughs and pats me on the shoulder. “Welcome to the dating world, my man.”



I SPOT Stella sitting on the balcony that overlooks the pool area. There are groups of chairs gathered around gas-lit fire pits, and she’s occupying one that was made for two people.

Legs drawn against her chest, her arms are wrapped around her shins, and she looks contemplative. She wasn’t at dinner, which surprised me, and when I asked, Greer just said Stella wanted some alone time, which only made me even more nervous.

While Keiko went off about Kelvin liking *Pirates of the Caribbean* and it being a fault of his she’s just going to have to accept, I kept looking around the restaurant to see if Stella would show up. She never did. I was ready to head up to my room when Gunner stopped me and told me not to chicken out.

He knows me too well.

That’s why I’m standing here now, overlooking where Stella is sitting, trying to figure out how to talk to her, how to bring up the topic.

Oh, hey, Stella, thought I’d tell you I have a crush on you.

Nice bathing suit top. By the way, I want to date you.

Beautiful, night, huh? Yeah, also, would it be cool if I asked you out?

*Jesus Christ.*

For a brief second, I start to retreat, but then realize if I do that, the boys will never let me live it down. I'm at their mercy.

With a deep breath and a goddamn prayer, I walk toward Stella. Alerted by the sound of my sandals, she looks over her shoulder and spots me.

"Hey," I say. "Can I join you?"

"Sure," she says while straightening up. Her chair is big enough for the both of us, but I don't want to bombard her, so I take a seat on the chair next to her.

"Missed a good dinner. Keiko was entertaining us with facts about *Pirates of the Caribbean*."

"Oh, I bet she was," Stella says with humor. "She was going off about it this morning. Poor Kelvin."

"He flies in tomorrow, right?"

Stella nods. "And I think he's going to come face-to-face with a litany of questions he wasn't expecting."

"Questions about what?"

"How he values their relationship. What's more important to him—fiction or her?"

"Oh shit. He's going to come off the plane, run smack into the thick humidity, and then be bombarded by Keiko. I don't envy the man."

"You have to hand it to her, though, knowing what she wants and having expectations. She's not messing around. She gets to the point."

For some reason, that feels as though it's directed toward me. I might be reading her wrong, but it almost felt like a jab.

“Knowing what you want and expressing them out loud can be nerve-racking, though.”

“Not when you’re strong in your convictions.” She stares at the pool, avoiding eye contact with me. There’s something wrong and I can’t put my finger on it. Something is bothering her. Is it me? Did someone tell her something? Only one way to find out.

“You know, I, uh, I was talking with the boys and—”

“Would you ever date anyone like Ashley?”

“Huh?”

“Like . . . what’s the appeal?”

I grip the back of my neck. “I don’t know.”

Stella glances in my direction. “Please, Romeo.”

Romeo . . .

That’s where we are right now?

“You and I both know her boobs have a lot to do with her appeal.”

“Not all guys are into looks,” I say, my voice growing agitated. I take a steadying breath and try to veer the conversation back to us. “So, the boys and I were—”

“You’re telling me you don’t find her attractive?”

My jaw clenches. “No, I don’t.”

“Bullshit,” she counters.

I drag my hand over my forehead and count to three. It’s fine. She’s clearly fixated. Deter her. “After golfing, the guys and I went to the clubhouse and—”

“You can’t look at her and think she’s not attractive.”

“Jesus, fuck,” I say, standing from the chair, startling her. “She’s not attractive to me. Stop fixating, for fuck’s sake.”  
*This is not the time.*

Retreat.

Not saying another word, I head for my room. Rage boils inside of me as I walk across the cream tiles of the hotel lobby and to the elevator bank, where I wait for the doors to open. When they do, I find Gunner standing on the other side.

“How did it go, man?” Gunner steps out of the elevator.

I move past him and punch the number for my floor.

“Fuck, what happened?”

“Not talking about it now,” I say as the doors close, blocking him out.

I lean against the elevator wall and take a few deep breaths. What was I thinking? I almost just told Stella I like her. That would’ve been a colossal mistake.

Hell, this entire thing has been a colossal mistake.

Playing along with the fiancé bullshit. Letting her get so close that now I crave her every goddamn second, every goddamn breath.

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. I head toward my room, stalking one foot in front of the other. And with every snap of my sandal against my heel, my anger seems to grow, because I’ve put myself in this mess. I’m the one who’s made the shitty decisions. I’m the one who inserted myself into this place of suffering.

No one else.

I can’t blame Stella because, clearly, she’s clueless.

I can only blame myself.

I reach my room, unlock the door, and charge inside. I toss my things on the coffee table. From behind my head, I pull my shirt off and toss it at the couch as well.

And then I stand there, in the middle of my hotel room, unsure of what to do.

I’m ignited.

I’m embarrassed.

I’m furious.

I'm—

*Knock. Knock.*

Fucking Gunner.

Growling under my breath, I head to the door and fling it open. “I don't want to talk—”

My words fall flat when I see Stella standing in front of me. She's wearing a pair of navy-blue lace shorts and a white bikini top. I never took in her outfit when we were outside, but then again, she was curled up and I didn't get a chance to look at it.

Seeing what she's wearing now only irritates me because she looks fucking hot. And I don't want to find her attractive. I don't want to have these overwhelming feelings that claw at me every day. I don't want to want her, need her. I don't want her to be everything I want, everything I ever said I wanted in a partner.

And yet, she is.

She's all I fucking want.

“What?” I ask, my voice seething.

“Why are you so angry?”

*Because I desperately want you.*

*Because no matter what I do, I can't get you off my mind.*

*Because I'd love nothing more than to strip that top off you and feast on your tits.*

Her tits.

The ones that I've dreamt of.

Not Ashley's.

Hers.

“Forget it,” I say, pushing away from the door.

But she doesn't take the hint and slips into my hotel room, the door clicking shut behind her.

I can feel my anger pulsing through my veins, my irritation at an all-time high and my need for her pounding relentlessly.

It's dangerous for her to be in here.

"I suggest you leave," I say, my back to her.

"I'm not—"

"Leave," I say a little harsher.

She doesn't listen.

Her stubborn streak flashes through as she tempts the beast inside me, walking up behind me. She places her hand on my back, the warmth of her palm searing my skin, enticing me, snapping my will.

Without warning, I spin on her, grip her wrists, and push her up against the wall. I pin her hands above her head, trapping her. Her eyes widen and her lips part in shock.

"I told you to fucking leave."

"Wh-what's going on?" she asks as she wets her lips.

Fuck.

Those lips.

Glistening. Enticing. Prepping me.

What I could do to those lips. What I've dreamt of doing to those lips.

Her luscious mouth gliding over mine, up my body . . . down my body, welcoming my thick cock . . .

She has no goddamn clue the kind of trouble she's tempting.

I pin both of her wrists in one hand, and then let the other hand fall to her waist, where I hold her in place. I watch her breath grow heavier, her chest rising and falling faster than before as a shiver shakes her arms. My hand slips up her side, and she sucks in a sharp breath when my fingers tantalize her ribs.

In a strained voice, I say, "I'm going to give you three seconds to remove yourself from this hotel room."

She swallows. Her eyes scan mine and once again she wets her lips. “And if I don’t?”

“Then I can’t be held accountable for what happens next.”

She doesn’t bat an eyelash. She doesn’t attempt to move.

So I start counting.

“One . . . two . . .”

Her breathing picks up even more.

“Fucking leave.”

She doesn’t move, doesn’t even hint at leaving. Instead, her decision to stay cements herself in place.

“Three,” I grind out. No attempt to flee, which only makes me more irritated.

Angrier.

And turned on.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” I say, pushing my hand up her body to just below her breast.

And I snap.

Nothing outside of this moment exists.

Not the sound of the ocean outside my window.

Not the dim light of the hotel room, or the faint sound of other guests passing by in the hallway.

My vision tunnels.

My need consumes me.

And I become unhinged.

I raise my hand to the edge of the triangle of her bikini top, and before she can say anything, I yank it down, exposing her breast. She gasps, and I look her in the eyes as I say, “Last chance to leave. Given how I’m feeling, you should get the fuck out of here.”

Her teeth roll over her bottom lip. She continues with her infuriating silence.



And she stays put.

“Bad choice,” I say before lifting her breast and sucking her nipple into my mouth.

A low moan falls past her lips as her back arches, her breast pushing farther into my mouth. I grip her hands tighter and bite lightly on her nipple, showing her who’s in charge.

“Brock,” she whispers, the sound of my name sending a bolt of lust straight to my already hardened cock.

My name, falling past her lips, on a sensual moan. I’ve thought many times what it might sound like, but it’s nothing like I imagined.

More strained.

Throatier.

Needier.

I need to be inside her. I need to make sure this moment is real, that I’m not dreaming it.

I let go of her breast and move my hand to her shorts to push them down. Without protest from Stella, I push down her bathing suit bottoms as well and tear off her bikini top, leaving her exposed and naked.

With a ragged breath, I take in her body. Athletic with a hint of curves around her hips. Tight stomach with a light definition of abs. Her pussy is completely bare, and when I work my eyes back up to her tits, I can’t help but notice just how damn hard her nipples are.

Keeping her pinned to the wall, I move my hand slowly down her body, gliding over her curves, my finger trailing in and out of her belly button. “Spread your legs.”

On command, she spreads, and I move my hand farther south until it rests between her legs. Carefully, I slide one finger along the crease of her pussy.

*Fucking soaking.*

I let go of her pinned hands, and when she reaches out to touch me, I snap at her, “Don’t fucking move.”

Startled, she lets her hands fall back to the wall as I tear down my shorts and briefs, leaving me just as naked as she is. I kick my discarded clothing to the side and take a small step away from her to get a better view. I see her eyes connect with my cock. They widen in surprise, only to soften as she sighs. I take that moment to grip my length and start pumping, using long, strong strokes, building up the pleasure that's gathering at the base of my shaft.

She sighs again.

She stares.

She spreads her legs even farther.

"Are you on birth control?" I ask when her teeth roll over her lip one more time.

"Yes," she answers breathlessly.

"Good."

I close the distance between us, pick her up, and hold her against the wall with my body. Her legs wrap around my waist and her soaking pussy slides against my cock.

"Oh God," she groans, still keeping her hands above her head.

"Put me inside of you. Now," I demand. I've lost all control of common sense. I'm fueled by frustration and need.

She slides her hand between us and grips my cock. With a smooth stroke, a bolt of lust shoots up my spine, and I'm about to yell at her when she slips me inside her warm, tight heat.

Fucking.

Hell.

*God.*

*Feels so fucking good.*

She slides down my length.

"Oh my God, Brock." And that does it.

I let loose.

She's about to learn who owns her pussy.

I grip her ass with one hand, still her arms in place with the other, and then I thrust into her.

"Fuck," she cries out, tensing against me.

I thrust again and again until I start a frenzied, nearly out-of-control rhythm.

There's no finesse to my need.

There's no romance.

It's carnal. It's explosive. It's what I need in this moment when nothing is holding me back.

Her tight pussy, wrapped around my cock, contracting with every thrust.

"Fuck," I grind out.

My body exerts itself, not slowing down, but rather, picking up the pace. I slam her against the wall, our bodies slapping, our groans mingling. But I don't let up.

I push harder, and harder.

Her encouraging cries grow louder and louder.

My name falls off her tongue rapidly.

"Brock, oh God, yes, Brock."

My eyes squeeze shut, my legs start to weaken, as I feel my impending orgasm start to gather at the base of my spine, pulsing, throbbing.

I slam into her, and her pussy convulses, squeezes, tightens.

"Oh, Brock, I'm coming," she cries out.

I take that moment to pump more. Faster.

Harder.

My balls tighten, and an explosive feeling forms at the base of my cock and erupts to the tip as I come inside her.

I come so fucking hard that I physically have to drop her hands and prop myself against the wall to keep standing. I catch my breath as I realize just how dry my throat is from my exertion. She clings to me, as I slowly come back to life.

And when I do . . . regret pummels me first, followed by disgust.

Disgust with myself.

How could I have done that to her? Taken what I wanted and not even paid attention to what she wanted.

I pull out of her and set her on the ground.

Fuck, what have I just done?

I grip the back of my neck, studying the floor, unmoving.

“Brock.” She takes a step toward me, and I take a step back.

“Fuck.” Hatred courses through me. I look up into her eyes. They’re glazed over but also hold a hint of panic. “Fucking hell,” I mutter. “Go.” I point to the door. “Just fucking leave.”

When she doesn’t move to go, but instead, tries to reach out for me, my mind goes into flight mode. I sidestep her and move into the bedroom, where I head straight for the bathroom and turn on the shower.

I can’t be in there with her. I can’t look her in the eyes, not after fucking her against the wall. For the first time ever, I was buried deep inside of her, and instead of treating her like the beautiful woman she is, I was a greedy bastard.

What the hell did I just do?

I grip the counter and stare at myself in the mirror. Utterly disgusted.

I lost control.

I blacked out.

I took what I wanted and showed no mercy.

I can’t even recall if she liked it.

She came, right?

Fuck, she did. She came. She announced it.

I lift up and drag both hands down my face before stepping into the shower, the barely warm water cascading down my heated body.

That was stupid.

That was really fucking stupid, because now I have a taste of her. Now I know what it feels like to be inside her, and now I can spend the rest of the vacation awkwardly regretting every second we just shared.

Not because it wasn't good.

But because it was fucking phenomenal.

Sinking into her, taking what I wanted, when I wanted it. Listening to her moan, feeling her hands curl around mine and the way her body arched against the wall. The tight grip her legs had on my waist, the heavy breaths that synced with mine. Even the way I felt her pulse against me, the contractions of her pussy.

Fuck.

Not sure anything will match up to that. To her.

I wash my body, wishing I wasn't washing away her essence, wishing I could keep it on me for a moment longer. The quicker I rinse her away, the quicker I can avoid the torture of her scent. *My fucking mistake.*

I switch off the shower and grab my towel to dry off. Once I've wrapped the towel around my waist and pushed open the door, I'm greeted with an empty hotel room. *Empty.* Just how I feel.

If only the silence of the room could override the thunderous commotion inside my head.

*Because I just fucked up worse than I ever have before.*

## Chapter Eleven

### STELLA

Never in my life have I ever been this fucked up in my head.

Not even when I caught my boyfriend in college making out with another guy at a party.

Yes, that happened. Yes, I sorted through all the feelings. I still talk to him. He's not with the guy he made out with, but he did thank me for helping him realize he was interested in men.

Can't hear that enough.

But I was happy for him.

Still am.

But that's beside the point.

My mind is fucked.

I stare at myself in the mirror and check out my freshly sun-soaked skin, which is highlighted by the yellow dress I chose to wear today.

No swollen lips, because he didn't kiss me.

No beard burn, because his lips barely touched me.

No feeling of satisfaction, because he didn't cuddle me after.

The only thing I feel is the need for more. For another taste.

But most importantly, for answers.

I don't know what that was last night. I have no idea where it came from. All I know is that when he first told me to leave, when I saw the determination in his eyes, I knew I was staying. I wanted to know what would happen when I disobeyed.

And I found out.

I was fucked.

Thoroughly fucked.

I came hard and fast. He rocked my world, and then when I least expected it, he left.

His rejection . . . confuses me. I know he's out of my league and I'm not what he wants. If he really did want me, I've practically thrown myself at him, so he could've had me. And last night he did, but then there was such anger in his expression afterwards. The way he swore and shoved away from me. Yelled at me to go. Pretty telling, if you ask me. He wanted to fuck. He fucked me. And, well . . . I left.

I can't really be upset, can I?

We haven't spoken since.

But my dad sure has sent enough texts to occupy my mind.

He wants to talk to me. He wants to have a sit-down, just me and him.

It's added to the mindfuckery on a whole other level.

And today . . . today is the day before my best friend gets married. Today, I need to focus on her.

I let out a deep sigh and stare at my reflection in the mirror.

“Push everything aside and focus on Greer. It's her day. No drama. No *woe is me* moments.” I smooth down my dress. “When you see Romeo, you will smile, you will act normal,

you will show not one ounce of awkward tension. The last thing Greer needs is to be worried about you.”

There.

Pep talk done.

Mindset switched.

Time to go downstairs for breakfast.

When I leave my hotel room, I tell myself I take the stairs for added exercise, not because I’m trying to avoid the elevator where I seem to keep running into people.

Once in the lobby, I greet some of the hotel attendants, snag a yellow flower from the bowl for guests to wear, prop it in my hair, and head to the restaurant where I’ve spent most of my mornings, drinking and eating with my friends.

Happy face.

I spot Greer first and give my limbs a little shake, and then I run up to her and hug her from behind. “You’re getting married tomorrow.”

Her arms go around mine and she hugs me back. “I want it to be here already.” When I release her, she turns around and asks, “Are you okay, you know, because of yesterday?”

“Doing good,” I say with a smile, and I hope I’m faking it convincingly. “Thanks for asking. I needed that moment alone last night and now I’m feeling refreshed. So, thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m good.” I look around. “Where is everyone?”

Greer nods toward the restaurant. “The guys are already eating. They were ravenous this morning. I was thinking we could grab our food from the buffet and then eat at one of the cabanas. I spoke with an attendant and he said he could set one up for us and then have people run to fill up our plates with more food, as well as keep the mimosas flowing.”

“Sounds like a dream. Has Kelvin arrived?”



Greer shakes her head. “Later tonight.”

“How is Keeks doing?”

“Better.” Greer nods. “Much better. She sent me a text last night, a very long one, about how she and Kelvin spoke on the phone and worked out their differences. Apparently, there were some movies Kelvin didn’t approve of Keiko watching but he never said anything because he didn’t want to start a fight. So, they agreed to make a hall pass list for movies.”

“Like a list of celebrities you’re allowed to have sex with, but instead of sex with someone famous, it’s movies no one gets to complain about?”

“Precisely.” Greer laughs. “Honestly, they must have the most interesting and quirky relationship I’ve ever seen, but I’m enjoying the ride.”

“Do you think Kelvin will propose soon?”

“Not sure. Keiko was saying how she has a four-year plan when it comes to getting married. They’re just coming up on year one. I think Kelvin has a while to go.”

“He’s a saint,” I say just as we spot Cora and Keiko walking up to us, arm in arm. Well, Cora has her arm looped through Keiko’s very stiff arm.

“Good morning, ladies,” Cora says. “How did everyone sleep?”

“Great.” Greer gives them a rundown of the morning and then we head toward the buffet.

I don’t look around, I don’t dare scan the dining space. I look straight at the pile of white plates. I grab one and hold it to my chest as I walk around the buffet.

Pancakes.

Waffles.

Yogurt parfaits.

Scrambled eggs.

Grits.

Nothing is catching my attention, so I walk to the omelet bar and pick up one of the questionnaire pads that let the chef know what you'd like in your omelet. I reach for a pen just as a tall, consuming figure files in next to me.

I don't need to look to the side to know who it is. I can smell his fresh cologne. I can practically feel his breath on the back of my neck as he closes in.

Goosebumps spread across my legs as I tamp down a shiver.

Sooner than expected. I didn't think he'd approach me at all. I thought he'd play the avoidance game. Either way, it doesn't matter, because this is it. Put on a good face.

Smiling, I glance up at his unshaven face, the dark scruff making him look rougher than normal. His eyes seem darker, moodier, and his hair is ruffled rather than styled, making his sex appeal that much more alluring.

"Good morning," I say.

His jaw ticks, and his eyes rake me over. "Good morning," he says gruffly.

I wave my omelet paper at him and say, "Going with the omelet today instead of the pancakes. Maid of honor duties require me to be stocked up on protein." When he doesn't say anything, I continue, "Have you gotten the sausage in your omelet? Was it good?"

"Bacon," he says crisply.

"Oh, interesting. I do prefer a sausage, though." My words connect in my head. *Oops*. "I mean, breakfast sausage. I wasn't alluding to anything else. Just breakfast sausage."

He doesn't smirk.

Not even the smallest lift of his mouth.

Instead, he stares at me as if he wants to say something but can't find the words.

The silence between us falls flat and uncomfortable.

Well, I'm not going to stand here and wait for him to speak. I can't, so I mark a few things on my paper and then hand it over to the chef.

I give the chef a quick thank you and start to walk past Romeo, but he snags my hand in his. Shoulder to shoulder, I look up at him, waiting for him to speak.

I'm about to take my hand away when he asks, "Did I hurt you?" When my brow pulls together in confusion, he elaborates, "Did I hurt you last night?"

Mentally, yes.

Emotionally, most definitely.

Physically . . . no.

He made me feel more in that moment last night than anyone has made me feel in a very long time.

But I can't say that. Not right now, not when our friends are about to get married tomorrow. Not when my head is a ball of confusion and I have no clue what I'm doing, what I want, or where I see my life going after this vacation. So, I put on my big girl pants and say, "Nope. All good." I tack on a smile, don't wait for a reply, and move past him toward the fruit bar. But I can feel his eyes on me. I can feel his dark gaze trying to cloud my thoughts.

Avoid. Avoid. Avoid.

That's all I can do.

"Kelvin is not partial to pineapple," Keiko says, walking up next to me. "But I referred him to the benefits of consuming pineapple regularly. Did you know—"

"Yes," I say quickly. "Yes, I know exactly what pineapple does for a man."

"You're aware of their semen becoming more palatable?"

Jesus Christ.

"Yes, Keiko," I say, my voice sounding more exasperated than anticipated.

“Well, dare I say Kelvin has been munching down on the pineapple all week?”

“I’d prefer you didn’t,” I say, skipping over the pineapple and grabbing more strawberries for my bowl instead.

“Are you uncomfortable talking about the intake of semen?”

I pass on the opportunity to put some cottage cheese on my plate as well because the white substance isn’t looking appetizing right now. “Just not breakfast talk, Keeks.”

“Ah, I see. Perhaps later we can discuss the intricacies of performing oral.”

“Nothing would please me more,” I say with a smile, even though the idea makes me want to slowly die inside.

After I gather my fruit, I snag a juice and then head back to the omelet station, where my omelet is thankfully ready and Romeo is nowhere to be seen.

I gather my plates and juice and find Greer’s cabana. Four loungers fill the confined yet airy space, along with two side tables that are shared between every other lounger. I take the lounger closest to Greer, straddle the sides as I sit down, and then place my meal between my legs.

Greer is the only one in the cabana with me so she leans over and asks, “What was with the exchange between you and Romeo by the omelets?”

Of course she saw that. Nothing gets by her. You’d think with her wedding tomorrow, she’d have other things on her mind, but not this girl.

I shrug. “Nothing, really.”

“Did you not notice the way he was staring at you? Possessively.”

Possessively, huh?

He sure as hell fucked me possessively last night.

Heat creeps up the back of my neck. “He was probably staring at an omelet.”

“I’m being serious, Stella.”

“So am I. I think you’re trying to make something out of nothing.”

She groans and scoops up a large spoonful of yogurt. “God, you guys are frustrating.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re clearly supposed to be together, but you can’t figure it out.”

I laugh. “Why would you think that?”

“Uh, it’s obvious, just from the looks you give each other. And all last school year, watching you two interact. It seems so flawless, your friendship.”

“Exactly. Friendship,” I say while stabbing a strawberry and bringing it to my mouth. “We’re good friends and it’s best we keep it that way.”

Greer looks over my shoulder and her expression falters as she asks, “Uh, do you agree with that, Romeo? Just friends?”

No.

No way.

Stiffly, I turn around to find him behind me, hands in pockets, his expression neutral.

Oh God, did he hear that?

I guess, what would it matter if he did? It’s not as though he wants anything more. He made that clear once he ran off to shower me *off* him after he fucked me against the wall.

“Stella, can I speak with you?” His voice is demanding, gruff, not like the man who I spent all night talking to two nights ago. For what seems like the hundredth time since we’ve been here, he’s done a one-eighty and turned into a recluse, a man hard to talk to, even harder to penetrate emotionally.

As if I’m being summoned to the principal’s office, I get up from my chair and follow Romeo to a secluded spot near

the pool house where they store the beach and pool towels.

When we're out of earshot, he says, "I wanted to speak to you about last night."

"Nothing to talk about," I say casually, taking interest in a palm leaf that's grazing my arm.

But his eyes bore into me, a deep chocolate color so mysterious that I have an incredibly hard time trying to look away, trying to read them.

"I heard."

So he did hear what I said. Great.

"Honestly, Romeo, I don't want to hash this out."

"Romeo," he says quietly while nodding his head slowly. "It's okay. I get it." He takes a step away. "Consider it forgotten."

When he starts to push past me, I stop him with my hand to his chest. "I didn't mean to forget about it. I just think this isn't the time nor place to talk about what happened."

Barely moving, his eyes track down to mine. "You've made yourself clear, Stella. I know where you stand and I'll be sure to honor that."

"And where do I stand?"

"As friends." He removes my hand from his chest and leaves, sending my mind back into an unstoppable tailspin.

I want to chase after him. I want to tell him I want so much more than just friends.

But I know there's no use. He's closed off.

What's done is done and it's probably best that way. And yet, part of me feels so sad.

*You're clearly supposed to be together, but you can't figure it out.*

Sadly, Romeo has *figured it out*. He's not willing to budge—*I know where you stand*—so what am I supposed to do? He

runs every time I try to engage, so surely I have to see from this that we're a one and done. Game over. The match decided.



“WHY AM I the only one who’s drunk?” Cora asks, her sandals in her hands as she sways back and forth.

“Don’t hog the drunk title. You’re not the only one who’s drunk,” I say, swaying next to her and looking up at the deep-blue sky.

“At least three of us are,” Greer says, giggling while she sits in a planter.

Leaning forward, Cora asks, “Do you think Keiko is giving Kelvin a blowjob right now?”

Exaggerating my movements, I nod slowly. “Oh yeah. Over dinner, she told me all about the ways to pleasure a man using only your mouth. I have to admit, I might have learned a thing or two.”

“Oh, Kelvin will be singing to the heavens tonight,” Greer says while leaning back against the brown mulch. “I think there are bugs crawling on me and I don’t even care.”

“I heard bugs crawling on you is good luck for your wedding,” Cora says.

“I think that’s rain on your wedding day,” I point out. “If only Keeks was here to set us straight.” I tip over into the planter with Greer and giggle. “Should we call her?”

Greer shakes her head. “No. She’d stop what she was doing to answer. Poor Kelvin would sit there with a stiffy, waiting to be finished off.”

Cora nods. “True. What about Lindsay and Gunner—what do you think they’re doing?”

“Something we’re not currently doing,” I answer as a piece of mulch pushes into my rear end. “Not sure this planter is as comfortable as it seems. Maybe we should get back to our rooms.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Greer says. “Mr. Turns Me On is expecting me. He might take the ruler out and reprimand me for being late.”

“Ew,” Cora complains. “Can you not talk about sex with my brother?”

“Sorry.” Greer smiles. “Hey, I have to give you my steamer for your dress.”

“Yes,” Cora says. “I’ll walk you back to your room, but you must ask Arlo if he’s clothed before we enter, because I have no desire to see my brother’s penis.”

“He’ll be clothed, I hope.” Greer turns toward me and gives me a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Eep, I’m getting married!”

“You are.” I hug her back. “See you tomorrow.”

I wave to my friends and watch them drunkenly make their way to the elevators, hand in hand. Smiling, I walk toward the stairs and lean heavily on the rail as I make my way up them. It’s always good to walk off the booze, and I’m not that drunk, just drunk enough to find stupid things funny.

Like if you look at the number nine long enough, it’ll remind you of a side-on, very sad penis with massive balls that just can’t seem to get it up. No matter how hard you tap on the number nine on your keyboard, it’ll never, ever, become aroused. Even if you put a three next to it—because three looks like boobs—it’s not going to do it. I’ve tried. I’ve attempted a thirty-nine on many occasions but nothing happens. Poor, poor nine. #flaccidforlife

I make it to my floor and walk through the stairway door toward my room. As I count the numbers, I draw closer and closer to Romeo’s room and realize I made a wrong turn somewhere. This place is a labyrinth when you’re drunk.

I pause in the hallway and try to gather myself. Okay, if I go this way, I’ll . . . possibly run into Romeo. Or wait, is it this way?

Do I want to run into him?



I ponder on that for a second and then smile to myself. I do believe I want to.

For some reason, I really want to teach him a lesson on friendship. A valuable one.

One he'll never forget.

Mind made up, I charge toward his door, after a few circles in the hallway as I decipher which way it is, and when I finally find it, I knock quite loudly despite it being later in the night.

I wait a few seconds, tap my toe on the ground, and go to raise my hand to knock again, when the door opens and Romeo stands there in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs.

Ooo boy, does he look good.

Never in my life have I seen such defined abs in person. Yeah, sure, I've seen pictures of abs online, or in *Men's Health* magazine, but to actually see them in person? Just . . . wow.

My eyes wander from his six-pack to his thick pecs to his collarbone, and then his roughly dotted five o'clock shadow to his stern eyes.

Hmm, he might not be happy to see me but I'm sure as hell happy to see him.

"What do you want, Stella?"

I lift my finger and poke him in the chest. "I'm going to teach you a lesson." And then I push past him and walk straight into his hotel room, which is silent. The TV isn't on, nor a single light besides the one by his untouched bed. "What were you doing in here?"

"Sitting on the balcony." He shuts the door. "I don't think you should be here."

"Funny. I think I should." I move toward the balcony and step outside. The cool ocean breeze picks up and I can understand why he was sitting out here. It's calming.

I feel him step up behind me. Keeping his distance, though, he stands at the threshold of the sliding glass door. "Why are you here?" he asks, his voice deep, sultry.

I turn to face him and I'm immediately caught off guard by how attractive he is. Barely any light framing him, I see an outline of his silhouette—tall, broad, defined. His dark features are barely visible, making him look even more sinister than when he opened the door.

I wet my lips and say, "To teach you a lesson." I point to a chair. "Sit."

He doesn't move, but instead grips the edge of the door tighter.

"Um, I told you to sit. It would be polite of you to oblige."

"You're drunk."

"Actually, tipsy, but thank you for trying to point out the obvious. And shouldn't you be drunk? Didn't you go out with the guys?"

"We did."

"Did you have drinks?"

"What do you think?" he asks.

Only one way to find out.

I walk up to him, press my hand to his chest, and move my face close to his, where I take a deep breath. A mixture of his intoxicating cologne and whiskey seep into my senses, and I'm immediately aroused.

Not moving, he stands there stiffly, looking out toward the ocean.

"You had some drinks, but not enough to lose control, because you always like to have control."

"Something you don't seem to let me have," he says with a voice so deep, it's almost strangled.

I smooth my hand over his chest and down his abs. "Are you saying you feel out of control around me?"

"Yes."

"Good." I step aside. "Now sit."

He still doesn't move, which only irritates me more. Fine, if he won't sit, then I'll just do what I want to do here.

And what I want to do is suck his cock.

I've thought about it all night, thanks to Keiko and her detailed descriptions at dinner. *Not about Kelvin, thank God.* But it still made me horny, the more alcohol I imbibed, the more she spoke about girth and taste. I want Brock's cock in my mouth. And now that I'm here with him standing defiantly in the doorway, I want to bring him down. Well . . . *I* want to go down—on him.

I reach for the hem of my dress and pull it up and over my head, revealing my matching set of lace lingerie. Yellow to go with my dress, it's cute, but revealing. From the enraptured look in his eyes, it's just revealing enough to drive him wild.

I move closer to him and grip his waist as I draw my breasts against his chest.

“Bra on or off?” I ask him.

He doesn't answer right away, but instead studies me and lets me draw small circles on his chest as I wait for his decision.

“Off,” he finally chokes out.

I reach behind me, unlatch my bra, and let it fall to the ground. My nipples pucker as I press them against his body. He sucks in a harsh breath, but doesn't say a word as I reach up to his hands, release them from the doorway and then guide him to one of the loungers on his balcony.

Before he sits down, I slip my hands under the waistband of his briefs and push them down to the ground, allowing his aroused cock to spring forward.

He's so sexy. His powerful thighs, his straining cock, and his spectacular chest, not to mention the soul-searching eyes that always penetrate my mind.

He stretches out on the lounger, his cock heavy on his stomach, and I move between his legs, where I lower down and let my nipples graze against his leg as I move up his body.

He keeps his hands at his sides, never touching me, but his eyes stay trained on what I'm doing. Almost as if he's allowing himself to look, but not touch.

I'm okay with that, because his look is as alluring as a caress.

When I reach his cock, I smooth my hands on either side of it and then caress up his abs to his pecs. His arousal twitches at my touch so I continue the movement, up and down, letting my breasts gently brush against him every so often.

On the fifth pass, I grow closer, causing his legs to spread wider.

On the sixth, his teeth bite down on his bottom lip.

On the seventh, his hands curl into fists.

And on the eighth pass, a low groan slips by his lips.

He's ready.

I take his cock in my hands, loving how eager it is, how primed he is for my mouth, and I roll my tongue over the head, lapping at his pre-cum. He sucks in a sharp breath and closes his eyes, as his head rests against the lounge.

The power—it's all in my hands right now. How I make him feel. How I make him lose control. It's all up to me. I want him to pant, to want more . . . *to want me*.

I swirl my tongue around the head a few more times before stopping underneath and flicking at the sensitive part of the tip. His fists grip even tighter. His legs twitch beneath me, and I notice a light sheen of sweat break out over his skin. That's when I take him all the way into my mouth until he hits the back of my throat.

He groans, and I pull back up, sucking hard, getting into the motion. One of my hands falls to the base of his cock, where I squeeze hard and start to pump in short, quick strokes. I can feel him grow tighter, I can sense he's close to his orgasm, and that's when I slowly pull my mouth off him.

There's no protest.

No communication about leaving him almost at completion.

Just heavy breathing and the connection of his eyes with mine.

And then he reaches out with one hand and cups my face. His thumb passes tenderly over my cheek, and this moment turns from wild with abandon to intimate and sensual in a matter of seconds.

At least, it does for me.

I'm not sure where he's coming from, but that gentle touch, the sweep of his thumb . . . *It's how I always want him to look at me.* I lower my mouth to his cock and take him in.

I lick along his length.

I suck the tip.

I roll his balls gently in my hand.

I pump him until his legs are tense under me.

He groans.

His chest heaves.

His stomach hollows out.

And then he's coming with a deep, earthy moan.

I let him ride out his orgasm in my mouth, and when he's done, I slowly pull away and stand from the lounge to find my dress. Forgetting the bra, I slip my dress back on, and without a retreating glance, I leave before he can stop me.

Because that was all I wanted.

That moment of taking charge.

Of having the power, at least for a second. Of taking *what I want* this time.

*Him.*



SUN BLARES through the window as my phone vibrates next to me, stirring me from my deep slumber. I lift my head off the pillow as my hair falls to either side of my body. Oh God, what time is it and what did I drink that would make me have such a bad headache?

We didn't drink that much, and yet I feel as though I guzzled an entire bottle of vodka.

My phone continues to buzz with incoming text messages. Who the hell—

Shit, it's Greer's wedding day.

I turn over so I'm face up in bed, and realize that I went to sleep wearing nothing but my lacy thong last night. My dress is tossed onto the dresser and there's a sandal resting on the pillow next to mine.

Not the first time I undressed like a maniac.

First time I did it after delivering a blowjob that made me horny enough to masturbate when I got back to my room, though.

Yup. No shame.

Had to get it somewhere, and I wasn't about to subject myself to Romeo again, not after how he blew my mind last time.

No, I needed to do my own mind-blowing. I needed to keep the control. I needed—

My phone buzzes again.

Groaning, I pick it up and start reading the messages.

***Cora:*** *AHH YOU'RE GETTING MARRIED TODAY!*

***Greer:*** *We should not have had those shots last night. You should see the bags under my eyes.*

***Lindsay:*** *I think it was the Fireball.*

***Cora:*** *Shhhh . . . we don't talk about that decision.*

***Greer:*** *I think you're right, Lindsay. It was the Fireball.*

***Keiko:** My head doesn't seem to be aching, but my cheeks are quite presently giving me grief.*

***Cora:** Dare I even ask?*

***Greer:** Oh God, did you suck Kelvin so hard your cheeks hurt?*

***Cora:** Please don't answer that.*

***Keiko:** If you're referring to the oral stimulation I took part in last night, then yes.*

***Cora:** He's not a GD lollipop, Keeks.*

***Greer:** You sucked so hard your cheeks hurt? Good grief, what does Kelvin say his penis feels like?*

***Keiko:** He would classify the pain as similar to rug burn.*

Poor Kelvin. I wonder how Romeo is feeling this morning. Satisfied? Confused? Curious?

Rug burn type of feeling?

Because I'm feeling all of those things. Except the rug burn, of course.

Does he even care how I made him feel?

Last night he felt detached, as if he were keeping me at a distance mentally, and I have no idea why. Why did he make me leave after we had sex the other night? Why does he talk to me all night, cuddle me, and then the next moment want nothing to do with me?

I'm about to text back when I get another text, but this one isn't in my friends' group chat. It's from my dad.

***Dad:** Stelly, we only have a few days left here. Would you please consider talking with me? Ashley doesn't have to be present. Just you and me.*

I sigh and exit out of the text. I still feel sick about everything that went down with my dad.

Instead, I text the girls back.

***Stella:** Pulling my aging body out of bed, taking a shower, and then will be at your beck and call. Give me twenty.*

***Greer:** Take your time. Arlo just came out of the bathroom and he has sex in his eyes.*

***Cora:** Come ON!*

***Keiko:** Kelvin just flashed me his Looney Tunes boxers and I must say, I'm feeling randy myself.*

***Stella:** Shower, yup . . . I need to get in the shower.*

***Greer:** Meet in my room in an hour. Love you.*

Closing out the texts, I drag my body out of bed and head to the bathroom, where I pick up my toothbrush and line it with toothpaste.

First thing's first—get this gross taste out of my mouth.

Cora and her stupid Fireball.

When I'm done brushing my teeth, I go to turn on the shower, when my phone rings. I glance at the screen and see my sister's face.

*Marguerite.*

I pick up the phone. "Hey, Margs."

"Did I wake you?"

"No." I take a seat on the bathroom counter and lean against the wall. The cool counter on my semi-bare ass feels like a cold glass of water down my back. If I wasn't awake before, I'm awake now. "I got up a few minutes ago."

"Okay. The time difference is crazy. It's why I haven't been able to call back. The kids are driving me nuts. I finally have some time to myself."

"Not my sweet babies. They're cherubs."

"They're hellions and you know it." I laugh and then she says, "So, Mom called me. Heard you're having fun in Hawaii."

"Yeah," I drag out. "Did she tell you everything?"

"She did."

"So, you know all about Ashley."



“Oh, yes, I do.”

“Am I crazy, or is it weird?”

“It’s weird,” she says. “It’s really weird. I don’t possibly understand where he thinks it’s okay to date someone who could be his daughter, but Mom said there’s more to the story that we don’t know.”

“Do you think he’s adopting her? Adopt an adult kind of thing?”

Margs laughs. “No. If it were only that easy. Mom made it seem as though it had something to do with Dad’s health.”

“What?” I ask, the hairs on the back of my neck sticking straight up. “He’s not sick, is he?”

“I don’t know. But Mom said she was fine with it, that she understood Dad, and that we need to sit down and talk with him, because we never know when he might not be in our life anymore.”

“Are you—wait, she used those actual words?” I ask, my voice growing with panic.

“Yes. That’s why I called you. I spoke with Angel, as well. Believe me when I say I’m not on board with Ashley, but Mom really wants us to talk to Dad. I wasn’t sure if you had a chance. Or if he looked sick . . .”

“No. He looks, healthy . . . happy,” I say, hating that I’m admitting that. “He’s different too.”

“Different, how?”

“You know how Dad was always kind of, how do I put this, uptight?”

Margs laughs. “Yes. I’m pretty sure the only joy he had when we were growing up was when he polished his shoes in silence.”

“He had more fun than that.”

“You know what I mean.”

I smile to myself, thinking of him at the kitchen table, polishing in peace. “I do know. Well, he’s not like that. He’s more loving, more open, freer. It was weird, actually, being around him. He looked like my dad, but he didn’t act like the man we grew up with.”

“Do you think it’s Ashley that’s helping him relax?”

“Probably,” I sigh. “He’s been reaching out a lot, wanting to talk. What if it’s something to do with his health?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” She pauses and then says, “I think since he’s there, you should take the chance to talk to him.”

“And then tell you so you don’t have to have the conversation?”

“Exactly.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I’ve a lot going on right now.”

“Greer’s wedding is today, right? What are you doing after that?”

“Not just Greer’s wedding,” I say quietly.

“Then what else—” She stops and I can practically hear her wheels spinning. “Wait, is Romeo there?”

God, I hate that she’s so perceptive.

“Yes, he’s one of Arlo’s best friends.”

“And did something happen between you and Arlo’s best friend?”

“Define *happen*,” I say with a wince.

“Oh my God! Something did happen. Tell me right now.”

Margs met Romeo a year ago. We ran into him at the park and needed another player for our volleyball game we were playing with Margs’s in-laws. Romeo wooed her so hard, he left with my sister totally swooning and begging me to go out with him. I told her we were friends and that was it. She’s been on my case ever since.

“Long story short, when I ran into Dad and Ashley, to save face, I told them I was engaged, as well.”

She laughs. “Real smooth. But I get it.” And this is why I’m glad Margs called me after receiving my SOS text. She gets me. Understands why I needed to save face.

“I told them it was Romeo, roped him into playing my fake fiancé, and everything was going fine until it wasn’t. I wound up making out with him in the pool to prove a point, which sparked something inside of me. After that it’s hazy, but the night before last, we . . . uh . . . he banged me against his hotel room wall.”

“Good . . . God,” she says in a deep voice. “I knew he’d be that kind of guy.”

“Yeah, did you also think he was the type of guy that would bang your sister and then tell her to leave immediately after?”

“What? He told you to leave?”

“Yes. I don’t know, Margs. He’s been so hot and cold this entire trip. I can’t read him. One second I feel as though we’re actually a couple and the next he can’t even look at me.”

“That doesn’t seem like him. He was super easygoing and fun when we hung out with him.”

“I know. He’s not like that anymore. It’s almost as if he’s keeping himself at a complete distance from me.”

“That’s so—”

There’s a knock at my door. I hop off the counter and reach for the shirt I borrowed from Romeo the other night and throw it on over my practically naked body. “Hey, someone’s at the door and I need to get ready for the wedding.”

“Avoidance, nice. But, hey, please do me a favor and meet up with Dad. Mom said she’d appreciate it if we did.” *Right. Dad.*

*It’s easier said than done.* Yes, we could speak after the wedding, but I don’t really want the high from the wedding to be dampened by talking to my dad. Even though I’m confused

by Ashley's behavior two days ago—her behavior the whole time we've been in Hawaii if I'm honest—and Mom's easy acceptance, I'm still angry.

Deep down, this hurts. I can't get past the fact that he could love someone who did so much damage to one of his daughters. Deep down, I'm still the girl that Ashley mercilessly taunted. Deep down, I'm still the unmarried girl who hasn't accomplished anything, let alone found a husband to spend the rest of her life with.

And if Dad's sick? Then he should be adult enough to talk to me about that too. I should mean enough to him that he'd want to tell *me*. Want to clear the air with *me*, rather than just wait until he sees me somewhere. Because by the time I get back from Hawaii, they would've been engaged for God knows how long, and I still wouldn't even know.

I just feel so blindsided.

Add in whatever this *isn't* with Romeo, it's just . . . overwhelming. If we weren't in this *deal* to save face, he probably wouldn't have had anything to do with me for the last week. So, I can't deal with him, and judging from yesterday, I probably won't have any friendship left with him after this.

*Because I'm not enough for him, either.*

My focus should be on Greer. She deserves that. Not Romeo. Not my dad.

"I'll think about it."

I say my goodbyes and hang up the phone. I open the door to find Romeo standing on the other side, freshly showered, and wearing green chino shorts and a plain white T-shirt.

His eyes scan me, taking in the shirt I'm wearing, and just from that one look, I know I'm in trouble.

## Chapter Twelve

### ROMEO

She's wearing my goddamn shirt.

Fresh from bed and looking so goddamn fuckable.

My eyes wander to her mouth, her wet lips, the same lips that moved up and down my cock last night.

“Hey,” she says, a little surprised. “Uh, what are you doing here?”

Good question.

What the hell am I doing here?

I can't be sure.

When she came to my room last night, I knew I couldn't say anything out of fear of what I *would* say. Just the sight of her had me aching to tell her everything, to end this nightmare I've been living in, but her words keep playing on repeat in my head.

Friends.

That's how she sees me.

At least, that's what I thought until she stripped down to her thong and sucked my cock as though it was giving her fucking life.

Hell, I jacked off this morning in the shower simply remembering how it felt to have her breasts skim along my legs.

I knew after that, I had to see her before the wedding. I need to . . . hell, I don't know what I need. Just to see her. To look her in the eyes, to try to decipher what the hell is going on.

And seeing her standing there with my shirt on doesn't calm the helpless emotions rolling through my head.

It doesn't help seeing her rumpled and beautiful.

It doesn't help that my will is slipping with every second.

And it doesn't help that she wets her lips. Those plump, delicious lips.

Fuck.

I close the space between us, slam the door behind me, slip my hand behind her head, and pull her against me, my mouth crashing down on hers.

She's shocked at first, but it takes her no longer than a second to reciprocate the kiss.

Her hand snakes around the back of my head and sifts through my hair as she pulls herself even closer.

I turn us so she's pressed against the wall again. I convince myself it's because it's a better angle, but in the back of my mind, I think it's because I don't want her getting away.

My hand falls under her shirt and then smooths to her backside, where I feel the top of her thong. I slip my hand under the band as I drive my mouth harder against hers.

Our tongues tangle together, our hands scramble for any kind of touch, and my mind hopelessly falls to what could be. What *we* could have.

But that thought turns into reality and causes me to pull away.

"Fuck," I mutter as I back away and stick my hands in my pockets, keeping them to myself. "That's . . . that's not why I

came here.”

Stunned, her fingers fall to her lips in wonder and she asks, “Why *did* you come here?”

“I—I don’t know.” My eyes lift to hers and, fuck, I can’t take it anymore. I can’t hold back. “I . . . hell, I don’t know what’s going on between us.”

“Me neither,” she says, unsure, nervous.

“And I don’t know how to navigate any of this.”

“Me neither,” she repeats while twisting her hands together.

“Okay.” I take another step back. “Then what should we do?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know.” She glances to the side and I spot her bridesmaid dress. “We have a wedding to attend.”

“We do.” I nod.

Her eyes land on mine again and then she says, “Save a dance for me?”

The tension in my body eases. I see the small olive branch she’s extending, so I take it. “You can have all my dances if you want.”

“Yeah?” she asks, hopeful. That hope gives me life.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” She smiles. “Then I guess I’ll see you at the wedding.”

I step toward the door. “Yeah. See you at the wedding.” I reach for the handle, when she stops me, her hand on mine.

“I’m sorry if last night was—”

“Last night was phenomenal,” I say, my voice rough. “I only wish I got the chance to return the favor.”

She smirks sheepishly. “I took matters into my own hands.”

My eyes narrow. Fuck, what I wouldn't have given to make her come, or to even watch her come for that matter. In a stern voice, I say, "Next time, don't."

"Don't what?"

I lift her hand and bring her index and middle finger to my mouth, where I place a soft kiss. "Don't take matters into your own hands. Let me."

And on that note, I take off down the hall to my room, where I need to fucking gather myself before the wedding.

Today is about Arlo and Greer, and I need to make sure it stays that way. Whatever's happening between me and Stella can wait, even if I'm desperate for more.

Desperate for her touch.

For her mouth.

For her hand in mine.



"YOU HAVE BEWITCHED me body and soul," Arlo says, quoting *Pride and Prejudice*. "And I love, love, love you."

Greer's eyes well with tears. She dabs at them with the small blue handkerchief she's kept tucked tightly in her hand.

The day is absolutely beautiful. Not a cloud in the sky, the sun setting at just the right moment—when they're about to seal their vows with a kiss—and the moment could not be more perfect against the orange backdrop of the sky and the blue ocean. Colorful native flowers cascade from a trellis built from boughs of trees and dot the aisle, where a few white chairs are set up for guests. Even though Arlo and Greer have a wedding party, they decided we didn't need to stand up with them, but could relax and take in the picturesque view.

Stella is sitting with Keiko, Kelvin, and Greer's family, while I'm sitting with Cora, Gunner, and Lindsay. It's intimate and perfect.



In the background, a ukulele plays “Dream a Little Dream” as the officiant closes his book. “It is my honor to announce for the first time Mr. and Mrs. Arlo Turner. You may kiss your bride.”

We all cheer while Arlo and Greer lean in and kiss. Arlo’s hand clutches Greer possessively, and I can’t help but wonder if that’s what I look like when I kiss Stella.

The tight hold.

The close body language.

The flex in his fingers, clinging on.

I know that’s how I feel when she’s in my arms. She’s only been there less than a handful of times, but it’s been enough.

Enough to remind me that even though I’ve tried to walk away several times, I keep coming back for more. Enough for me to realize I don’t want anyone else.

Greer and Arlo pull apart and start walking down the aisle, hand in hand. As Arlo passes me, I offer him a fist bump that he accepts, surprisingly, but then again, he’s been anything but uptight today. I’ve actually never seen him happier. It’s as if everything has come together for him and he can finally breathe.

I know the feeling of constricted lungs.

I know what it feels like not being able to take a breath.

I’m in the middle of it right now.

Once they’re down the aisle, we filter out behind them and head straight into the cocktail hour, which seems silly since there are no more than twenty people here.

Before the wedding, we took pictures as a group. Greer did a grand reveal with Arlo so they could get group pictures out of the way, and now that the sun is setting, I know they’re going to take advantage of the scenery with the photographer.

“What a gorgeous night,” Cora says next to me while looping her arm through my arm. She chuckles. “I never thought I’d see the day when my brother settled down and got

married, but I don't think I could've picked someone better for him. I adore Greer."

"I knew the moment I saw them interact. Sparks were flying. They were meant to be together."

"Kind of like you and Stella, right?" she asks with a cheeky grin. When I don't say anything, she tugs on my arm. "Come on, Romeo, don't bullshit me. You might bullshit her and hide your feelings from her, but you can tell me."

I glance at Stella, who's talking with Keiko and Kelvin by the small bar.

"It's complicated," I say quietly. "Why, has she said anything to you?"

She shakes her head. "No, is there something to say?"

"No." I glance down at my feet. "Nothing to tell."

"There's chemistry there, Romeo. Everyone sees it."

"I know," I answer quietly. *We* know we have chemistry in spades, but that's something easy to achieve with someone as sexual as Stella. "But it's not that easy. We're friends." *I could see her as my best friend that I share my whole world with. If she wants that.*

"Friends is the best place to start when it comes to a relationship." She unlocks her hand from my arm and gives my forearm a squeeze. "I think you'd be surprised how much closer you both actually are. Stella's just as comfortable with you as she is with us, and that should say something. She really likes you, Romeo. Why not consider more? Give it some thought." She glances over at the food table. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've some Spanx to take off and some food to shovel in my mouth."

She leaves my side and I look at Stella again.

Fucking gorgeous.

She's wearing a lavender full-length dress that cuts low in the back, the fabric settling just above her ass. The front is cut high and wrapped tightly around her neck, offering no view of her cleavage. But she doesn't need to offer more, because the

way the dress hangs and hugs her body, nothing is left to the imagination. And the high-cut slit in the front also adds a layer of sexy I wasn't expecting. Her hair is styled in long waves, floating down her exposed back. She has small pieces pulled back from her face and a matching flower tucked behind her ear. Honestly, when I first saw her walk down the aisle to her chair, she stole my breath.

I know it's shitty to say at someone else's wedding, but I couldn't take my eyes off her, and during the ceremony, I had to force myself to pay attention.

She laughs at something Kelvin says and then accepts her drink from the bartender. She brings it up to her mouth and takes a small sip before nodding.

"Stare a little longer, man," Gunner says, coming up to me.

I let out a long breath and turn toward him with a smile. "When are you getting married?"

He chuckles. "Nice avoidance." He glances over at Lindsay, who's filling up a plate of food with Cora. "Soon, man. Really fucking soon."

"Yeah?" I ask. I don't know why I sound surprised. Lindsay and Dylan—their son Gunner didn't know he had until a year ago—moved in, and they're already a family, so marrying Lindsay would just be sealing the deal.

"Got to talk to the big man to see how he thinks I should propose, and of course, I need his help picking out a ring."

"You're going to involve Dylan? That's pretty great of you, man."

"Couldn't think of doing it any other way," Gunner says. "By the way, I got a call from Adam Lee today. There's a voicemail telling me he'll call me back."

Oh shit.

Sweat breaks out on the back of my neck. I hope to *fuck* he didn't say anything to Gunner.

"Do I need to be concerned?" he asks.

I swallow hard and calmly shake my head. “No.”

Fuck.

I didn’t think they would call, not in a million years. Let alone call Gunner. How did they even find his number?

“Are you sure?” he asks with a questioning stare.

“Yeah, nothing to worry about,” I answer, my throat growing thick with nerves.

“Because you’d tell me—”

“Like I said, nothing to worry about.” I smile and then say, “I’m going to get a drink. Want anything?”

“I’m going to grab something for me and Lindsay after I run to the bathroom.” He eyes me but doesn’t say anything. He leaves for the bathroom, allowing me to let out a shaky breath.

Jesus.

That’s not something I need to worry about right now.

Even though I want to know why he called . . .

Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I go to the bar and order a beer, which they pour into a tall glass for me. When I turn around, I find Stella walking toward me. She’s tentative, but also determined. Her silky dress flows over her body, sensually defining her legs as she closes the distance between us.

She’s so fucking beautiful it hurts.

I don’t even think she realizes it.

“You look good in a suit, Romero,” she says, surprising me with my last name.

I smoothly look her over and say, “You look fine as fuck, Garcia.”

“I’m not wearing a bra,” she whispers, and my eyes go to her breasts.

I wet my lips and take a sip of my beer. “Yeah, I can tell.”

“And you should see the underwear Greer got me.”

“Is that an invitation?” I ask, raising my brow.

She smirks. “Only the lucky ones get to see it.”

Feeling as though she’s flirting, I ask, “And how does one become a lucky one?”

“By helping me out of my dress,” she says with a wink and then nods toward the food. “Want to grab something to eat?”

*Yeah, you.*

“Sure,” I answer.

We head to the buffet of appetizers and fill a plate full of coconut shrimp, beef and horseradish on a piece of toast thing, and fried mac and cheese balls. Have to admit, even though Arlo is a classy, uptight motherfucker, he went easy on us with the food. I think a lot of that is from Greer’s input. I think if this were all on Arlo, we’d be feasting on high-priced and unpronounceable tartare and fish eggs.

Once we’ve made our selections, we set down our plates and drinks on an empty high-top table.

Stella turns toward me and says, “So, I have a bet going on with Kelvin.”

“You have a bet with Kelvin?”

That mischievous grin, her lightheartedness—it eases my chest and reminds me how easy it is to talk to Stella. How much fun I’ve always had hanging out with her. One of the main reasons why I started to fall for her. She makes me laugh.

*She makes me happy.*

“Yup.”

“I didn’t think Kelvin was a betting man.”

“I think there’s more to Kelvin than we know. Also, word on the street is, things were, uh . . . adventurous in their hotel room last night, so Kelvin is in a very good mood.” *Probably not as good as how I felt after Stella finished sucking me off.*

I chuckle. “God, I don’t even want to know.”

“Trust me, you don’t. Keiko went on and on about sexual acts last night.”

“Yeah?” I bring my beer to my lips. “Anything in particular? Anything . . . you might have partaken in?”

She looks away slyly. “Maybe.”

“Ah, so I have Keiko to thank.” I make a joke, hoping it does well, and when she laughs, I realize that maybe the awkwardness might fade away.

“No, you have Fireball to thank.”

I pick up a coconut shrimp and ask, “So, what’s the bet with Kelvin?”

“He doesn’t think Keiko will dance tonight. I told him one drink down and she’ll be on the dance floor.”

“You gave her one drink?”

“Oh yeah. I got her drink for her and asked the bartender to make it strong. She’ll be dancing. Guaranteed.”

“You don’t play fair, Stella.”

Her eyes flash up to mine. “I play fair.”

“Yeah? Is that why I jacked off with glue?”

She snorts and covers her mouth with her hand. “Oh my God, I gave you that lotion?”

“Yeah, I thought my penis was shedding.”

She laughs so hard that tears come to her eyes. “Oh, that’s amazing.”

“It wasn’t. And what about you having me blow bubbles to avoid eels?”

Her head tilts back as she laughs some more. “That was your own choice. I didn’t force you to do that.”

“You scared me enough.”

“You’re a grown man, Brock. You shouldn’t be scared of a little eel.”

“I can be scared by whatever the hell I want.”

*Even you.*

“Mature,” she says, her eyes full of humor.

“Not to mention tearing my pants down on the beach . . .”

She points her finger at me. “That was a complete accident. I wasn’t planning on flashing your manhood to everyone. It just happened that way.”

“Sure,” I drag out with humor. “How are things with your dad, by the way?”

The humor that was in her eyes quickly extinguishes as she plays with a crumb on her plate.

“Something happened, and I’m not sure we ever talked about it.”

“Yeah. I don’t think I want to talk about it, not right now. This night is supposed to be fun, and that’s what I want—fun.” She sighs. “This whole trip has been anything but relaxing. We go back to school in two weeks and I’m not ready yet. I’m not ready to be a teacher again. I want . . . fun.”

I watch the froth in my beer slowly dissolve and dissect her words and the tone in her voice. She wants fun. I can’t blame her. This entire trip has been one incident after the other.

Fake engagement.

Pranks gone wrong.

Emotions getting twisted and turned in every direction.

Unbelievable sex with zero follow-up.

We haven’t relaxed, and I think it’s time that we both take a second to do so.

“Then let’s have fun,” I say.

“Fun with you?” She cutely points at me. “I think you forgot the definition of fun.”

“You obviously don’t know me as well as you thought you did.”

She scoffs. “Oh, I know you. And do you know how many times I’ve asked you to be fun this trip?”

“Clearly not enough,” I say with a smile.

“Clearly.” She tilts her head to the side as she takes me in, something brewing in that beautiful mind of hers. “You know, I feel like a betting person tonight.”

“Oh yeah?” I sip my beer.

She nods. “Yeah. Care to wager?”

“What’s on the table?”

“Fun. For the rest of the trip, we forget about the arguments, the misjudgments, the awkward energy between us, and instead, we just have fun.”

“What does ‘fun’ entail?” I ask.

“Anything that brings us joy.”

“Anything?” I raise my brow.

She smirks. “Anything.”

Fun with Stella in a tropical location. I’ve been miserable ever since I got here. The constant tugging on my feelings, the avoidance, the headaches from holding back. Frankly, I’m over it.

I’m tired.

I’ve lost any ability to stay away from her now. Might as well just dive in headfirst.

Maybe I’ll regret it later. Maybe this will end in serious heartbreak for me since she’s been adamant about the friends thing. But this might be my only goddamn chance to have another taste of her.

And the hell if I’m going to let that chance slip through my fingers.

“All right. I’m in.”

“Really?” she asks, looking surprised.



“Yeah. I could use a break from whatever the hell has been going on here.”

She laughs. “That means you can’t be cranky, grouchy, mean, evasive—”

“I get it. You want fun.”

“I want us back.”

I tip her chin up with my finger. “Then you got it.”

“But I’m going to hold you accountable. So, if at any point in time, you go back to the bitter, resentful Romeo, I get to cash in.”

“And what exactly are you cashing in on?”

“First week of school, you need to choose a day that you show up to teach physical education in a dress.”

The corners of my lips tip up. “Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

“So very much.”

“And what if you lose this bet?”

“I won’t,” she answers with an abundance of confidence.

“You’re that sure?”

“I’m that sure.”

“Well, humor me.”

“Fine.” She gives it some thought and then says, “If *I* knock the fun out of our sails, which won’t happen, but if it does, I’ll bring you coffee from Frankie Donuts every day for a week.”

I shake my head. “Too easy. I have to wear a dress. You need something a lot more damaging than a few cups of coffee.”

“Okay, then you come up with something.”

“Hmm.” I scratch my chin, making a show of pondering the stakes. She playfully pushes me. “I got it. If you become

the ruiner of fun, then you must wear my old baseball uniform to school in the first week.”

“Your actual uniform?”

I nod.

“But you’re massively bigger than me.”

“Hence, why it would be amazing to see. Hat included.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “How come my punishment seems worse?”

“I thought you weren’t worried, since there’s no way you’ll ruin the fun.”

Her face scrunches up cutely. “You’re right. I’m not worried.” She holds out her hand. I take it in mine and we shake on it.

“You’re on, Stella. Look out, all the fun is coming your way.”

“We’ll see . . . grumpy.”



“SOMEONE NEEDS TO CUT KEIKO OFF,” Stella says as we finish our dinner.

Keiko is out on the dance floor, dancing by herself, feeling the flow of the music. Stella easily won her bet with Kelvin, who doesn’t seem to care as he watches her every move with the look of a man who’s completely and utterly infatuated with his girlfriend.

“Why would you want to cut her off? Are you—are you trying to ruin her fun?” I ask, leaning back in my chair and swinging my arm up onto the back of hers.

“No,” she drags out. “She’s going to have a rough morning tomorrow if we don’t, which will make the morning rough for all of us, because hungover Keiko is a nightmare. And, for the record, I’m allowed to ruin other people’s fun, just not yours.”

“That wasn’t originally drawn in our contract. Are you making that an addendum?”

“Lawyer talk is one way to take the fun out of things.”

I laugh and tug on her hair. “You going to eat that cake?”

“Planned on it. Why, do you want it?”

“Wouldn’t hurt you to share,” I answer.

“You already ate your cake. Stop trying to steal mine.”

“Not steal,” I say while reaching for her fork and spearing a piece of the cake, only to bring it to her mouth. She parts her lips and I slip the cake in her mouth. “Just sharing.”

I pick up another bite, but this time, I place it in my mouth and smooth my lips over the fork.

Her eyes track my movements, and when I bring the fork back to the cake, she takes it from me and cuts herself a bite. I watch as she carefully places it in her mouth and then drags her lips over the metal tines.

“Keep doing that, see where it gets you,” I say.

She picks up a bite for me, and I open up for her. “You’re the one who started it.”

I chew the cake and swallow. “At this rate, we’re going to be having a lot of fun.”

Together, we finish her cake. Everyone else goes out on the dance floor. Keiko and Kelvin find an odd rhythm together. It doesn’t match the music, but it works for them. Gunner and Lindsay opt for making out on the dance floor. Cora is dancing with Greer’s brother, who looks so uncomfortable it’s almost comical. The bride and groom are twirling around the dance floor, and Greer’s parents are doing the mom and dad shuffle to the beat of the music, back and forth, but that’s about it.

Which leaves me and Stella.

“Care to dance?”

She dabs at her mouth with a napkin. “Well, you did say you’d save a dance for me,” she says. “Think you can handle

me?”

“I know I can.” I stand from my chair and hold out my hand. With a smile, she takes it, and I lead her out onto the dance floor as the song changes to something slow.

Just what I was hoping for.

Keeping her hand in mine, I lift it up and then move my other hand to her exposed lower back, where I rest it just above the curve of her ass.

She looks up at me and grins. “Getting pretty close to the goods, don’t you think?”

I swipe my pinky finger under the fabric of her dress and say, “Nah, still have some room until I get to that naughty underwear you talked about. Which, care to give me any kind of hints about it? I love a good guessing game.”

She allows me to lead our gentle sway. “It’s unlike anything I’ve worn before, but I could see myself wearing them more often for special occasions.”

“A pair of underwear you’ve never worn before?” I ask. What could that be? Curious, I move my hand a little lower until all my fingers slip under her dress. They graze over what feels like lace, and I keep my hand there as I say, “Lace. You wore lace last night.”

“You remember,” she says, surprised.

“I remember everything from last night,” I say seriously. “All the way down to how your nipples felt grazing my legs.”

Her eyes darken. “Liked that, did you?”

“Babe, I liked everything.”

Her fingers curl into my hairline as she asks, “Any guess on the underwear?”

“Lace thong? But you wore that last night.”

“It’s sort of a lace thong. Greer is wearing one, as well. She gave one to all of us, besides Keiko. Keiko would never in her life wear such a thing. She actually gave us a laundry list of why the underwear is so unpractical.”

“Unpractical, huh?” I give it a thought. “Are they crotchless?”

“Mm, not really.”

Now I’m really fucking curious.

“But moving and swaying with you, it’s making me . . . horny.”

I pause and I can feel myself growing stiff instantaneously. “Is it vibrating underwear?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “No, but from the look in Greer’s eyes, I don’t think she’s going to stay out here much longer.”

I glance over at the happy couple, and Stella is right. Greer looks as though she’s in her own bubble of ecstasy. Arlo is holding her tight, one hand curling around her back while the other tips up her chin, and she speaks to him quietly.

“I bet you she’s telling him what she’s wearing right now,” Stella whispers. “Look at Arlo’s eyes, how they became darker. There’s no doubt in my mind that he knows. That she’s telling him how they make her feel. That she’s giving him a detailed description of the way they rub against her clit.”

*Fucking A.*

My dick surges in my pants, begging for me to find out. I know she’s teasing me—she’s doing this on purpose—and hell, it’s working. And given our new bet, there’s no way in hell I’ll be stopping this train to “fun” town.

With my throat feeling clogged with lust, I ask, “Are you feeling the same way?”

“Yes.”

“What feels best? Side to side movements? Back and forth?”

“Side to side,” she says, her eyes slowly shutting only to pop open again when I dip her to the side. Her mouth drops open while a small exhalation pushes past her lips.

“Could I have everyone’s attention?” Arlo asks as the music cuts out. “Greer and I are going to head out.” Shocking, since Greer looks as though she’s about to orgasm. Her poor family. “We want to thank you so much for being a part of our special day. It means the world to us that you were here to celebrate our love. But this isn’t the end. Wedding festivities continue for the rest of the week, starting with brunch tomorrow down by the beach. Thank you again.” Greer waves with Arlo and then they take off, hand in hand.

“They are so going to bang,” Cora says, coming up to us, taking in the scene in front of her: my hand down Stella’s dress; her hand tangled in my hair. “Apparently, they’re not the only ones.”

Stella releases me but stays close. “Are you wearing the underwear Greer gave you?”

Cora shakes her head. “No, after walking in them for the first few minutes, I realized I’d be so horny by the end of the night, I might offer Keiko and Kelvin a threesome.”

Stella and I both laugh.

“Why, are you still wearing them? Clearly Greer is.”

Stella nods. “Yup.”

Cora glances up at me and pats my chest. “If you play your cards right, you might be in for one hell of a night.” She looks over her shoulder as the party starts to clear out. “I think I’m going to head up to my room with the rest of that cake and eat myself into a coma. That’s what happens when you go on a romantic vacation alone.”

“You can hang out with us,” Stella says, and I curse the words the minute she says them.

But Cora lets out a short, concise laugh. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” She motions between the two of us. “Not sure what’s happening here, but whatever it is, it’s electric, and I’m not about to be the third wheel. Thanks, though. The cake and I will have a great time alone.” She gives Stella a hug and then gives me another pat on the chest. “Make smart choices, you two.”

That leaves just us as everyone else clears out.

That was a very quick departure.

“What now?” Stella asks me.

I take her hand in mine and say, “Follow me.”



“YOU’RE SERIOUS,” Stella says, more as a statement than a question.

I slip my socks off and nod. “Never been more serious.” I toss my tie to the ground and hold my hand out. “Scared?”

“No.”

“Then what’s holding you back?”

“The walk back to the hotel. Everyone will get a view of my boobs.”

“You can wear my jacket.” I tug on her arm. “Come on.”

Her eyes fixate on the dark abyss of the ocean and then back to me. “Don’t let go of my hand.”

“Trust me, babe, if your dress is as revealing as I hope it is when wet, I won’t be going anywhere.”

That puts a smile on her face, and then she takes off running, pulling me with her. The sand sinks beneath our feet, but as we near the shore, the ground becomes firmer and firmer until we hit the water, fully dressed in our wedding gear—for the most part.

When the water hits our thighs, I pick her up, hold her close to my chest, and then sink us both under a wave, the tail end of her yell fading beneath the water. As we surface, I cling to her, making sure she doesn’t drift away, and I’m surprised by the cheerful laugh with which I’m greeted.

“Why is the water colder than I expected?” she asks, floating next to me.

I push my hair back and say, “Probably because it’s late at night.” I take in her wet face, drops of water cascading down her beautiful features, her hair clinging to her neck. Since I can touch the sand, I stand so the water is at hip height and pull her up with me, watching as her silky dress clings to every part of her form.

Her nipples are dangerously hard, poking against the fabric that outlines every part of her mouthwatering and sexy frame. “Yeah, this was a great decision.”

Her eyes roam over my white dress shirt that no doubt is see-through and clinging to me. “Yeah, I agree.” Her hand roams over my pec. “Great decision.”

Chuckling, I pull her back down into the water and wrap her legs around my waist. “How are you feeling? Still horny?” I wiggle my brows.

Laughing, she presses her hand to my face. “Sort of, but also light. Carefree.”

“So, I’m doing my job. I think it’s your turn to bring the fun.”

“Oh yeah? And what are you envisioning?”

My hand floats up to the back of her neck. “Does this dress unclasp?”

“I’m not about to be topless in the water with you.”

“Now who’s the fun spoiler?”

“You know we’re not supposed to be out here, according to the beach rules. Someone will spot us and I don’t want them flashing their headlights on my headlights.”

“Jesus.” I laugh out loud. “Don’t call your tits headlights.”

“Why not? Whenever you see them, you look like a deer caught in the headlights.”

I smooth my hand over her ass, then give it a pinch. She yelps. “If that’s the case, then I should call my dick a spotlight.”

“Oh my God, don’t be cheesy.”



“Uh, you were the one who brought the cheese factor. Not me. I was just piling on top of it.”

“Which makes it worse. My comment was cute cheesy, yours was cheesy cheesy.”

“Who made you the judge on cheesiness?”

“Me.” She smiles and loops her arms around my neck. “Ever dry hump in the ocean?”

I nearly choke on my own saliva.

“Uh, no.” I cough.

“Interesting. Well, don’t think it’s going to start now.”

“Seriously?” I move my hands to her ass, trying to feel through the fabric what underwear she’s wearing. “Then why bring it up?”

“Just an honest, getting-to-know-you question.”

“Poor timing.”

Her fingers drive up the back of my head, sifting through my hair. “Aw, are you horny too?”

“Do you not feel how hard I am?”

“I just thought that was a flashlight.”

“You’re such a fucking tease.” We float with the waves. I push off the sand beneath me to make sure the waves don’t submerge us, and it’s peaceful.

Serene.

Just the moment I was looking for.

“Let’s talk about the rest of our vacation.”

“Okay, what do you want to talk about?” I ask her, moving my hands under her dress now and finding the lace waistband of her underwear.

“There’s an itinerary.”

“There is.”

“And there are a lot of fun things on the itinerary.”

“Yes, there are.” I move my hands farther south, only finding bare ass.

“Care to be my partner in crime with all of the things?”

“Are you asking me to be your boy toy?”

The most innocent, yet sexy, laugh pops out of her mouth as her head falls back. “I mean, if that’s what you want to call yourself.”

“I’m good with that.”

“No strings attached?” she asks, as a series of waves hit our backs.

Without stumbling, I say, “No strings attached.” Because I know that’s the only way I’m going to get her, and at this point, no strings attached is better than nothing.

I move my hands inward until they connect with something round and smooth.

She smirks.

I move my hand farther down, connecting with another round, smooth object.

“Can you guess?”

I shake my head. “Seems as though I need to become more proficient in lingerie.”

“If you’re lucky, you’ll find out by the end of the night.”

“I damn well better find out,” I say with a tone that makes her snuggle even closer.

“Excuse me,” a voice calls, coming from the beach. “The beach is closed. You can’t be in the water right now.”

Stella buries her head in my shoulder as she whispers, “Told you.”

I lift my hand to the worker and say, “Sorry about that. We’ll be out in a second.”

“Thank you. I left some towels for you.”

“Appreciated, man,” I say as he walks away. “Even when we get in trouble, we still get catered to.” With her legs still wrapped around me, I walk us out of the ocean.

“It’s incredibly hot that you’re still holding me,” she whispers. “I could see this scene unfold in a movie. Water dripping off the hunk, forearms rippling, sensual music playing in the background.”

“Rippling forearms?”

“You know you have good forearms, don’t even deny it.”

“I’m not, just surprised you noticed.” We reach the dry sand and I set her down.

“Uh, I noticed the first day I met you.”

I pause in our pursuit to the towels. “Really?”

She turns toward me. “God, don’t milk the compliment.”

“I’m not milking it, just surprised. Never thought you looked at me like that.”

She faces me now, and that’s when I see her entire body draped in her wet dress. And, fuck . . . yeah, I’m going to find out what kind of underwear she’s wearing. There’s no way in hell I’m not. Her dress molds around her breasts, the sight making my thoughts incoherent, turning my brain into a scrambled mush.

“It’s hard not to notice how attractive you are, *Romeo*,” she says with a humorous lilt, while her hand presses to her hip.

“Yeah, but you’ve never told me.”

“And why would I? So you could let it go to your head, like you’re doing right now? No, thank you. I suggest we move on or I’m going to take back what I said.”

“Can’t take it back. It’s already out there in the world.” I reach down and shake out a towel for her. “Here, I can tell you’re cold.”

She glances down at her chest and then back up at me. “Maybe this is just how my nipples are.”

“Afraid they’re not. As your fake fiancé, I’ve been keeping track.”

“What a noble man I’ve attached myself to.”



“THIS COULD NOT BE MORE PERFECT.” Stella breaks off another piece of Pop-Tart and places it in her mouth as we sit in front of one of the fire pits set up for guests.

“Cherry Pop-Tarts are fucking fire.” I break off a piece as well and savor the sugary goodness. “I can’t remember the last time I had one.”

“Yeah, your six-pack makes that obvious.”

“Ooo, another compliment. I need to start making notes of these in my phone.”

“Don’t be obnoxious.”

“It’s in my blood, babe. You should know that by now.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right.”

“Did you ever think Greer and Arlo’s wedding would end like this for you?” I ask as I take a sip of the Powerade we bought to share.

“Sharing a Pop-Tart with you while in drenched wedding attire, sitting in front of a bonfire? No, I never would’ve seen this coming.” She pauses and catches my eyes. “Glad it did, though.”

“Keep saying shit like that and you’re going to give me butterflies.”

She pushes at me. “Please. I’m sure you’ve heard better. Tell me, what was the best pickup line ever used on you?”

“Pickup line?” I scratch the side of my jaw. “Uh, well, girls really don’t use pickup lines, at least not with me. I did have one girl after a game in Chicago hop the fence, run up to me, and say ‘I’ll suck your cock right here, right now.’”

“Seriously?” Stella asks, shocked and amused. “Did you let her?”

“No. Jesus. Who knows where her mouth has been if she’s willing to scale a fence and risk security to suck me off?”

“That’s what you’re worried about, where her mouth has been? Not the people who might see you, the bad press, or your morals?”

“Always got to think about diseases first, morals second.” I tap the side of my head.

“Were you thinking about diseases when you were slamming me against the wall with your cock?”

I choke on the Powerade, and she slaps my back until I can actually breathe again. With the back of my hand, I wipe my mouth. “Jesus, Stella.”

She chuckles. “What? It’s true. That happened.”

“Well aware that happened.”

“So, were you concerned about diseases?”

Regaining myself, I say, “Nah, you’re practically a nun.”

Her eyes flash to mine. “I am not a nun.”

I tap my chin. “I believe we talked about the last time you kissed someone . . .”

“Uh, if that’s the case and you’re calling me a nun, then you’re an age-old monk.”

I shrug. “No shame in it. I know what I want, when I want it. It’s quality, not quantity, babe.”

She sits a little taller. “Are you calling me quality?”

“Fuck. Yes.”

She smiles to herself.

“Like that compliment?” I ask her.

“Yeah . . . yeah I do.”

## Chapter Thirteen

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### STELLA

I'm nervous.

I'm shaking in my own skin.

I can't keep my eyes off him.

And I sure as hell can't keep my hands to myself, either.

*I know what I want, when I want it. It's quality, not quantity, babe.*

I'm swooning.

I don't swoon. I'm not that girl. But dear God, seeing Romeo in his wet, rumpled shirt with his corded chest on display, the fire lighting up one side of his handsomely chiseled face, mixed with his words . . . I was struck with lust.

Not just a wave of lust, but a tsunami.

My breathing became heavier.

My head became foggier.

And my body started thrumming for what's to come.

For what's about to happen right now as I walk hand in hand with him to his room, wearing his suit jacket and feeling the electric energy bounce between us.

I asked for fun and I think he's about to give it to me.

He unlocks his door and lets me in first. Light from the resort filters in through the window, offering just enough visibility in the room for me to navigate around the furniture.

Romeo shuts the door behind me and drops our things on the floor, not even bothering with decorum. I face the balcony, loving the way the moon reflects off the beautiful water.

I feel his body move up behind mine first, followed by his hands to my shoulders, where he very slowly peels his coat off. It pools onto the floor, around my legs, as his hands smooth up my arms, spreading a wave of goosebumps all over my skin. When he reaches the back of my neck, he finds the clasp to my dress and undoes it. Since the clasp is the only thing holding up the dress, it falls to the floor as well, exposing my entire backside to him.

I hear a soft intake of breath as his fingers track down my spine, to the swell of my ass, and then to my thong.

“Pearls,” he says softly while caressing the white balls. Keeping his hand on my back, he slowly moves to my front, his eyes eating me up, promising carnal things are about to come. And when he sees the front of my underwear, he groans. “Fuck, Stella.”

His fingers glide over the pearly strand that connects front to back.

“You wore this all night?”

“Yes,” I say breathlessly.

“And this is why you’ve been turned on?”

I nod. “It feels amazing, rubbing against my clit.”

His jaw ticks and he studies me for a few seconds before he starts to undo his dress shirt, but when he gets to the last button, he doesn’t take it off, instead, he lets it stay open, revealing a portion of his toned and tanned skin. Then, he whips his belt from his waist and tosses it to the side. Just one look at the large bulge in his pants and I know he’s turned on.

Interlocking my hand with his, he brings me to the couch, where he takes a seat first, spreads his legs just enough, and

then pulls me down onto his lap so I'm facing him. He rests his hands to the side and says, "I want you to ride me, while wearing that underwear. I want you to get off on those pearls and I want to watch it."

That won't take long, especially when I can feel the ridge of his cock against my center and when I get to stare at him, feel his chest, while riding out my orgasm.

But I start slow because I'm going to enjoy this moment. I'm going to let myself not rush, not worry. We're both here. We both want this. Today was full of buildup for this single moment, and I'm going to prolong it as much as I can.

I move my hair to one side and then rest my hand on his chest as I start to move my pelvis up and down on his bulge. Immediately his eyes turn hazy as his hands fall to my thighs, his thumbs pressing inward, lighting me up even more with such a simple touch.

"You're so hard," I say, continuing to move over him.

"You turn me on, Stella."

His confession makes me pause, and when I meet his eyes, I know he's telling the truth. There's a sense of vulnerability showing, the type I've never seen from him before. It's new. It's different. It's provocative. *I love it.*

With his hands, he encourages me to keep going, so instead of trying to figure out what he means by that, what all of this means, I push my thoughts out of my head and live in the moment.

The pearls glide over my clit as I ride him.

His hands travel up my stomach to my breasts and he lightly squeezes them.

"How do you like your tits played with?" he asks.

"Sucked," I gasp as I feel the first ache of an impending orgasm.

"Is that what you want right now? For me to suck them?"



I nod and lean forward, bringing my chest closer. He takes one of my breasts in his hand, squeezes it, and then sucks my nipple into his mouth.

“Yes, Brock,” I say, bracing myself on his shoulders now.

With my encouragement, he sucks harder then cups my other breast and rolls my nipple between his fingers.

A bolt of pleasure throbs impatiently between my legs as I rock harder, faster.

“Fuck,” he groans before pulling my other breast in his mouth and paying it the same attention.

A tingling sensation erupts over my body, starting at my hands and pumping hard up my arms, down my back, and to my center, where my clit rubs relentlessly over the pearls.

The feeling of the delicate beads over my clit drives me mad.

The pressure of his mouth on my breasts ignites my body.

And when he pinches my nipples, with his teeth and with his hand, euphoria screams through me.

My pussy clenches, my body quakes, and I’m thrust over the edge as my orgasm rips through my body.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper in disbelief as wave after wave of bliss tears through me.

Romeo continues to help me ride out my pleasure until I collapse against his chest, my lungs trying to take in as much air as possible as my body floats back down from the clouds.

“Oh my God,” I mutter as his hand slowly traces up and down my spine.

Quietly, he whispers into my ear, “Watching you come apart like that was by far the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.” His hand trails down to my ass, where he drags his fingers along the pearl strand and then back up. “Drenched. *For me*. You’re so goddamn beautiful, Stella. Every part of you.”

Once again, goosebumps raise along my skin as he talks sweetly to me, his fingers trailing softly.

“I remember when I first saw you in the teachers’ lounge. You weren’t what I was expecting when it came to the new Spanish teacher. I was expecting someone older, someone less feisty. Someone who wasn’t going to be a distraction. But you were.” His lips kiss the top of my head. “A beautiful distraction.”

Unsure where this is all coming from, I lift off his chest to look him in the eyes, and I’m greeted with an intimate look. He reaches up and caresses my face, his thumb dragging over my cheek, just like when my mouth was on his cock. But this time, it feels heavier, more heartfelt.

Then he scoots to the edge of the couch and stands, with me in his arms, and walks me to the bed, where he carefully lays me down. It’s shameless to say how much I love his strength, how he can so easily pick me up and move me around with ease. How he can fuck me against a wall and not be out of breath. It’s sexy. It makes me feel possessed and, oddly, I like that.

I’ve always admired Arlo’s possessive nature with Greer. The protective instincts. I feel that with Romeo, especially in the bedroom.

Instead of hovering above me, he stands at the foot of the bed and drops his shirt to the floor, followed by his pants and briefs. I lie back on the mattress, my elbows propping me up as I enjoy the view. His body is chiseled in every way, from his muscular thighs, to the deep *V* in his hips, to his individually defined abs, all the way to his impressive pecs and shoulders. He’s beautiful to look at, but when he’s gripping the base of his surging cock, it’s impossible to turn away.

“I could come just like this,” he says. “Stroking myself, looking at how beautiful you are. I could come so easily.” He takes a step forward. “But I want to come deep inside of you. I want to see the look on your face when I enter you once again, this time slower. I want to see how my cock makes you feel. I want to know how goddamn big I am.”

I swallow hard and say, “You know how big you are.”

“I want to see it in your eyes,” he says. “I want to see the realization reflected, that I fill you up.”

I wet my lips as my breathing becomes tighter, shorter. More turned on.

Letting go of his length, he takes the waistband of my lace thong and pulls it off, and when I think he’s going to drop it on the floor, he instead takes the strand of pearls and moves them over his fingers, only to bring his fingers to his mouth.

And dear God, it’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen.

It causes me to spread my legs farther as I feel my arousal grow.

“You taste amazing,” he says, dropping the underwear to the ground. He then lowers between my legs and says, “But I want more.” Before I know what’s going on, his fingers spread me wide and his tongue is pressing against my clit.

“Brock,” I moan as my pelvis shifts closer to him.

The width of his shoulders forces me to spread my legs even wider as he licks along my arousal voraciously. As if I’m the last meal he’ll ever have, he moves his mouth, his lips, his tongue over me, and it’s a dizzying bout of sensations. I try to gain my bearings, I try to figure out how he’s making me feel so good and so fast, but it feels impossible, as once again, my brain fades to black and all I can do is feel.

“Oh my God,” I say when he flicks the tip of his tongue against my clit. “Yes. Yes.”

He moves one of my legs upward until my foot is resting against his shoulder and then he slips his fingers inside of me.

“You’re ready,” he says, before removing himself and pulling me to the edge of the bed, where he stands. “I need inside of you.” He stands me up and I can barely balance on my wobbly legs. My clit is throbbing, my body is so aroused at this point that I feel as though I’m in some sort of warped dream, the room spinning around me, and where I can hear nothing but the sound of our heavy breathing.

He lies back on the bed, his cock straining forward. The veins prominent. The skin wrapped so tight. He's there. He's right there with me.

He reaches for me, and I climb on top of him, lining myself up with his cock. He sticks a few pillows under his head so he's propped up and can watch our connection easily. He positions his cock at my entrance. I assist him, and when I feel he's at the right spot, I sink down low until I'm completely full.

I feel every last inch of him, and it's so fucking good.

My mouth falls open and a low, feral sound falls past my lips. "Brock," I say in a strangled voice. "You're—God, you're perfect for me."

"I am, baby." His hands fall to my legs, and I try not to get wrapped up in the truth in his voice or the emotion behind his words.

His hands fall to my hips again and I feel him gain leverage with his feet as he starts to pulse inside of me.

"Fuck, you feel so good. So damn good, Stella." He groans with a few more pulses. "So tight. So perfect. Your pussy was meant for me."

"Yes," I say as he bottoms out with each pulse, hitting me in a spot no other man has ever touched. My stomach starts to hollow from the sensations rolling through me. My clit starts to tense, and I know—only a few more pulses will take me over the edge. "I'm there," I say. "Brock, I'm going to come."

"Me too, baby." He groans and continues to pump up inside of me.

Harder.

Faster.

My arousal spikes.

Heat fires through my veins.

My pussy clenches.

And then I'm coming.

“Brock, yes, God, yes!” I cry out.

“Motherfucker,” he moans as his hips still. I feel his cock twitch inside of me, coming. “Ahh, fucking hell,” he says as he slowly lowers his hips and then melts into the mattress.

I fall on top of his chest and he wraps his arms around my back.

“Jesus, Stella,” he says, his hand stroking my back again.

“Yeah . . . Jesus is right,” I mumble against his rock-hard chest.

Jesus is really fucking right because, oh my God, what just happened?

In a matter of seconds, I think my heart just flew out of my chest and found Brock’s, where it’s clinging on for dear life.

That was . . .

That was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I felt him, deep inside me.

Touching me.

Changing me.

Making me think that maybe this isn’t just for fun. That there’s more to us.

I sink into his hold.

How could I possibly even think about more with Romeo when my head isn’t on straight?

No, this is supposed to be about fun. This is supposed to be a vacation fling.

At least, that’s what I think we agreed upon.

He might have just rocked my entire world and shifted it on its axis, but this isn’t permanent. This isn’t forever.

This is now.

So, enjoy the now.



“HEY . . . STELLA,” Romeo whispers, his minty breath rolling over my cheeks. His finger pokes my side as he chuckles. “Stella, babe, you have to wake up.”

“Mmmmmm,” I grumble and bury my head under the pillow.

He laughs some more and then whips the sheets off my naked body. I curl into a fetal position and groan some more.

“Stella, we have to be down at the beach in thirty minutes, and I can’t leave until I know you’re awake and in the shower.”

“Who made you the itinerary police?” I grumble.

“Nobody. But I’m sure Greer will miss her maid of honor at her wedding brunch.”

“Ugh,” I groan. I lift up and catch a freshly showered Romeo in a pair of shorts and nothing else. “You showered?”

“Yeah. I tried to get you to shower with me, but that fantasy was quickly washed away when you swatted at me to keep away from your dead body, as you called it.”

“I said that?” I ask, rolling to my back. I feel Romeo’s eyes on me, scanning my naked body.

“That and other things.”

I sigh and move my hands over my breasts. “Seems as though I’m a beast in the morning.” Then I lower my hand over my stomach and I glance up to Romeo, who I know has his eyes fixed on my hands. “Did you also know, morning is when I’m the most turned on?”

“I didn’t,” he answers in a gruff voice.

“Very turned on.” I move my finger to my pussy, which I spread for him. “I’m already wet, aren’t I?”

“You are.”

“See? I love morning sex.” I shift on the sheets, letting the coolness of the fabric spark against my heated body. “I haven’t had it in so long, though.” I move my finger over my clit and my teeth pull on my bottom lip.

“If you want my cock, just say it,” he says as he stands there with an impressive bulge.

“I want your cock. Now.”

Keeping his eyes on me, he undoes his pants and reveals he was going commando and then lowers them to the ground.

I scan his body and say, “You’re so hot, Brock. I wish I could take a snapshot of your body so when I wake up in the morning, horny, I can masturbate to your picture.”

His hand drags over his face, and his eyes go to my phone on the nightstand where I put it last night. He walks over to it, flashes it at my face to unlock, and then he presses some button on it.

“I’ll do you one better,” he says as he places my phone on the dresser across from the bed and props it against the TV. When he walks away, I realize it’s on video and recording.

You’d think I’d be wary of such a thing, but instead, I’m even more turned on from the thought of recording us.

“On your hands and knees,” he demands in a deep voice I’ve only heard him use in the bedroom.

I do as he says and face the camera head-on. When I look up, I see him climb behind me, his erection hard as stone. I look sleepy. My hair is wavy from the ocean and being sifted through by his fingers last night. On my breasts, there are little purple marks from when he sucked on them last night during our second round of sex, when he decided he was going to make me come just by playing with my breasts and curling his fingers inside me. I lost all control of my body and gave in to the way he played me so easily with pleasure.

“Do you see how sexy you are?” he asks as he positions himself against me, his hardened length ready to enter. “Watch your eyes when I enter you.” He pushes slowly forward, and he’s right. There’s something hazy about my eyes, something

earthy I can't describe, and when he inserts himself fully, my mouth falls open and my back hollows pushing my chest up and out.

"So good," I say quietly.

He gathers my hair, twists it around his fist, and then pulls so my head is forced up, my tits are more pronounced, and my back arches.

"Perfect," he says as he starts pumping in and out of me. "Fuck, you *are* turned on."

"More than you know," I say, already feeling the early quaking of my orgasm.

"We're supposed to be getting ready for brunch," he says while gripping my ass with his other hand. "But you're too goddamn hot not to fuck right now." He pulses harder inside me. "So goddamn warm. So ruffled and thoroughly fucked from last night." His legs slap against my ass and it happens so fast—my body starts to build with heat all over again. "This is a reminder," he says as my legs start to go numb, "that when we're having fun today"—he grips my hair tighter and my pussy starts to clench—"and you're sore, you know it's from when I came multiple times inside of you."

"God." My teeth clench down, my stomach bottoms out, and I fall over the edge of my pleasure. "Yes, Brock," I yell as my body convulses.

He groans behind me, pumps harder, and then stills as his grip on my ass tightens and he comes.

"Goddamn," he breathes heavily. "Shit." He slows down his pulses and slowly brings us back to life. When he pulls out, he smooths his hand over my back, then bends over me, twists my head so I'm forced to look at him, and places a very soft, very gentle kiss on my lips.

When he releases me, he goes to my phone, ends the recording, and then he tosses the phone on the bed. "Happy viewing." He then slips his pants back on and says, "Catch you at the beach, babe."



He takes off as I sit there on wobbly legs and figure out how I'm possibly going to keep my hands off him in front of our friends.



"THERE THEY ARE, THE NEWLYWEDS," Gunner says, clapping as Greer and Arlo approach.

And, oh my God, never in all the years that I've known Arlo, have I seen that kind of contentment on his face. With an arm around Greer's shoulders, he's wearing a simple light blue T-shirt and white shorts. His hair is messy and he has a lazy look about him.

The man is in love. Head over heels infatuated. *I want that for me. A man who looks at me just like that.*

"Good morning," Arlo says before pulling out a chair for Greer and helping her sit down. Eyes on hers, he lifts her hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to her ring finger before taking a seat.

Holy shit, the intimacy in that moment has me squirming in my seat.

There's true joy at that end of the table, and I couldn't be happier for my friend.

"How was everyone's night?" Arlo asks while unfolding his cloth napkin and setting it on his lap.

We're positioned right by the ocean in a private table setting. The ocean is right below us as we sit atop a pile of black lava rock that's been evened out into a patio. It's beautiful, the perfect view for a beautiful morning.

Yup. Beautiful morning.

Hear those birds chirping?

See the rainbows strewn across the sky?

Is that a centaur in the ocean? Maybe. Who knows?

Either way, I'm on cloud nine.

Romeo not only made me feel whole last night, but this morning was by far the most erotic thing I've ever done, and as I sit here, at breakfast with my friends, I keep looking back at my phone, wanting to watch the video. Wanting to see how delectably he pleasures me. I want to watch his body flex behind me as he moves in and out, and I desperately want to watch his face the moment he comes.

It's as if my phone is burning a hole in the table and I won't be satisfied until I watch it.

"Our morning was pleasant," Keiko says while picking up a piece of pineapple bread from the table. "Kelvin and I delighted in some morning fornication while cleansing ourselves in our hotel shower."

Kelvin coughs violently and reaches for his water.

Keiko smooths her hand over his back and continues, "It was rather fascinating, actually—"

"Keeks, skip the details," Cora says, sparing us all.

I'm all for girl talk and diving deep into our sex lives, but the morning-after wedding brunch doesn't quite seem fitting, especially since Greer's parents are at the other end of the table.

Trying to break up the awkward tension that's settled over the table, I ask, "Does it feel different now that you're married?" Stupid question, but at least it detours the attention from the weird staredown between Cora and Keiko.

"It does," Greer answers. "I don't know how to explain it, but I do feel different. Like now, everything is right in the world."

The pride beaming from Arlo is almost nauseating, but it's also adorable as he casually grips the back of her neck. I wonder how that feels.

Probably as though she's his. No one else's.

Why do I suddenly want that?

Is it the tropical vibes here?

The Maui air?

Or the man who recorded us just moments ago having sex?

It's got to be one of those, because as I listen to Greer go over the favorite parts of her wedding, I can't help but be envious of my friend. Envious of what she has. Envious of her clear mind and her calm state.

"You have a disgruntled look on your face," Romeo says, leaning down and quietly whispering in my ear.

"Oh, really?" I ask, trying to make my face neutral.

"What's going on? You're not stealing the fun, are you?"

"No." I shake my head and then smile at him. "Just thinking about something for a second."

"Well, stop thinking, unless it's about what I look like with no pants on and my cock staring you down."

Now it's my turn to cough, which draws attention from the entire table.

"You okay there, Stella?" Romeo asks while handing me a glass of water.

The bastard.

"Fine," I choke out.

"Well, we want to thank everyone again for flying out here and spending this time with us. As a thank you, we want to take you all on a helicopter tour today. I know we have some fun activities coming up, but we were able to schedule a few tours for our party today and thought it would be fun."

"I'm so in," Cora says, as the waitress appears with drinks. "I can't remember the last time I was in a helicopter. Maybe a few years ago?"

"I can't remember ever flying in a helicopter," I say to myself.

"Never been?" Romeo asks.

"Have you?"

"Plenty of times."

“When—oh, I always forget that you had a rich life before you settled down to be a PE teacher.”

“It wasn’t a rich life.”

I lift my brow at him. “Do you or do you not have millions upon millions of dollars in your bank account?”

“Millions upon millions seems obnoxious. But, yeah, there’s some in there.”

I chuckle. “Then you had a rich life.”

“I don’t flaunt it.”

“One of the reasons why I tolerate being around you, because instead of flashing your black card, you’d rather eat a pub burger in a booth with me while discussing the game.”

“Yeah, the perfect night,” he answers.

“You really consider that the perfect night?” I ask, bewildered.

“Give or take a few things.”

“Like the company?” I ask with a roll of my eyes.

“No, the company is the best part of that night.” He winks and then takes his apple juice from the waitress. “The burger could be changed to wings. The booth could be swapped with my couch. But the company, yeah, that stays.”

Dear God, what is happening?

Why is he saying things like that?

Why is he trying to make me want him even more?

No strings attached, that’s what I said, and yet, when he says things like that, he makes me want to attach myself forever.

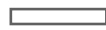
Why is that? Why am I swooning over something so simple? Why am I fixated on these little things? On Arlo and Greer? On the possessiveness, the need to be wanted and touched? Why, out of the blue, am I having these mixed, confused feelings when I’ve never considered Romeo to be anything but one of my best guy friends?

I glance up at him and catch a small glint in his eyes, one that speaks of promises for what's to come.

But I don't know what's to come.

Other than I'm confused.

He makes me feel good, so good, but there also seems to be a piece of me that's missing, and I can't figure out exactly what that piece is. And that's frustrating.



"ARE YOU READY FOR THIS?" Romeo asks, his arms wrapped around Cora's and my shoulders.

"I mean, it's safe, right?"

"Totally," Cora says, looking effortlessly beautiful in a light pink maxi dress.

Greer's brother and parents decided to skip the tour because they had plans to go taste testing at a brewery. I'm pretty sure her family is a little petrified of what might come out of Keiko's mouth. Frankly, we all are, but as her friends, we're used to it by now. As new people to the group, it can be frightening to be around someone with a lack of a filter and limited social etiquette.

Which leaves us with two groups. Arlo and Greer decided to fly with Kelvin and Keiko—Arlo's quite interested in what Keiko has to say about the history of the islands, something she's been reading up on ever since she found out we were going on this trip. And then that leaves me, Romeo, Cora, Lindsay, and Gunner in another helicopter.

Romeo joked around about being the lucky guy with two girls at his side, but I didn't find it that funny until he whispered in my ear that there was only one of us he'd be fucking tonight.

Fair.

That's very fair.

“And don’t worry, I’ll hold your hand the entire time,” Romeo says into my ear.

“Hello,” says a pretty blonde in khaki shorts and a blue polo as we approach the helicopter. “My name is Sherry, and I’ll be the pilot for your tour.”

“Sherry, I’m Romeo and these two are my wenches, Esmerelda and Ursula.”

“What?” I ask with a laugh as I pull away from him.

“Wait, who’s Ursula?” Cora asks.

Romeo thumbs toward me. “The sea witch, of course. Wouldn’t even take her top off for me in the ocean.”

Oh my God.

Sherry laughs and says, “Oh, this is going to be fun. I love when groups like you come around.”

“You asked her to take her top off?” Cora asks, looking at me, confused.

“He was drunk.” I wave her off and then needle Romeo in the side with my finger.

Concerned, Cora whispers, “Was it the Fireball?”

“Oh, Fireball is the devil’s juice,” Sherry says while lifting up a clipboard and looking over some paperwork. “I’ve found myself in quite a few predicaments after drinking that.”

“Tell me about it.” Cora fans her face. “I’m all too embarrassed to say that I’ve fallen back into the devil’s hands this trip, but I have no one to make bad decisions with.” Cora motions toward me and Romeo. “These two have been pretending to be fake engaged. Gunner and Lindsay, who’ll be here shortly, are months away from becoming engaged. Kelvin and Keiko—well, they’re probably one of the best couples you will ever meet, and then we’re all out here because my brother got married to one of my besties.”

Sherry holds up her pen and then points at me and Romeo. “You two are pretending to be engaged?” Humor lights up her eyes.

“Yup,” Romeo says, his charming self blossoming, as he kisses the side of my head. “Aren’t I the lucky one, putting a ring on the old sea witch?”

“Very lucky.” Sherry smirks at me. “He stuck his neck out for you, put a ring on the sea witch—scary stuff—and you wouldn’t take your top off?”

“See what I have to deal with?” Romeo says.

Head held high, I say, “I have my morals. Just because he’s fake engaged to me doesn’t mean I owe him anything.”

Sherry holds her hand out for a high five. “Attagirl.”

“Hold on, Sherry,” Romeo pleads. “I thought we had a bond going here.”

Sherry shakes her head. “Girl power first. Sorry, bro.”

Cora and I laugh out loud just as Gunner and Lindsay arrive. “Sorry we’re late. We were talking to Dylan on the phone.”

“Dylan is their son,” Cora says. “Out of wedlock. Harlots over here.”

Sherry chuckles. “So, you’re telling me I get to fly a helicopter for a sea witch, who’s also fake engaged to, dare I say, a loud mouth?”

I snort.

“And two harlots who birthed a son out of wedlock, and a lady in a maxi dress who seems to be the only one who has it together?”

“What the hell did we miss?” Gunner asks, making us all laugh.

“You’re precisely right,” Cora says. “I’m the only one out of these hooligans who’s normal.”

“Then you will be my second-in-command.”

“You hear that?” Cora asks, pointing her finger over her head. “Second-in-command.”

Good lord.

During the next few minutes, Sherry runs over safety precautions, what to expect, and everything we need to know about flying in a helicopter. Then she hooks us up with headphones with attached mics and ensures we're buckled into our seats. Gunner and Lindsay sit in the front with Sherry while Cora, Romeo, and I take up the back.

"Get ready, Stella girl," Romeo says while giving me a gentle shake to my shoulders.

Cora peers over at us and looks Romeo up and down. "What the hell is going on with you? Did you take an upper or something?"

"What?" he asks.

"You're all . . . cheerful. It's a drastic change from when you first got here."

I chuckle, thinking about why he's probably in a good mood. For a guy who hasn't even kissed a girl in a year, he's had more sex on this trip than he's had in a long time. So, yeah, he's probably completely full of joy, especially since I'm the first girl he's gone bare with. I learned that tidbit late last night as he slowly drove in and out of me.

Feels good to be the only girl he's trusted in that way. I like it a lot, actually.

"I don't know," Romeo says, "maybe something evil has been . . . sucked out of me."

Oh.

My.

God.

Cora's eyes widen as she glances over at me. Sweat breaks out on the back of my neck. Divert. Divert. "At least he's not a giant asshole anymore. So, whatever he's doing, he should keep doing it."

"I plan on doing it a lot," he replies, and I swear to God, I'm going to kick him in the crotch when we get out of this helicopter.



“All right, everyone strapped in?” Sherry asks.

“Yup,” we all say.

Thankfully Cora turns to the window, ready for takeoff. Romeo stole the middle seat, since he’s taller than both of us and can look over our shoulders. Gunner did the same thing and took the middle seat up front. Can’t say they’re not gentlemen.

Sherry flips some switches, and before we know it, the helicopter is lifting off the ground and it’s the weirdest sensation as we just . . . careen into the sky.

Startled, I reach for Romeo’s hand, which he offers easily. He intertwines our fingers and holds on to me tightly. When I turn to look at him, he mouths, “I got you.”

He has me.

Yes, he does. I think he has me more than he knows.



“CARE TO EXPLAIN what’s happening with you and Romeo?” Cora asks as we walk through a souvenir shop in town.

After the helicopter tours, which was probably one of the most breathtaking things I’ve ever seen, with the cascading green mountains and tremendously picturesque waterfalls, we all headed into town for a change of scenery. Greer, Arlo, and the boys joined Greer’s family at the brewery while Kelvin and Keiko took off to a museum, leaving me, Cora, and Lindsay to do some shopping.

“Nothing is going on,” I say while picking a dress off a rack to look at it.

“Nothing is going on? Oh, okay,” Cora mocks.

“Yeah, I wasn’t even in the back seat with you guys, but I felt the energy,” Lindsay says.

“There’s no energy,” I say, sticking to the plan of denial.

“Then why were you holding hands the entire time?” Cora asks with a hand on her hip.

Lindsay whips around to us. “They were holding hands the entire time?”

Exaggerating her movements, Cora nods her head. “Oh yeah, and not like just clasping.” She picks up Lindsay’s hand and weaves their fingers together. “They were linked.”

Lindsay’s eyes widen. “Linked fingers are not for friends. Linked fingers are something more. Is there something going on with you and Romeo? I mean, after that kiss in the pool, I’d believe it.”

“You guys are looking too far into—”

“GASP!” Cora says, bringing her hand to her heart. “Look, she has a hickey.”

“What? No, I don’t.” I feel around my neck, as if I could actually tell.

“Not on your neck.” Cora pokes my boob. “Right here.”

Lindsay moves forward and her eyes widen too. “That’s a boob hickey.”

I adjust my shirt, hoping for some coverage. “If you must know, it’s a burn from my curling iron.”

Cora pushes my hand away and moves in close. “No, it’s not. There’s no scarring, but there are broken vessels, which indicates sucking.”

“Fine, fine,” I say, exasperated. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but I got into a little situation with the housekeeping vacuum. I’m not proud of it, but—”

“Is housekeeping vacuum code for Brock ‘Romeo’ Romero?” Lindsay asks.

What’s the point?

I sigh and nod. “Yes.”

“Ooo, I knew it.” Cora fist-pumps the air. “I freaking knew it. I’m no fool. I know when two people are fornicating.”

“How long have you been fornicating?” Lindsay asks.

“It’s really not sexy at all when you two say fornicating.”

“Sorry.” Cora clears her throat. “How long have you two been fucking?”

I roll my eyes. “Not long.”

“More than two days?” Lindsay asks.

“Umm . . . yeah?”

“Why did that sound like a question? Shouldn’t you know?”

“Well, we kind of had angry sex against a wall one night, and then the next night I went to his hotel room after the bachelorette party and gave him a blowjob—”

“What?” Cora says, her eyes nearly popping out of their sockets.

But I don’t care about her reaction because it feels good to get this off my chest. To tell someone about this crazy trip I’ve been on.

“Yeah, blowjob on the balcony, and then last night we did it again, after I dry-humped him in my pearl underwear.”

Cora fans herself. “That’s exactly why I took those beads off. Trouble. They spelled trouble.”

“Then we did it again during the night, and then this morning . . .” My face burns up with embarrassment.

“Don’t stop now. What happened this morning?” Lindsay asks.

“Uh, well, he kind of recorded us on my phone.”

Cora immediately dives for my purse and starts digging through it. “Where is it? I need to see.”

“Oh my God.” I push her away. “You’re not watching us have sex. Are you insane?”

“No.” She keeps pawing at my purse. “I really, really want to watch that.”

I swat at her hands. “Stop that.”

She steps away and adjusts her dress. “Whoa, things just got carried away,” she says, looking stunned.

“Yeah, you could say that. Why on earth would you want to see us having sex?”

“I don’t know. Your connection is so strong, I think it would be hot.” She tugs on my arm. “Just tell me how it was filmed. What position?”

I glance around, making sure I’m not making a scene in front of random tourists, and I whisper, “Doggy style. We were facing the camera. I could see him from the selfie view in the screen.”

“Oh, dear Jesus.” Cora grips a rack of clothing to hold herself up. “That is—that is hot. Have you watched it?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. But I think I want to tonight.”

“God, can you watch it and give him a hand job at the same time?” Cora asks.

“Oh, that would be really hot,” Lindsay says.

“So, you two are encouraging this?”

“Why the hell not?” Cora asks and then gestures around. “You’re in paradise, enjoy it.”

“Yeah, but what happens when we’re no longer in paradise, when I have to go back to work and see him in the teachers’ lounge?”

“Would you not carry the relationship back home?” Lindsay asks.

“We said no strings.” I shrug and then move around the store, needing something to busy myself, since I’m feeling so conflicted at the moment. The thought of ending things with Romeo, of not touching him once we’re back in Chicago . . . it doesn’t settle well.

“Who suggested that?” Lindsay asks.

“I did. I thought it would be easier that way.” I sigh and pick up a stuffed teddy bear wearing a shirt that says *Aloha*.

“And are you second-guessing that right now?” Cora asks, her voice becoming more empathetic and less gossipy-excited.

“I don’t know what I’m thinking, to be honest.” I set the bear back on the shelf, only to move to another shelf where there are shot glasses and souvenir glasses. “My mind is a cluster of fucked-up thoughts. And I’m trying to not focus on it, because all that does is bring me down. I want to relax during this vacation before the school year starts.”

“That makes sense,” Cora says. “So then why don’t you just wait and deal with it when you get home?”

“That’s the plan.”

“I sense some hesitancy,” Lindsay says.

I pick up a pint glass with large bikini-clad breasts plastered on the front, which makes me laugh and think of Romeo. “It’s hard to keep my emotions at bay,” I admit. “But I also think it’s because I’m going through a lot right now and that’s messing with my head.”

“With your dad, you mean?” Cora asks.

“Yeah.” After his last text suggesting we meet tomorrow, I’ve just felt off. I don’t want this now. He’s engaged. I hate that fact and who he’s engaged to. But that doesn’t mean I have to ruin the final days of my vacation *talking things out*. I can’t undo what’s been done, just like I can’t undo the pain I feel every time I think about Ashley. But I can choose not to sink back into that anger. I did text him back and tell him it wouldn’t be while I was on vacation. “You’re right. The best thing to do is have fun and figure things out later.” *On all fronts*. I show them the glass. “I need to buy this.”

Lindsay laughs. “Look, they have wine glasses with penises on them. We should get these for the Ladies in Heat Book Club.”

“Coming from a new member, I think that’s a novel idea—no pun intended,” Cora says.

And just like that, we each pick out a penis wine glass for ourselves, Keiko, and Greer, then consider what books we should look at when we next meet. It's moments like these where I'm so thankful I started working at Forest Heights. Good friends, mostly good students, and good times.

## Chapter Fourteen

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### ROMEO

I open my hotel room door and grip the side as I stare at Stella on the other side. Instead of the jean shorts and shirt she was wearing earlier, she's in a pair of cotton shorts and a low-cut tank top.

No bra.

I nod at her. "You walking around like that?"

"Yup. Shimmied at a few guests' faces before I came over."

"Funny." I pull on her hand and tug her into my room. "What took you so damn long?"

"I told you, had to make the rounds."

"I know you're joking, but I don't find it funny."

"Ooo, getting territorial, are we?"

I cup her face and pull on her bottom lip with my thumb. "Would you like me making the rounds?"

The corner of her lips tilts up. "I thought you already were."

"Remember, babe, quality not quantity."

Her eyes soften with a smile. "I got you something."

“Is it a new set of lingerie that’s going to rock my world?”

“No, better.” She lifts up a bag and hands it over. “Here.”

I take the bag, stick my hand inside, and pull out a glass. It takes me a second to understand what I’m looking at, but when it clicks, I laugh out loud. “Look at these knockers.” I rub my thumb over the fake boobs on the pint glass. “It’s uncanny how much they look like yours.”

“My boobs aren’t that big, nor that perky.”

I reach out and take one of her breasts in my hand, giving it a good squeeze.

“Yeah, yours are far better.” And then I pull her in by the waist and press a kiss to her lips. “Thanks for the gift. I’ll get a hard-on every time I drink beer now.”

“Better than limp dick.”

“Your reasoning is oddly correct.” Tugging on her hand, I bring her to the couch. I set the glass on the table and then turn toward her. “Get anything else while you were shopping?”

“A bikini that was too expensive for my salary, but I needed it.”

“Yeah? What does it look like?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow,” she says with a cheeky grin.

“Looking forward to it.” I smooth my hand over her leg. “So, you tell the girls about our no-strings-attached agreement?”

“What?” she asks, her eyes panicking. “I didn’t. Why would you—”

“Lindsay told Gunner, and Gunner told me.”

She swears under her breath. “What happened to girl code?”

“I thought we were keeping this quiet.”

She sighs heavily and then points to a purple mark on her chest. “They saw your teeth and lip marks on my chest and guessed.”



I glance at her chest and spot where I've claimed her. My fingers reach out to her skin and my thumb rubs over the intimate mark. A covetous feeling fades over me. This was from me. This was me putting my stamp on her, and it's sexy. It's hot.

And I'm not the least bit sorry.

"Anyone else see them?"

She shakes her head. "No."

"Then maybe I should make some more." I scoop her up and place her on my lap so she's straddling me.

"You aren't allowed to make any more marks. It's bad enough these are here."

"You think it's a bad thing?"

"Uh, you're not the one walking around with hickeys all over your chest."

I reach behind my head and pull off my shirt. When I toss it to the side, I say, "Have at it, babe."

"I'm not sucking on your chest." She grins. "I only suck on your dick."

I smirk. "Feel free to mark that up, as well." I slip my hands under her shirt and bring them to her breasts. I let their weight rest in my hands while I rub my thumbs over her hard nipples.

"We never talked about what happened this morning," she says.

"What's there to talk about?" I roll her nipples between my fingers and her hands fall to my chest, where she seeks support.

"You . . ." She sighs. "You recorded us."

"I did. Have you watched it?"

"No. Would you have?"

I nod and pinch her nipples. She lets out a long hiss. "I'd have probably jacked off to it by now."

“You would?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Is that something you’d like to watch . . . now?”

“It’s your video, babe, you do what you want with it.” I remove my hands from under her shirt and then pull on the neckline, releasing each breast. I lift them and take my time with each nipple. Every lick, every suck, increases the way her pelvis rolls against mine.

“I . . . I want to watch it. With you.”

I release her breast from my mouth and look her in the eyes. “Then let’s watch it.”

“I want to watch it naked,” she shyly says.

“Even better.” I push her tank up and over her head, and then lift us both off the couch. Her arms and legs wrap around me, her breasts pressing against my bare chest.

“Have I told you how much I love the way you carry me around?”

“No, but it’s noted.” I move my mouth over her neck and then slowly lower her to the bed. I spend a few minutes testing her skin, moving my mouth down her body until I reach the waistband of her shorts. I pull them off and discover she’s not wearing any underwear, either. “You came prepared.”

“Didn’t think it made sense to wear undergarments since I assumed this is what was going to happen.”

“You assumed right.” I slip off my shorts and grip my already hard cock as I grab her phone from the coffee table. I bring it over to the bed and we both settle back against the headboard to watch. I hold the phone in front of us, she unlocks it, and I find the video. I press play and turn it up, but she pauses the video.

“I don’t want there to be noise.”

“Fuck that. Do you realize how sexy you are when I’m deep inside of you? I want to hear it. If we’re going to watch

it, we're going to do it right." I spread my legs and hold my hard cock, and then I press play again.

We watch as I climb on the bed, my erection hard as I move behind her. From this angle, I watch her every facial expression: the way her hair falls over her face; how her tits sway with every thrust I make. It's incredibly hot, and I'm already addicted to this video.

"Look at you," I say, letting go of my length and moving my hand around her waist to pull her closer. I kiss her shoulder as my hand snakes around to her hip and then to her pussy, where I slide a finger over her slick slit. "Look at how sexy you are, how you give in to my every command."

Her legs spread a little farther, giving me better access.

"You're so . . . strong," she says, her breath growing heavy. "God, Brock, look at your muscles."

"Can't. I'm too focused on your tits." She moans on the video and I swear my dick grows another inch. "Fuck, babe."

I glide my hand up her chest to her breasts again and gently pull on her nipples. She hisses again and moves one of her legs over mine, intertwining our bodies.

"I need more," she says, moving to my lap. Sitting up on her knees, she positions my cock at her entrance and then sits down, and I nearly come from how tight she is, from this position.

"Fuck," I mutter, dropping the phone to the bed and moving my hands to her hips to help her move up and down.

She places her hands on my knees and she works my dick. Rotating, moving up and down, she even reaches between my legs and lightly strokes my balls.

"Jesus Christ, babe, I'm going to come."

Pleasure washes over me, a numbness pulsing through my veins as her pussy contracts around my cock.

"Oh my God, Brock, I'm coming," she says, moving faster over my length. "Yes, oh my God, yes."

Her cries, her shifting, pushes me over the edge as well. My cock swells inside of her and my body tenses as I come.

“Shit,” I groan, the aftershocks of my orgasm passing through me.

She leans back on my chest, and I wrap my arms around her stomach, holding her close as my lips find the curve of her neck.

“I seriously love your pussy,” I say.

She chuckles. “I seriously love your cock.”

I smile against her skin, never thinking I’d hear her say those words, let alone that I’d be in this position, watching a video of us having sex on her phone while we have sex at the same time.

“What do you want to do now?”

Her hands fall to mine. “Finish watching the video.”

I chuckle, press a kiss to her neck one last time, and then pick up the phone. I’ll watch it as many times as she wants.



“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS,” Stella says, looking adorable in a harness and helmet. But even with how adorable she looks, it doesn’t distract me from what we’re about to do.

“Don’t make a big deal about it.”

“Uh, I’m going to make a huge deal about it.” She cups her mouth and shouts, “Romeo is afraid of heights.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“What?” Arlo says, turning around from where he was just fitting Greer into her harness. “When have you ever been afraid of heights?”

“Since forever,” I answer. No use denying it.

“We went rock climbing and you didn’t have a problem with it.”

“I sweated through my underwear in the first minute.”

“Attractive,” Stella grumbles next to me.

“Just because I’m scared, doesn’t mean I’m not going to do it. I just need to pump myself up first.”

“Aren’t you cute.” Stella grips my shoulders and shakes them. “Need a pep talk? Here you go. Brock Romero, you’re a strong, confident man who doesn’t need to smoke.”

“Are you quoting *Friends*?” I ask, recognizing the phrase from when Chandler tries to quit smoking.

“Maybe. Is it working?”

“It’s made me want you even more right now.”

“What?” Arlo asks, and I forgot that he isn’t in the know.

“Practicing,” I say with a nod. “You know, for the fake engagement.”

He eyes me suspiciously and Stella hides her laugh. “Smooth,” she mouths, and I shrug. “Okay, just know these cables are strong, the height means nothing, and if anything, you’re more likely to get hit by a bird flying by than to crash to your death.”

“Wow.” I chuckle. “You need help on your pep talks. And you call yourself a coach.”

“Greer does all the talking. I just stand there with a clipboard and look pretty.”

“You do more than that.” Greer comes over. “You also come up with killer conditioning drills that torture the girls.”

“True. So, looks pretty, holds clipboards, and tortures athletes with conditioning. Just need to work on the pep talks.”

“That’s easy to fix. Keep hanging with me and you’ll learn all the things on a good pep talk.”

“Ha,” Gunner says, walking up while slipping into the provided gloves. “If you think calling your players a bunch of moronic, petite assholes is a pep talk, then, yes, please learn from the best.” Gunner pats me on the shoulder.

Stella laughs out loud. “You call your players moronic, petite assholes?”

“On occasion.”

“There’s *an occasion* pretty much every week.”

“Think I should call the girls moronic, petite assholes?” Stella asks Greer.

“God, no.” Greer rolls her eyes. “You know they would all go running to their parents to tattle on us. They’re too sensitive. Guys are easier to work with in that regard, unfortunately. You can call them an asshole and it’ll spur them on. Doesn’t quite work with our girls.”

“What is the velocity and trajectory of this launch?” Keiko asks, coming up to the practice zipline.

“It’s just a straight line, so you can learn how to load up on the rope,” the worker says.

“Ah, I see. And how would you properly mount?” Keiko hikes up her harness. “Within the last fortnight, I’ve become accustomed to some new mounting positions—”

“Not that kind of mounting,” Cora says, stepping in. “For the love of God, not those kinds of mounting positions.”

Chuckling, Stella comes up to me and whispers, “Sex has been on the brain for Keiko. She did some reading this summer, and poor Kelvin, I think he’s going to throw out a hip or something.”

“I’m sure Kelvin has no problem with Keiko’s inspiration for mounting positions. I know I wouldn’t have a problem if it were you. As a matter of fact, you should tell her about the one you did last night while we were watching—”

“Shut it,” she whispers, jabbing me in the side.

I chuckle and wrap my arm around her shoulders. Arlo gives me a funny look but goes back to paying attention to Greer.

“As my fake fiancée and no-strings-attached mistress, are you going to protect me from the scary heights?”

“You’re really shooting down my libido, here.”

“Trust me, it needs to be shot down after that ravenous hand job you gave me this morning,” I whisper softly.

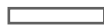
“Ravenous?”

“You were drooling, babe.”

“I was not. God, for that, I’m sleeping in my hotel room tonight.”

“Yeah, okay,” I scoff.

“Oh, just you wait and see.”



“AREN’T you going to wait for me?” I ask, chasing after Stella as I jog down the hallway of our hotel.

“No.”

She continues to move forward but her small strides are no match for my big ones.

“You can’t be mad. You’re the one who came to my room. You’re the one who let me strip you naked. You’re the one who bent over my bed and spread your legs. And you’re the one who spent the night.”

“I’m well aware of my choices, but I’m still mad at you.”

Laughing, I pull on her arm and twist her toward me, then spin her against the hallway wall and press my hand to her hip. She tries to hide her smile but does a shitty job of it.

“There she is.” I lean down and press a kiss to her mouth.

“That picture you sent wasn’t playing fair.”

“Did you save it?”

She sighs. “You know I did.”

“What do you plan on doing with it?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asks with a grin. “I plan on placing an eggplant emoji over your ding-dong, printing it, and

framing it for Principal Dewitt's office."

I smirk. "I dare you."

"You obviously don't know me well enough. I'll do it."

"You would—"

"Well, hello," a voice says to our right. We both glance over to find Stella's dad standing in the hallway with a tray of food in hand.

I push off the wall and nod. "Mr. Garcia. Good to see you."

"Dad, I thought you left already," Stella says, straightening up.

"We, uh, we stayed a few extra days in the hopes that I'd get a chance to talk to you."

Sensing Stella's immediate tension, I slip my hand in hers and give it a squeeze. We still haven't talked about her dad and what's going on with him. From her unrelaxed posture and subdued voice, I realize I've made a big mistake by not talking about it.

The question is, do I ask her? Or do I keep moving on with the deal we made?

"I told you, Dad, I don't want to talk. Not right now."

"I need to explain."

"And I need to not worry about this while on vacation," she says back.

"Then when?" Donny pleads, and, hell, I feel sort of bad for the man. I don't understand what happened between them, but I do know he seems to be trying. I'm tempted to step in and mediate, but I know that would be a terrible idea, one that could cause me a lot of backlash from a temperamental Stella.

Not something I'm willing to deal with, especially since I just was able to convince Stella to have some form of relationship with me. Even if it's currently no-strings-attached.



Donny's eyes well up, and I fear he might cry. If only my stubborn Stella would give in. "I don't want to lose my girls. I already feel you slipping away. Please, Stella, give me a chance to explain everything."

I squeeze her hand again, offering encouragement.

Finally, she says, "How about when we get back on Tuesday. You can call me and we can set up a time."

Donny nods. "Thank you, Stelly." He offers us a warm smile. "Have fun with the rest of your vacation. We won't bother you anymore."

Donny takes off down the hall, and, hell, I feel racked with guilt, and he's not even my father. I don't know how Stella does it.

"You okay?" I ask.

She lets out a long breath. "Yeah, I think so."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

I nod and start walking her down the hallway. "You know, you never told me what happened with you and your dad."

"I tried to." I feel her look up at me. "But you blew me off."

"I'm sorry." I stop us in the hallway again. "I haven't handled this trip well. I haven't handled my emotions well, or our relationship, for that matter. I'm sorry, Stella."

"It's okay," she says quietly.

"Will you tell me?"

She nods. "But not right now. We have a fun day of horseback riding ahead of us."

"Yeah, not too thrilled about that. I feel a little bulky to be riding horseback."

"It's why I can't wait for this activity. I feel as though watching you on a horse is going to be one of the highlights of this vacation."

“Yeah, I’m sure my balls will appreciate it too.”

“Aww, if you need me to massage your balls later, I might be able to be convinced.”

“Is that so?” I pull her in and kiss the top of her head. “Then I’ll be sure to ride my balls roughly on the back of the horse.”

“There’s something so wrong with that statement.”

“Yeah, I heard it as I said it out loud.”

Laughing, she pulls me into a hug when we reach the elevators, and, hell, it feels good to have her at my side. I’m not thinking about the future, I’m not thinking about where this is going. I’m living in the moment and soaking up as much of her as I can.



ARLO TAKES a seat next to me and Gunner at the pool and looks me in the eyes. “I’ve been pretty fucking silent this entire time, but tomorrow is our last full day here, and I need to know what the hell is going on.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask innocently.

“You and Stella.”

“What about us?”

Arlo glances at Gunner, who plays dumb with me. Over the past few days, Stella and I have grown more and more intimate in front of our friends. Cora, Greer, Gunner, and Lindsay are all aware of the “setup” Stella and I have, but for fun, we decided to keep it from Arlo. Activity after activity, he’s kept his eye on us but has never said anything. Gunner and I had a running bet on if he’d actually approach the topic. Gunner thought he was going to drop it until we returned home, and I said there was no way Arlo would be able to get through the rest of this vacation without saying something.

Now that the girls are at the spa and we’re hanging out by the pool—minus Kelvin, he decided to rent a metal detector

and scan the beach—Arlo is making his move.

“Don’t bullshit me. Are you two together?”

“Define *together*,” I say as I scratch the side of my face. My five o’clock shadow that Stella seems to love feels prickly against my fingers, and I worry it’s too rough for her skin. Then again, she’s never said one thing about it other than she loves the way it feels between her legs.

“Are you dating?”

“Dating? No.” I shake my head.

“Are you fucking?” Arlo asks in an even more irritated tone.

“Oh, fucking . . . yeah, we’re fucking.”

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” Arlo asks.

“I wonder that every day.” I bring my beer to my lips and take a sip.

“I’m being fucking serious. Need I remind you of the feelings you have for this girl?”

“Not necessary.” I shake my head. “I remind myself every goddamn day when I look in the mirror.”

“So, then what are you doing?”

I shrug. “Taking what I can get.”

“And what happens when you return to Chicago?”

I stare at the amber color of my beer. Jesus, Arlo really knows how to bring down a vibe. “Not sure, man,” I answer honestly. “I’m hoping I can convince her to take things slow with me. To keep things going. But she has some issues with her father, and I know she’s not going to be able to commit to anything with me until she figures out what’s going on with her dad.” At least I’ve worked that out since being in Maui. She’s a closed book, so far, but I suspect the tension runs deep.”

“So, you’re going to pursue this, then?” Arlo asks.

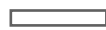
“Dude, I don’t have a fucking choice.” I look up to the sky and take a deep breath. “I’m falling for her, and hard. I was already fucking infatuated with her before this trip, but after being with her—intimately—I know there’s no going back. I’m addicted. I want to be around her. I want to make this happen. I just need to figure out how without scaring her away.”

“Do you know what happened with her father?” Gunner asks.

I shake my head. “No. That’s job number one. Once I figure that out, then I can devise a plan on how to move forward. We’re good for each other, man. She might believe I see this time as ‘just having fun’, but I’m hoping she’ll wake up one day and see a future. With me.”

Arlo leans back in his chair. “I do not envy you, man.”

“Yeah, I don’t think anyone would.”



I ADJUST my button-up shirt and knock on Stella’s hotel room door. Tonight is our last night in Hawaii. When we get back, we have our teacher social to attend, and then school starts. I’m nervous to have this time with Stella because of the unknown in front of us, but I’m also partially excited to see if we can take this any further.

In typical Arlo fashion, he saved a private sunset sail for our last night and noted we should dress nicely. So, I put on my black, short-sleeved button-up shirt with mini tropical birds on it and paired it with black dress shorts. Gunner has a matching shirt I know he’s wearing tonight, but instead of black, his is a deep blue. As expected, the sleeves are a little tight around my biceps, but it’s manageable.

The entire time I was getting dressed, I kept wondering what Stella was wearing. What I love about her is that she doesn’t mind showing skin. She’s very comfortable in her body and has no problem flaunting it.

The door opens, and Stella stands there in a long, black cotton dress with thin shoulder straps and a plunging neckline that emphasizes her cleavage and the top of her abdomen. Her hair is pulled up into a loose bun with little wisps framing her face, accentuated by a well-placed yellow flower behind her ear.

“Hell, babe,” I say while dragging my hand over my mouth. “You look stunning.”

Her eyes light up as she takes a step forward and stretches upward to press a soft kiss on my mouth. “Yeah?”

My hand falls to her hip. “Fuck, yeah.”

Her lips smile against mine and she grants me one more kiss, and then she takes a step back and links my hand in hers. “You’re looking pretty sexy yourself, *Romeo*.” She shuts her hotel door behind her, clutch in hand. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Together, we head to the lobby, where the rest of our crew is meeting. Greer’s parents and brother left yesterday, so it’s just friends tonight, and everyone is looking dressed up and nice. I’m getting the feeling that it’s going to be a good night.

Gunner pops a bottle of champagne and pours everyone a glass as we head toward the marina on the party bus Arlo rented. Stella is tucked against my side with my arm around the back of her seat. It feels so natural to be with our friends, to have her close to me, to claim her as mine.

“Wait, are you and Gunner wearing the same shirt?” Stella asks me.

“Yeah. We went shopping together for the trip, and he claims we grabbed the same shirt at the same time, but I remember it differently. I grabbed the shirt first, he saw me holding it, and then grabbed one for himself.”

“What? Drama.”

I chuckle. “I told him I was wearing mine tonight and he texted back he was too. Neither of us would change, so here we are.” I poke her shoulder. “Who wore it better?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Gunner.”

I stare her down. “Earning yourself a spanking tonight.”

She laughs. “It’s funny you think that’s a punishment.”

My jaw moves side to side before I say, “Watch what you say, because I’m not just talk, and you should know that after last night.”

Her cheeks flush, and she looks away while lifting her glass to her lips.

Yeah, last night.

Hell, I still can’t believe we did that.

She was mouthing off, and I told her if she didn’t stop, I’d fuck her on the balcony naked, where anyone could see her gorgeous tits bounce up and down as she clung to the railing.

She didn’t stop, therefore, I took her to the balcony, stripped her down, and fucked her from behind while she attempted to stay quiet.

Shockingly, she wasn’t as quiet as you’d think.

“Are you discussing your endeavors of last night?” Keiko asks while turning toward us. She looks pretty in a green sundress and her hair down. She seems more relaxed than before, and I wonder if Hawaii and Kelvin have been good for her.

“Uh . . . yes,” Stella says cautiously.

“Ah, it appeared you were savoring some carnal coitus,” Keiko says without hesitation.

I spit my champagne back into my flute as Stella goes completely white.

“You . . . you saw that?”

“Very much so,” Keiko says casually while adjusting her glasses. “I must say, you have procured very exquisite breasts.”

I snort so hard I worry the champagne is going to shoot back out of my nose.

“Oh . . . my . . . God.”

“Are you ashamed?” Keiko asks. “Wasn’t the point of performing coitus on the balcony to display your skills in the bedroom for the resort to observe?”

“Not even a little.”

I continue to laugh as Stella needles me with her finger.

“Ah, well, Kelvin and I assumed you were carrying out a meticulous portrayal of the sensuous need between a man and a woman. We remained for the entire viewing.”

Stella drains the rest of her champagne and then takes my glass. “It wasn’t a viewing.”

“Oh, then what was it?” Keiko asks.

“An idiotic decision.”

“Did you not intend for others to watch you perform coitus?”

“No . . . no, we did not.”

Keiko nods and then says, “Then you shouldn’t have been sans clothes on the balcony.”

“Yeah, lesson learned,” Stella says with zero humor in her voice.

I pull her in tight and whisper in her ear, “At least you have acquired exquisite breasts.”

She chuckles, sighs, and then leans into my hold. “Better to be Keiko and Kelvin watching than anyone else. I guess.”

We spend the next twenty minutes on the party bus sharing champagne, enjoying the company of our friends, and reminiscing about our favorite parts of the vacation. Keiko raves about the native vegetation and the “multitudinous” pictures she took that she can’t wait to examine when she gets home. Cora explains how she’s divorcing Fireball again and would appreciate everyone’s support in her endeavors. Lindsay and Gunner both agree the helicopter tour was their favorite thing they did this trip. Arlo and Greer’s is obvious. I’m tempted to say my favorite thing about the trip was the

pearl underwear Greer gave Stella—but hold back for the sake of Stella’s embarrassment—yet claim it was just relaxing around the pool. And Stella—well, her answer is sarcastic, claiming meeting her new mom was her favorite moment. Everyone laughed, but I know better.

It was a response formed from hurt.

And even though I promised her fun, I intend on getting to the bottom of that hurt. Maybe she’ll see that I can be the dependable rock that she needs in her life, especially given her dad hasn’t been present since the divorce.

When we reach the marina, we’re quickly escorted onto what looks like a mini yacht, not a sailboat. There are multiple levels on deck, and we all filter on board and spread out to check out the space on our own. Champagne is handed to us by the staff and hors d’oeuvres are quickly passed around as well. Neither Stella nor I take any. Instead, we head to the back deck at the top of the boat and take a seat in a booth. I run my fingers along the back of her neck and say, “You look really beautiful tonight, Stella.”

She tilts her head toward me, a genuine smile on her face. “You’re kind of ruining guys for me, Brock, with comments like that.”

Growing a pair, I say, “Good. I hope I am.” When her eyes widen in surprise, I figure this is my moment to talk about what we’re going to do when we get back home. We leave tomorrow, and I want to know what the roadmap for us will be. When we get off the plane, are we going to shake hands and say thank you for a no-strings-attached vacation? Or will I be lucky enough to ask her out on a date? To continue this—well, whatever this is. “Can I ask you something?”

She studies me. “You look nervous.”

I awkwardly chuckle. “Yeah, I might be.”

She smooths her hand over my thigh. “You’re serious.”

“I wouldn’t lie about that.”

Turning toward me, she gives me her full attention and asks, “What do you need to ask?”



Here goes nothing.

“Have you seen the bathroom on this boat?” Cora asks, coming up to us with two glasses of champagne and taking a seat in the booth. “If I had a guy on this trip with me, we’d totally be doing it in that bathroom. It’s huge. Hey”—she motions to the both of us—“you guys should totally go do it in the bathroom.”

Perfect timing, Cora.

Christ.

“Haven’t you been on a yacht before?” Stella asks. “Given your family money, I’d think this isn’t new to you.”

“You know, I haven’t, and now that I think about it, I find that extremely odd.” She downs a large gulp of champagne. “And I’m not happy about it. We need to be yachting more.”

“Seems like something you need to yell at your brother about.”

“You’re right, I do need to yell at him.” Cora stands from the booth and takes off without another word.

That was easier than I thought. Turning back to Stella, I take her hand in mine and say, “So, I was wondering—”

“Twenty-one knots, max speed,” Keiko says, coming up to us, shaking her head. “Incredible. The captain suggested a tour of the engine room later this evening. I’m counting down the minutes.” She looks between us, her eyes studying, her head calculating. “Were you conversing in private?”

“Yeah,” I say, feeling exasperated.

“Ah.” She nods. “About what?”

“If it’s in private, do you think it’s something we want to share?” I ask.

“Perhaps. It’s only human nature to gab, depending on the situation. Would this be one of those situations?”

“No,” I answer quickly.

“Hmm.” She slowly adjusts her glasses. “I’m perceiving a taciturn vibe from which you want me to depart from the stern of the boat.”

“You’re perceiving correctly.”

“I see.” She folds her hands together. “Well, I guess there’s nothing to do but to bid you adieu.”

“Bye, Keeks,” I say forcefully.

She turns around and marches toward the stairs. Sighing, I lean back in the booth and look toward the sky. Jesus, this was probably a horrible time to try to do this.

“You were saying?” Stella chuckles while poking me in the side.

I’m about to open my mouth when Arlo calls out, “Hey, come down here so we can toast.”

With another large exhale, I stand from the booth and hold my hand out to Stella. She takes it and says, “You were trying to ask me something.”

“I will later. Come on. Let’s go make a toast to our friends.”

Hand in hand, we walk down to the main deck, where the staff again fill our glasses with champagne, and I wonder if later I’ll find the same courage I just mustered.

I can only hope.



WHO KNEW the entire night would only consist of spending time with our friends?

Probably everyone, since we went on this boat ride with our friends.

But for some reason, I assumed I’d get some private time with Stella, but boy, was I wrong. After the toast, we hung out with everyone and then were ushered to the stern of the boat, where there was a table set up over plexiglass covering the

mini pool. It was an experience for sure, eating on a boat over a pool while the waves of the ocean rocked us through the deep-sea water.

The dinner was intimate, the food was really fucking good, and the company was great. When I could, I kept my hand on Stella's leg, or on the back of her chair, running my finger tenderly over her exposed back. I wanted her to know that I was there and wasn't going anywhere. After dinner, they served us a delicious dessert. Arlo pulled out the stops for this final, high-class adventure.

And now that the sun is setting on the horizon, I'm standing at the stern of the boat with Stella. She's up against the railing while I hug her from behind, my chest to her back, one arm around her while the other holds the rail in front of her. I lean over her shoulder and rest against her as we watch the sun disappear.

"I think I'll have dreams of that white chocolate mousse," Stella says.

"I think I'll have dreams of you moaning over the white chocolate mousse."

She chuckles. "I'm not even sorry. That's how good it was."

"The dark chocolate was just as good."

She scoffs. "You and I both know that's a lie. You're just trying to feel better about your choice."

"I hate that you're right."

A contented laugh falls past her lips as she tilts her head against my shoulder. "I can't believe we go back to reality tomorrow."

I swallow hard. What's reality to her? Does she mean going back to Chicago, to work? Or does that mean no us? The contemplation rolling around in my head—the uncertainty—makes my gut churn.

"I'm not ready to be a teacher again," she adds. "What about you? Are you ready to go back to being a PE teacher?"

“Always been a PE teacher,” I say.

“You know what I mean. Kind of felt as though we had zero responsibilities while here. Going home means checking back into reality. Not sure I’m ready for that. Are you?”

“If you’re asking if we could stay here longer, together, the answer would be yes,” I say, as casually as possible.

She presses her hand against my hand that’s wrapped around her. “I wish we started this no-strings-attached thing first thing. I think we missed out on a few days, and that’s not fair. Thanks to my dad and Ashley.”

I swallow hard, my saliva feeling like a million daggers as it moves down my throat. “Yeah, but without Ashley claiming to be your new mom, I don’t think we’d ever have ended up where we are right now.”

She pauses and then looks back at me. “Oh no, don’t give her credit for all the sex you’ve had this vacation.”

I chuckle. “Have to give credit where credit is due. We might not even have talked at all this vacation, and then you wouldn’t have known the magic that is my dick.”

She scoffs. “Oh, Jesus. Don’t be that guy, the one who thinks his dick is God’s gift to the female population.”

“But it is . . .”

She reaches back and pinches my side playfully.

“Hey, watch it.” I laugh into her ear and then place a kiss on her head.

She’s silent for a second and then says, “You know, I hate to admit it, but I think you might be right about my dad and Ashley. I was set on avoiding you all trip, and without them, I think we’d have never interacted.”

“You never would’ve made out with me in the pool.” I squeeze her. “Which, between you and me, was my favorite part of the trip.”

She tilts her head back so she can look me in the eyes. “Really?”

I nod. “Yeah, but I wasn’t about to say that in front of everyone.”

Her lips move to the side as she says, “When I think of that moment, I can’t help but think how it was tainted, how the first half of our trip was tainted by my dad.”

Going out on a limb, I say, “You never told me what happened with your dad.”

“Probably because it’s embarrassing.”

“What do you mean?” When she doesn’t answer, I kiss her neck gently. “Talk to me, Stella.”

“You won’t judge me?”

“Never.”

She turns in my arms, and her hands go to my waist. Her eyes are fixed on my shirt as she says, “He knew Ashley bullied me in high school, and he still went out with her, fell in love with her, proposed to her.”

“What? He knew?” I ask, feeling my anger spike. “How did you find out?”

“I brought it up, and they both admitted to it. I was so upset, insulted, hurt, that I walked away. It’s why my dad has been trying to talk to me. He said he has to explain to me why.”

“And he hasn’t yet?”

She shakes her head while her fingers link through the belt loops of my shorts. “I haven’t necessarily given him the chance to. I did speak with one of my sisters and my mom, though, and they both said something about Dad’s health. They wouldn’t say what, but said I need to listen to him.”

“And that’s what you’re going to do when you get home?”

“Yeah.” She sighs and tugs on my shorts. “Another reason I don’t want to go home just yet.”

Lifting her chin with my finger, I ask, “What are the other reasons?”

When her eyes connect with mine, I can practically see the indecision in her eyes. But what is she indecisive about? Me?

Her teeth roll over the corner of her lip as she looks away. “What were you going to ask me earlier?”

Avoidance. I see how this is going to go. If I come out and tell her what I’m thinking, then she won’t be able to avoid it.

I glance behind me just to make sure no one is going to bother me, and when I notice all of our friends on the opposite side of the boat, I realize it’s now or never.

“What are your plans for when we get home?”

“What do you mean?” she asks, confused.

“I mean . . .” Hell, I can feel sweat start to creep up my back. For a man who’s pretty sure of himself, my confidence where Stella is concerned is pretty fucking low. “I . . . I like you, Stella. And I know you said no strings attached, but I’m not ready to say goodbye to this.” I wet my lips, my heart paused in my chest. “Are you?”

Her eyes fall to my chest and then flash up to my face. “I like you too, Brock.” She looks to the side. “But with everything going on with my dad, I’m just not sure I should get involved in anything, you know?”

And just like that, I feel my heart shatter in my chest as my hope is splintered.

I nod. “Yeah, I get it. Forget I even said anything.”

Her hands glide up my chest as she moves closer. “I’m not saying no, Brock. I’m just . . . hoping for maybe some time?”

“Time?” I ask, trying not to wear my heart on my sleeve, even though it feels impossible when it comes to this girl.

“Yes. When I was talking to my mom the other day, she said some things about me not accepting their divorce, and that I hadn’t looked at their marriage from an adult’s perspective. Essentially, they were never happy together. I’m not sure what that says about me that I didn’t see it. That I haven’t let it go, even though they’ve been divorced for eleven years. My mom also didn’t think the history with Ashley should concern me

now. And I need to process that, but right now, all I feel is hurt and betrayed. I need to work through that.” She stands on her toes and presses a kiss to my chin. “I like you, Brock, a lot.” Her hand smooths over my heart. “I don’t want this to end, either, but I don’t want to promise you anything when I know I need to work some things out.”

“I can respect that.” I rest my hands on her hips and press my lips to her forehead. “You’re worth the wait, Stella. So, I’ll wait.”

Her eyes become glossy as she stares up at me. “You mean that?”

“I mean it.”

With a smile crossing her beautiful lips, she stands on her toes and brings my mouth down to hers. *Sealing our new direction with a kiss?* That’s how I’m going to see this. This isn’t an end to what we have, and that’s what matters the most. It’s not easy to ignore your past hurts. Fuck, I know that. But she hasn’t pushed me away, so I’ll make sure she knows I believe in her, *in us*, and will walk with her through this. She’s worth the wait.



“YOU LOOK PLEASED WITH YOURSELF,” Arlo says, approaching me at the airport. I glance up from my phone, where I was texting with my parents, sending them some pictures of the trip.

“How does one look pleased with themselves?” I ask.

He takes a seat at my table and says, “Smug.”

“Speak for yourself.” I nod at him as Gunner takes a seat, as well. “You’ve been a smug asshole your entire life, but increasingly so since you’ve married Greer.”

“Because I have everything I need in life, which leads me to believe you’re treading the same line.”

I lean back in my chair and set my phone on the table. I glance over my shoulder at where the girls are gathered, sharing some Maui chocolate before the flight. “I don’t have everything I want in life, but I’m leaving Maui knowing there’s a chance that I can continue things with Stella when we get back.”

“Really?” Gunner asks. “You talked to her? Told her how you felt?”

“Pretty much, yeah. Told her I liked her a lot and that I wasn’t done with what we started here.”

“So . . . are you boyfriend and girlfriend?” Gunner asks in singsong.

“No. She has some things she needs to work out with her dad. She asked for some time, but she said she liked me a lot, too.” I shrug. “There’s promise there.”

Gunner pats me on the back. “Well, there you go, man. Love is blooming.”

When I look over at Arlo, I find him cautiously studying me. His fingers lightly drum on the table. There’s some serious thought behind his eyes, and I’ve a feeling I’m not going to like what he’s thinking about.

“Just say it, man,” I say, not wanting to beat around the bush.

“Be cautious,” he says. “I think Stella was more affected by what’s going on with her dad than she lets on.”

“Why do you say that?”

“From things Greer has said and my own experience. Issues with parents just don’t fade away, and they have a serious impact on how you approach your own relationships. Something I learned while in therapy,” Arlo admits. “If she’s struggling with her dad, you’re going to need to give her some space to figure that out, or else you might fuck up your chances completely. Tread carefully, don’t push her, and when she asks for time, give it to her.”



The table falls silent, only for Gunner to say, “Wow, way to bring down the vibe, man.”

Arlo shrugs unapologetically. “Wouldn’t you rather know the truth?” he asks me.

“But you don’t know that’s the truth,” Gunner says. “That’s your opinion. Stella might not be as damaged as you—no offense.”

“That could be true, but better to be prepared for the worst.”

I mull over his words. I honestly don’t know where Stella’s head is at. She asked for fun, and that’s what I gave her. Now that we’re heading back home, I might need to set my feelings to the side and focus on making sure she’s as solid as she can be with her father before I pursue anything. And that fucking sucks, but I’ve waited this long. I won’t pressure her. I can wait a few weeks more, or months, depending on how long it takes her.

“He’s right,” I say, the words stinging more than I care to admit. “I need to make sure she’s solid before I dive into anything deeper with her.”

Leaning toward me, Gunner asks, “You realize you just said Arlo is right? He’s not going to let you live that down.”

“Yeah, I’m aware.”

Looking smug again, Arlo continues, “You also need to make sure she’s not using you.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” I ask.

“She’s not in a good mental place, right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Which means she’s going to cope by trying to forget. I think we’ve all done that in our lives. The easiest way for her to cope right now . . . is with you.”

“Ahh, I see what he’s saying,” Gunner says, nudging my shoulder. “Do you?”

“I’m not a moron.” I give it a second of thought. “Do you really think she’d do that?”

“Yes,” they both say at the same time.

Arlo adds, “Not because she’s meaning to. I don’t think she’s that kind of person. But I think she’s going to be overwhelmed and lean on you, even though she asked for time. It’s going to be confusing for you, since you have feelings invested. You need to be smart and realize nothing can happen with you two until her head is on right, no matter how much you like her.”

Gunner leans over to me and whispers, “You know this pains me terribly, but he’s right again.”

“Hell . . .” I mutter, because he *is* right. “That’s what the vacation was, a way to escape.”

“Exactly.” Arlo pockets his phone. “She was tapped out emotionally and she got lost in you. No strings attached. I know she means well, and it’s good she wants to take her time, but you need to be vigilant about her not slipping back into what you had in Maui, not until she’s sorted things out. Trust me, I didn’t move forward with Greer until I figured my shit out. It’s never going to work if her head is clouded.” Arlo stands and taps the table. “I’m going to make sure my wife has everything she needs before we take off.”

With that he leaves, and Gunner says, “Attentive asshole.” Turning toward me, Gunner grows serious and says, “He’s right, you know.”

“I know.” I bite down on the inside of my cheek out of pure frustration.

“You want her, but you want her for all the right reasons. Give her space, give her time.”

“And what if she doesn’t ever clear her head?”

Gunner gives me an apologetic look. “Then maybe it wasn’t meant to be.” He grips my shoulder. “But I’m telling you this, if you go after her now, you’re guaranteeing yourself an unhealthy relationship. Arlo is right. He couldn’t give Greer what she needed until he resolved his past. Stella won’t be

able to give you what you need, what you want, until she does the same.” Gunner stands and says, “I’m going to check on Lindsay as well, not because Arlo is checking on Greer and I feel obligated, but because I want to see what my chances are at entering the mile-high club.”

I appreciate him trying to lighten the mood. “I can tell you right now. Slim,” I say.

He scoffs. “What little faith.” And then he takes off.

Mind blazing with questions, uncertainty, fear of losing Stella, I pick up my phone again and flip through the texts of my mom gushing over the helicopter pictures I took. I write back a quick response and then check my inbox. My phone dings with a new email and my heart stutters when I see it’s from Adam Lee.

I look over my shoulder to make sure the guys are where they’re supposed to be and then I open the email.

*Dear Brock,*

*I know things have been crazy the last few weeks with your friend’s wedding, but I was hoping to speak with you on the phone when you get back to Chicago. The athletic director has narrowed down the candidates, and it’s between you and a guy from California. Because of the high turnover rate recently, he wants to hire the right person for the head coach position and that’s why he’s taking his time. Luckily, the fall season schedule isn’t heavy for the boys and they can be coached by the assistant coaches in the meantime. The assistant coaches realize the importance of waiting for the right man and know they don’t have the experience Bob is looking for, so if you were hired, there wouldn’t be any “mutiny.” We’re hoping to make a decision in the next three weeks. Wanted to give you a heads-up. Also, I called Gunner as a formality for a reference, but since he didn’t answer, figured you guys were busy with the wedding. Tell him there’s no need to call me back.*

*I’m pushing for you, man. Would love to have you at Weston University.*

*Take care,*

*Adam*

“Fuck,” I mutter, exiting out of my email app and setting my phone back on the table.

Not the complication I was expecting to deal with right after vacation.

My jaw clenches as I consider the head coach position over at Weston. It would be a dream to move up to the collegiate level. I like coaching with Gunner, but I’m not completely infatuated with teaching high school. I’d rather be immersed in baseball, and when things weren’t happening with Stella, my buddy Adam just so happened to mention the position at Weston. I applied, not thinking I’d be considered.

But, fuck, now it’s down to me and someone else. What if I get the position? There’s no way Stella would move with me. We aren’t even in a real relationship. And long distance doesn’t seem like something she’d be interested in. Plus, all of her family lives near her.

Maybe I won’t get it.

Maybe I won’t have to choose.

Even as I try to convince myself, why do I think that’s not how it’s going to happen?

## Chapter Fifteen

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### STELLA

“How on earth did Arlo put together the teachers’ barbeque right after a wedding?” I say to Cora as we head toward the loungers at the back of his property.

Arlo has—what I call—a mansion that sits on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. His backyard is a dream with two levels to it. The level closest to the lake is filled with pristinely cut grass, black-and-white loungers with accompanying umbrellas, and of course, a volleyball court for Greer. The upper level, which connects to the house, is all stone pavers with a built-in grill and outdoor kitchen, a fire pit, and seating. Stone steps lead you down to the second level, and of course, being the English teacher Arlo is, he added a green light to the patio area, because who would he be if he didn’t have a *Great Gatsby* touch?

And every year, without fail, Arlo holds a teachers’ barbeque—that’s what he calls it—before the start of the school year. It’s a time for teachers to meet any new faculty, for them to relax, and to have one last moment of peace before we go back to the classroom. The thing with Arlo’s barbeque, though, is that it’s not what the average person would call a barbeque. It’s fancy. The finger foods aren’t ribs covered in sauce, but rather petite appetizers that you can take down in one bite. He hires caterers to serve the group and to make sure

we're fed well. And the alcohol, well, let's just say it gets me in trouble every year.

Every.

Damn.

Year.

And this year is no exception as I chug back my first glass of champagne.

"I hate to give my brother credit, but he's impeccably organized and can pull things off normal people can't," Cora answers.

"Is it just me, or is this year's event fancier than last year?"

Leaning in, Cora says, "Arlo wanted it to sort of double as a celebration of the recent nuptials, as well. So, yeah, it's fancier."

I glance over at a table with presents on it. "Is that why those presents are over there?"

Cora laughs. "Yeah. Did you not read the invite?"

"Apparently not." I tip back my glass and flag down a waiter, who trades my empty flute for a full one.

"Is there a reason why you're already on your second glass of champagne?" Cora asks. "From what I've heard, you're notorious for getting drunk at these parties."

"That would be correct, and I don't think I'll stop that streak tonight."

Cora takes the champagne out of my hand and asks, "What's going on? Are things weird with Romeo? Because since you've gotten here, you haven't even said hi to him."

"Keeping tabs?" I ask.

"No, but I thought—I don't know, that maybe you guys would continue your fling from Maui."

"We met up last night at his place. Everything is fine with him."

"What did you do? Was it a date?" Cora asks, excited.

“No. Just hung out. We were both jet-lagged from the trip, so we didn’t meet up until yesterday. We watched the game.”

“That’s all? Did you . . . have sex?”

I shake my head. “No.” I look around and then whisper, “But it’s not as if I didn’t try.”

Cora gasps. “What do you mean? He denied you?”

I slowly nod. “Yup.”

“Is that the reason for the alcohol?”

I shake my head. “No, because his reasoning was sound. He wanted to make sure I was okay before he started, in his words, fucking me all over his loft.”

“Ugh, he *would* fuck you all over his loft.” Cora sips her champagne as she scours the party space. “Just look at him in those jeans and tight shirt. I can count his six-pack from here.”

I turn around and find Romeo talking with Gunner, both with beers in their hands, both with smiles on their faces. And yup, would you look at that? With just enough wind, his shirt clings to his abs, and you can count them.

“Please tell me you’ve licked his abs.”

I feel a blush creep up my cheeks. “I have.”

She sighs. “Where are my abs that I get to lick?”

“Is your divorce final yet?” I ask.

Cora married a dillhole and has been in divorce proceedings for over a year. Something to do with his money and her money—since she and Arlo inherited a lot from their grandparents. And, of course, the dillhole has been uncooperative during the entire process, dragging everything out. Imagine that.

“Not yet, but soon. Very soon. I can taste it. And the minute it’s final, we’re celebrating. Girls’ trip.”

“Yeah? To where?”

Cora smiles. “Where else? Vegas, baby.”

I chuckle. “Of course. Why didn’t I guess that? Well, maybe—”

Cora’s hand grips my shoulder as she gasps out loud. “Dear Mother of God. Who . . . is . . . that?” She points shakily to a guy who just walked up to Romeo. I watch as Romeo shakes the guy’s hand and then introduces him to Gunner.

He’s tall, wearing all black, with a leather jacket. His dark hair is sexy messy on the top of his head. He screams “trouble, bad boy, wrong decisions,” and from the look in Cora’s eyes, I can tell she doesn’t care.

“Uh . . . I think that might be the new history teacher. There was only one addition to the faculty this year, so it must be him.”

“My, oh my.” Cora nibbles on her bottom lip. “Look at that ass in those jeans. What’s his name?”

“Hmm, I’m drawing a blank. It was a different name.” I take my champagne back from her and say, “This will help.” She gives me a skeptical glance and then I say, “Oh, yeah. Pike Greyson.”

“Oh, Mr. Greyson, please put me in detention.”

“Jesus.” I chuckle. “I dare you to say that to him.”

“A few more glasses of champagne and I’m sure I will.” She nudges me. “Introduce me.”

“I don’t know him.”

“But you’re faculty. I’m just the sister of the famous Mr. Turns Me On who works at the donut shop.”

“Uh, not just any donut shop. You work at Frankie Donuts taking pictures for their social media. It’s a sacred position.”

“Yes, and that position has added some fluff to my hips and tits.”

I look my friend up and down and shake my head. “You realize that’s not a bad thing, right? Pretty sure if you walked up to Pike, he’d have no problem putting you in detention.”



Cora fluffs her hair. “You think? God, he has one-night stand written all over him, doesn’t he?”

I nod. “Yeah, he does. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“I’m not looking for marriage, that’s for sure.” She nudges me again. “Come on, introduce me.”

“Why are you doing this to me? I have enough to worry about. I don’t need this extra pressure.”

“Oh, right, the alcohol intake. What’s the mass consumption for?”

“Are you trying to breeze through this conversation so you can force me to introduce you?”

“Pfft.” She waves her hand at me. “I would never do such a thing.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay.” I take another sip of my champagne and say, “I’m talking to my dad tomorrow.”

Cora pauses and all the humor disappears from her face. “Oh, shit, really?” She glances back at the boys and sighs, then gives me her full attention. “Are you okay? Well, probably not, given the consumption of alcohol.”

“Nervous. Don’t want to have the conversation. I’ve been dreading it, but I feel as though I have no choice but to face the music, you know?”

“Yeah, and it might be cathartic. You’ve been putting it off, so there must be this heavy weight hanging over you. Hopefully, you’ll be able to feel better afterward, and then . . . you could move toward something with Romeo. That’s what you want, right?”

I glance back at the boys just as Romeo’s eyes connect with mine. He offers me a quick wink and then turns back toward Gunner, who’s talking animatedly.

That little wink makes me feel like a pile of mush. All warm and soft inside. How could I possibly see him any other way than the way I see him now?

“I think it is,” I say.

“Good, now introduce me.”

I chuckle, take Cora by the hand, and then we walk up to the guys. When Romeo sees us approaching, his eyes stay connected with mine. I’ve seen that gaze before—it’s the same gaze he uses right before he picks me up, tosses me on the bed, and has his way with me.

I wanted him so bad last night. I wanted him on top of me, driving into me, telling me how beautiful I am, how perfect I am for him.

“Hey, ladies,” Romeo says, greeting us first. Pike turns around and his eyes immediately find Cora. Like the devil in a leather jacket that he is, he slowly rakes his gaze over her before he steps aside, allowing us into the circle.

Oh, poor Cora, she’s in for a whirlwind if she decides to pursue him.

“Hey.” I reach my hand out to Pike. “I’m Stella Garcia, Spanish teacher.” Pike takes my hand and slowly nods.

“Pike Greyson,” he says in a deep English accent.

Yup. Cora is in trouble.

“Nice to meet you.” Man, I’m intimidated and I’m not even interested in him. “Uh, this is my friend and Arlo Turner’s sister, Coraline.”

Face neutral, Pike takes Cora’s hand in his and says, “Coraline.”

A deep blush colors Cora’s cheeks. “Everyone calls me Cora.”

He makes some sort of low grunt and then says, “Going to fill up on a brew.” And then he takes off.

Cora leans against me and fans her face. “Sweet Jesus, I very well might have just gotten pregnant.”

“Pull it together,” I say, pushing her off me.

“Nope, it’s happening. I’m going to sleep with that man and I know it’s going to be the best sex I ever have. I’m calling it right now. God, do you think he talks dirty? Spanks?”

Gunner clears his throat. “He was actually telling us just now how he uses whips while fucking.”

Cora’s eyes widen. “Seriously?”

“No,” Gunner says, exasperated.

Cora points her finger at him. “Don’t mess with me. I’m already horny after being in Maui with all of you fornicators.” She pushes her hair behind her ears and says, “I need to go to the bathroom. If you guys speak with him again, talk me up.”

She takes off, leaving me with Gunner and Romeo.

Gunner glances around. “I’m going to find my girl, see if she wants to do it on Arlo’s desk in his office. Nothing would give me more joy.”

I snort as Gunner walks off, eyes roaming for Lindsay, which leaves me with Romeo.

He nods toward the loungers and asks, “Want to sit with me?”

“Sure.”

Instead of taking my hand like he did in Maui, he walks beside me as we make our way to the lower half of Arlo and Greer’s backyard and to the black-and-white loungers. I take a seat on one, half expecting to share with him, but he sits across from me instead. His distance makes me worry and I wonder if asking for time has pushed him away.

“I think Cora might have a thing for the new teacher,” Romeo says in a lighthearted tone.

“You think? I fear for both of them. Pretty sure Pike can take her down with one stare, and I’m not sure if he’s ready for the kind of whirlwind that is Coraline Turner.”

“Not sure who I fear for most.” Romeo brings his beer to his lips and I watch as his throat works the liquid down to his stomach. For some reason, it’s erotic to watch. Maybe because I know what it’s like to have my lips all over his neck. “You okay?” he asks.

“Huh? Oh yeah, fine.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “Why don’t I buy it?”

There’s no use in faking it with Romeo. He seems to be able to see right through me. “I’m meeting with my dad tomorrow.”

His brows lift. “Really? When did you plan this?”

“Earlier this week. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to focus on it, but now that it’s tomorrow, I can’t stop thinking about what he’s going to say.” I lower my gaze to my hands. “What if he’s sick and only has so many days left to live? Is that why he’s getting married? Why he’s living his life the complete opposite of what I grew up with? I can’t help but wonder if this is his last-ditch effort to live life.”

Romeo’s fingers connect with my chin as he lifts my gaze to his. “You can’t think that way, babe.”

“Easier said than done. Mom said there was something going on with his health. What if he has cancer?”

“Guessing and worrying isn’t going to do anything besides ruin your night. You can’t focus on that right now.”

“What do you suppose I focus on, then?”

“Anything else.” He gestures with his arms.

“So, if I were to say I want to go home with you tonight, what would you say?”

The corners of his jaw tense as he looks away. “I’d say you were trying to forget and using me as a distraction.”

“Is that a problem?”

“It is for me,” he says, surprising me.

“What does that mean?” I ask, inquisitively.

“It means I don’t want you to use me as a way to forget. I’m more than that.”

Confused, I ask, “Where’s this coming from?”

“It’s how I’ve always felt.”

“You felt like I’m using you?” I ask.

He chuckles but it's not a humorous chuckle. It's dry, almost . . . sarcastic. "Stella, I spent the last two weeks in Maui at your beck and call, letting you use me in whatever capacity you needed. Fake fiancé, partner in crime . . . fuck boy."

Offended, I say, "I did not use you as a fuck boy. If I recall, you were the first one to fuck me. Against a wall, no less. That was on you."

"Yeah, maybe it was." He rubs the back of his neck. "But *that* was due to lack of control. You think having you near me, holding my hand, pretending you're mine, making out with me in the pool, grinding on my goddamn cock—you think that was easy on me?"

Confused, I set my champagne flute on the table between the chairs and ask, "What are you even talking about? You initiated the handholding. Yes, the pool was on me, but the touching, the..."

"You're saying it's all my fault?" He points to his chest; anger starting to radiate.

I hold up my hand. "Hold on, what's happening? Why are you getting so mad at me right now?"

Hissing, he says, "Because you don't fucking get it, Stella."

"Don't get what?"

He glances toward the lake and takes a deep breath. When his eyes return to mine, I feel them pierce me to my very core. "I like you. I've liked you for a long goddamn time. Not sure if you chose to ignore it or if you're just that goddamn oblivious. But I like you. More than I probably should. And 'pretending' to be the man I wish I was, the man by your side, holding your hand, waking up next to you, that was fucking torture. That was hard. But I set aside my feelings because of your dad, because you needed help. But then shit got complicated and you wanted more. All you had to do was say the word and I'd have done any-goddamn-thing you wanted,

because that's how much I care about you, but it seems as though that's only a one-way street."

"What are you talking about? I care about you," I reply, my heart tripping in my chest from his confession. How long has he liked me? I didn't know, I was oblivious. If I'd have known, I . . . hell, I probably would've acted on it. But I always thought he saw me as a friend, nothing more.

"You might care about me as a friend, but not in the deep way I've hoped you would. I told you I liked you out on the boat, and you asked for time. I'm giving it to you, but during that time, you can't use me as an escape. You can't use me to help cure your woes, because you need to realize it's breaking me. One look, one touch, one promise of a night with you at a time."

Tears well in my eyes, and even though we're at a teachers' barbeque, I ignore everything around us as I lean even closer so he can hear me over the clog in my throat. "I'd never use you like that."

"But you have. You just haven't realized it," he says, standing from the lounge. I stand as well, a sharp intake of breath passing through my lungs. This man has become vital to me. How can he not know? Yes, I tease him, yes, I've flirted with him, but he's enjoyed that and teased and flirted back. He's not going to walk away and not help me understand, right? *I won't sleep if he walks away.*

"Brock, don't leave. I—I have no idea what's going on. I was just joking. I mean, yes, last night, I wish we'd slept together, but I understood why we didn't. I wasn't trying to pressure you."

"This isn't about last night. This isn't about today. This is a culmination of everything, and you seeking me as refuge from your problems with your dad, the night before you're supposed to talk to him, it's the straw that broke the camel's back."

He starts to walk away, but I tug on his arm, keeping him in place. "So, are you saying I can't even talk to you about

this? I thought we were friends. I thought this is what we do. Talk, complain, help each other out.”

“That’s exactly what we are, Stella—*friends*. It’s probably best we keep it that way.”

He tries to walk away again, but I stand in front of him, my hand to his chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Greer next to Arlo, watching us intently with concerned looks on their faces. Pushing them out of my mind, I look up at Romeo. “I honestly have no idea what’s going on. Why you’re so mad at me. I feel as though this came out of nowhere.” A tear cascades down my cheek. “Can we please talk about this? Don’t leave. Don’t end this conversation to make a statement. Just talk to me, work through this, help me understand better. I don’t want to lose you again, Brock.”

And this is even more true than it was a few months ago when he shut down. We were friends then, but the level of intimacy we now share, the depth of friendship, it’s not something I can lose. Not now. *Probably never*. I need him in my life.

His eyes fall shut and he lets out a deep sigh, before quietly saying, “Come over tonight, after the party, and we can talk then, okay?”

I nod vigorously. “Okay.”

And then he pulls me into a hug and places a kiss on the top of my head. It takes everything in me not to break down at Arlo’s, wrapped up in Romeo’s arms.

I don’t know what just happened, but all I know is I need to find a way to fix it.

## Chapter Sixteen

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### ROMEO

**Gunner:** *Dude, you left without saying bye. Did you have dessert?*

**Arlo:** *Are you seriously home right now?*

Sitting in my loft, staring at the Chicago skyline, I slouch on my sofa and text the boys back.

**Romeo:** *Had to leave. Things got . . . complicated.*

**Gunner:** *Shit. What happened?*

**Romeo:** *Exactly what you said was going to happen. Stella meets with her dad tomorrow. She came to me to help distract her.*

**Arlo:** *That's why she's been acting weird. Greer was concerned. What did you say?*

**Romeo:** *Called her out on it.*

**Gunner:** *Oh fuck, really? Is that why you guys looked tense over by the loungers?*

**Arlo:** *I noticed the same thing. It looked as if you were fighting.*

**Romeo:** *Not really fighting, just talking.*

**Gunner:** *And how did the talking go?*



I drag my hand over my face, annoyed, frustrated, desperate.

**Romeo:** *Well, she's headed over here, so not great.*

**Arlo:** *What the fuck? Dude, what are you doing?*

**Gunner:** *That doesn't seem like a good idea if she wants a distraction but you don't want to be that for her.*

**Romeo:** *You didn't see her eyes. She was distraught. She wants to talk. I kind of caught her off guard.*

**Arlo:** *How so?*

**Romeo:** *I've gone along with her fake fiancé farce, I even did the no strings attached, and then all of a sudden, I told her I don't want to be that person anymore. She had no idea it was coming, but it's been brewing in my head ever since we got back from Maui. She looked terrified that she was going to lose me. I don't know, made me think something is there.*

**Gunner:** *Something IS there, she just hasn't figured it out yet.*

**Arlo:** *She likes you. We can see it when you two interact. She likes you, but you want her when she wants you, not when she's looking for an escape.*

**Gunner:** *Precisely.*

**Romeo:** *I know. I know.*

There's a knock at my door.

Hell, she's here.

Taking a deep breath, I set my phone on the coffee table and walk over to my entryway, where I open the door for her.

She must have gone home and changed, because she's no longer wearing the dress she wore to the barbeque, but instead a pair of Adidas sweats and a simple white T-shirt. Her long hair is tied up into a bun and she's carrying her keys in one hand and her phone in the other.

"Hey," she says quietly, somberly. And I can't fucking help it. My heart twists in my chest and before I can stop myself, I

pull her in by the hand and straight to my chest, where I give her a hug. Her arms wrap around me and she holds me tightly as I feel her shake against me.

She's crying.

Fuck, why is she crying?

Shutting the door behind her, I bring her to the couch and take a seat before pulling her onto my lap and holding her tightly.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

She continues to bury her face against my chest as she says, “I’m so sorry, Brock. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” I rub her back, trying to soothe the sorrow racing through her.

She lifts up just enough to look me in the eyes. Her hand cups my cheek as her thumb drags against my five o’clock shadow. “You’ve been so good to me. You’ve followed along with my crazy antics, barely asking questions, going in blind. You’ve taken care of me, helped me have fun, helped me forget, and from what you said, I haven’t done the same. I’ve made you feel used—”

Her throat chokes and a sob escapes.

“Hey,” I say quietly, trying to calm her down. “I’m good, Stella.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t make me feel better.” She gets off my lap and starts to pace the room as she wipes away her tears. “I’ve been messed up for a while and I think I’m just starting to realize it. I mean, what was I thinking? I asked you to be my fake fiancé, and for what? To make me look better in front of a person I couldn’t care less about? I asked you to play along, to ruin your vacation because I was a selfish asshole.”

“Stella, you’re not a selfish asshole.”

“Yes, I am,” she says, her voice growing louder. “My dad gets engaged, and what do I do? Try to break them up. Who does that? I’m almost thirty. Thirty, Brock. And I’m parading around like an asshole trying to do everything possible to ruin

everyone else's life, because I'm not happy with mine." The words fall past her lips and I see the realization strike her almost instantaneously.

"Stella—"

She shakes her head, more tears falling from her eyes. "Because—because I'm not happy with my life. Because I'm not where I want to be. Because at this point in my life, I thought I'd be married, I thought I wouldn't be living in a small, one-bedroom apartment, my dreams still on a vision board rather than accomplished." She stops her pacing and folds her arms over her chest. "I'm sorry. This isn't your problem, this is mine. I should go."

She starts toward the door, and I practically leap off the couch and cut her off before she can even close in on the entryway.

"You're not leaving, not like this."

"What's the point of me staying here? I'm only going to drag you down with me."

"You're not dragging me—"

"I already did," she shouts. "I already brought you down to my level." A sardonic laugh bubbles out of her. "You don't need this." She gestures to herself. "Why do you even like me?"

She's spiraling, and I need to stop it before her spiraling damages any chance I ever have at making her mine. It was not my intention to make her fall down a rabbit hole of hatred when I spoke to her at the party, but that's what's happening, and frankly, it's starting to scare me.

"Stella, deep breaths, babe."

She shakes her head and backs up until she hits the wall. Slowly, she slides down it until she's sitting, her legs pulled against her chest. More tears fall as she says, "I'm sorry, Brock."

Fuck.

Seeing her like this is breaking me, it's driving a dagger straight to my heart. I scoop her up into my arms and walk her to my bedroom, where I lay her down. I grab the back of my shirt, pull it over my head, and toss it to the ground before slipping us both under the covers. She curls up into a ball, and I pull her against my chest, facing me.

"I'm . . . sorry."

"Shhh," I say softly while moving my hand over her back. "It's okay, Stella. Everything's going to be okay."

Her hand smooths up my chest, the feel of her palm against my skin warming me, igniting a spark inside of me. Despite everything we've been through, I still want this woman. I want her for her beautiful mind. I want her for her sassy, smart-witted mouth. I want her for her demanding, take-no-prisoners attitude when she has an idea in her head. I want her for the sincerity and care she has for her friends. I realize, going through this with her, that things won't ever be perfect, and we have our own baggage. But that's what relationships are all about, filtering through each other's baggage and helping each other carry it around while we unload together on the journey of life. I just need to get her to understand that.

When her breathing evens out and I feel she's calmed down, I quietly answer her question. "I like you, Stella, because you make me laugh. Because you get me unlike anyone else. When all I want to do is punt a few kids across the gym, you don't judge me, you don't tell me as an educator we're supposed to accept all students, but instead, you're right there next to me, shining my punting shoe." She exhales and holds me closer. "I like you because you challenge me, you don't put up with my shit, but give it right back to me." I press a kiss to the top of her head. "I like you because you make me happy, and honestly, that's all I'm looking for—for someone to make me happy."

"You make me happy," she practically whispers. She lifts up and her tear-soaked eyes connect with mine. Her hand cups my cheek. "You make me incredibly happy, and I think that scares me, because I don't think after everything I did to you, I deserve that happiness."

“Stella, you act as though you murdered one of my family members. You asked me to pretend to be your fiancé. It’s not a crime, and if I really didn’t want to do it, I’d have told you to shove it up your ass. But I didn’t, and it’s because it was a chance to get closer to you. I took it.”

“But you felt used.”

I huff out my frustration. “I felt like that because I like you, because I wanted more. I was scared you were going to play with my emotions.”

“If I’d known, I never would’ve asked you to do something like that.” She lifts up. “You have to know that, Brock.”

“I know.” And it’s true. These last few weeks, Stella might have shown a side of crazy I’ve never seen before, but she wouldn’t have asked me to do any of those things if I’d spoken to her, if I’d actually had a conversation with her that mattered. Instead, I chickened out every moment I got. “I should have told you where my head was at. That’s on me.”

“Why . . . why didn’t you say anything?” she asks.

I shrug. “Afraid you wouldn’t have the same feelings. There were moments where I wanted to, but you referred to me as your friend and—I don’t know, I just didn’t think you were in the same headspace as me.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t, that is, until I kissed you in the pool and then you started opening up. It was . . . eye-opening. I spoke with Cora the next day and told her I was in trouble, that I was falling for you. That I liked you more than I should, and it hit me like a tidal wave. And now, knowing that I’ve hurt you—”

I shake my head and press my finger over her lips, silencing her. “Enough of that.” I take a deep breath. “Hell, Stella, do you realize what you just did to me?”

Confused, she shakes her head.

I cup her cheek and roll her to her back. “Babe, you just made my goddamn heart flutter. You said you were falling for me.”

The sadness in her eyes vanishes as her cheeks redden. “It’s the truth.”

“Do you realize how long I’ve been wanting to hear that? Fuck.” I chuckle. “You just made my goddamn night. I’ve been crushing on you for so long, and I just found out you have the same feelings. You don’t just like me, but you’re falling for me.”

Her teeth roll over her bottom lip. “You don’t need to make a big deal about it.”

“Oh, I’m making a big deal about it.” I move my leg between hers and shift my body over hers. “I know you have a lot going on and that I told you I’ll wait, and I will, but I need you to know . . . I need to be inside you tonight.”

“But . . . I thought—”

“I know what I said.” I rest my forehead against hers. “But give me this night. This one fucking night, and then I’ll wait.” I look her in the eyes. “Please.”

Her legs spread. “I want it just as much as you, not because it’s a distraction, but because it’s you, Brock. Because I get to be with you.”

“Hell, babe.”

She pushes on my chest so we’re both sitting up on my bed. She reaches for my pants, undoes them, and then strips me down to nothing.

“Sit up against the headboard,” she says as she pulls her shirt over her head. Her pants join her discarded shirt on the floor, and she stands there in nothing but a green lingerie set, looking positively stunning. Eyes on mine, she reaches behind her and undoes her bra. My eyes fall to her chest as my hand snakes around my erection, and I slowly pump my length.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful, Stella,” I say while she pushes her thong to the floor. “Everything about you turns me on, but it’s that smart mouth of yours that really captured me.”

She sits between my legs and places her hands on my knees, before sliding them up my inner thighs until she reaches

where my hand grips my cock. She removes my hand and then brings her mouth to the tip, where she presses a small kiss. My cock jumps in response just as she licks her lips and plunges down on my shaft.

My hands fall to the side and grip the plush comforter underneath me as she pulls me deeper and deeper into her mouth until I hit the back of her throat.

“Christ,” I mutter, my legs already tingling from having her between them.

I know I said I’d hold off until she cleared things up with her dad. I know I said I didn’t want to get involved until she was ready to get involved, but fuck, her confession destroyed any rules I had set for myself. Completely blasted through them, leaving me a pathetic man, needy and willing to do anything to get her in bed, naked, and letting me feel her warmth, her beating heart. Although, that’s not strictly the truth. I *love* this physical connection between us.

It’s fierce.

A promise.

*Right.*

Her lips slide up my cock to the tip, where she hollows out her cheeks and sucks hard, causing my pelvis to thrust toward her mouth. Her hands attempt to pin me down, but it’s no use, I need more friction, my cock demands it.

“Stella, please. Need inside you.”

Her mouth releases me, but she doesn’t sit up just yet; instead, she smooths her thumb on the underside of my cock, just where the head meets the shaft, and I nearly come right then and there.

“Fuck, Stella. Don’t make me come.”

Her lips fall back to my cock where they part and her tongue glides over the tip, swirling, enticing me. I try to catch my breath from the pleasure rocketing through me.

“I’m not fucking kidding, Stella,” I say, my legs tensing as the early tingles of an orgasm float up my legs.

She doesn't listen, and instead drives her mouth down my cock again, and that's enough.

I pull her up on me and rest my head against the headboard as I stare her in the eyes. "You have two choices," I say, my words clipped. "You can either sit on my cock right now, or you can make me come with your mouth, only for me to bring you to the edge of an orgasm and leave you hanging."

Her eyes narrow. "You wouldn't."

"Babe." I move my thumb across her cheek. "I want to be inside you, so if I have to throw down a threat to make that happen, I will."

"That desperate?" she asks with a smile.

"That infatuated," I reply. "I want to come inside of you. I want to claim that pussy because you said you're falling for me."

Her eyes darken. Her body reacts to my confession. She slides up my legs and straddles my lap. She grips my cock and positions it at her entrance, then lowers herself to my lap. We're at eye level, my back against the headboard, her legs on either side of mine. I can't remember the last time I had sex in this position, it was never with anyone who mattered to me. But with Stella, being eye to eye with her like this, as she moves her hips . . . yeah, this is exactly what I needed. *What we needed.*

"I love your cock," she says, moving up and down. "It feels incredible inside of me. Thick, long . . ." She swallows. "You hit me in places no man has ever hit me before." Her hands sail over my pecs and up to my shoulders to grip them tightly. "I feel full, Brock." She looks me in the eyes. "So full. You make me believe that maybe—maybe I'm not broken."

"You're not," I say through clenched teeth. "You're not broken at all, babe."

"I feel broken," she says right before her head falls back, exposing her neck.

My lips find the silky column and kiss her gently, nibbling all the way to her ear, where I whisper, "You're perfect to me,



Stella.”

“Oh God, yes,” she groans when I move my hips against her. My hands fall to her hips and I press my fingers into her skin to let her know I have her, that she’s mine. In this moment, we’re connected, and there’s no way I’m letting her go. Her head falls to the side as her pace picks up and matches with mine. She releases one of my shoulders and moves her hand between us to press her fingers against her clit. Her pussy convulses around my cock, shooting stars off in my eyes.

“Ahh, fuck.” I move my hand down between us as well, remove her fingers, and take control of her clit with my thumb, barely pressing against it, just enough to light her up.

“Holy shit, Brock,” she says on a surprised gasp. “Oh no, oh God, I’m going to come.” Her groans turn into moans. Those moans turn into feral cries as she clutches me for support, and her pussy starts to convulse around my cock, pulling on me. “Brock, yes, oh my God, yes.”

Shit.

I move her hips faster.

Harder.

I lift her and sit her back down on my cock.

My forearms burn.

My legs tense.

My balls tighten, and a bolt of euphoria shoots up my spine just as a rush of pleasure rushes through me.

“Fu-uck,” I yell as I come so hard that everything else around me blacks out and I drift into what feels like a blissful serenity. “Jesus, fuck,” I mutter, my hips slowly moving in and out of her as I catch my breath.

She collapses on my chest, her arms falling to my waist as we sit there connected. My heart beats erratically against her as I gently stroke my fingers up and down her spine.

“Are you—” I swallow, my breath seizing for a second. “Are you okay?”

She nods against my chest. “Yes. That was . . . wow.”

“Yeah.”

*Wow* is right.

I don’t know if it was our position, our need, or our confessions, but that was different. We were on another level, and as we rest, we both realize it.

When we both finally catch our breath, I say, “Tomorrow, when you’re talking to your dad, remember, I’ll be here for you to talk to, to hold you, to give you whatever you need.” I lift up her chin. “I’ll wait for you to figure things out, because what we have between us, it’s special.”

“You think I’m worth the time, even after everything I put you through?”

I place a soft kiss on her lips. “You’re worth the wait.”

## Chapter Seventeen

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### STELLA

Taking a deep breath, I ring the doorbell to my dad's quaint two-bedroom house. It's located just outside of Chicago in a quiet neighborhood where all the houses look the same and have brick exteriors. I don't have much attachment to Dad's house, but then again, why would I? My mom got our childhood home in the divorce, and I believe I've only been here once.

The door opens and I half expect Ashley to be on the other side with a smarmy grin, welcoming me into her house. Instead, my dad answers, wearing a pair of jeans and a simple, light blue T-shirt.

"Stelly," he says faintly. "I wasn't sure you'd show up."

"I thought about it," I answer honestly. Especially when I woke up in Romeo's arms this morning. I considered staying with him because it felt so good. So right. But when he grumbled something in his sleep and clung to me tighter, I realized if I stayed, I wouldn't be able to clear the air and move on.

I have to figure out what has caused this rift with my dad. And I don't think it's just about Ashley now. If I hadn't realized that a good man like Romeo cared about me, wanted more than just friendship, then perhaps some of that blindness comes from what my mom suggested. That I didn't understand

their marriage properly, or rather their divorce, and I need to understand to move forward in life. Has that stopped me from fulfilling my dreams? I'm not completely sure. I told Romeo I was messed up—another new revelation—and I know from a psychological standpoint that I can't put all the blame on my parents' divorce. But I need to understand myself better, and hopefully, that will start by spending time understanding my dad. I want to move forward.

And I want to move on.

I want to move on with Romeo.

When Romeo walked away from me last night, I realized that it isn't enough to only have him in my life as a friend. I want more, and I hate that it's taken me this long to figure it out.

Gaining enough courage, I look my dad in the eye and say, "I did think about not coming, but I realized I need to stop being selfish and I need to start listening."

Dad's eyes soften as he reaches out his hand, and I take it in mine. As he guides me into the house, he shuts the door behind me, and I notice the little touches Ashley has made since she's moved in. In the living room, there's a gray-and-white area rug that matches the couch. On the fireplace mantle, there are pictures of Dad and Ashley, along with pictures of me and my sisters . . . and my mom. Curtains hang over windows, adding softness to the previously cold space, and there are even a couple of throw pillows on the couch, which makes me chuckle. I know how much my dad hates throw pillows. Looks like Ashley and my mom have at least one thing in common.

"The place looks great, Dad."

He brings me into the kitchen, which is now painted a soft cream color, highlighting the pops of blue that must be from Ashley, as well. "Ashley has put her touch on the house." He gestures to the kitchenette table, where there's a plate of homemade cookies in the center. "She also made some cookies for us to share. I told her you always liked peanut butter M&M cookies growing up." Leaning over, he says, "They don't taste

like yours, but she put in a good effort. She burned half, but those are in the garbage can outside.”

I chuckle. “And they’re not poisoned?”

Dad laughs with me. “No, Stella, they aren’t.”

I take a seat as Dad pours two glasses of milk for us. I don’t have the heart to tell him I’m not a milk girl anymore, but instead, indulge in the nostalgia of sharing milk and cookies with my dad.

Wanting to show I’m not scared of a possible drive-by poisoning from Ashley, I pick up a cookie and take a bite. It’s a little hard, but the flavors are all there. “These are pretty good.”

“Not as chewy as yours,” Dad says while picking up a cookie as well and taking a bite.

“Does she use bread flour?”

“Probably not.”

“Bread flour helps make the cookies chewy. Give her the tip. Bet it makes a difference.”

“I’ll let her know. Thank you.”

I finish my cookie, sip my milk, and then say, “Before we get into everything, I need to tell you that I’m sorry about the way I handled things in Hawaii. I was in a bad place mentally, and seeing you there, with . . . Ashley”—I swallow hard—“made it that much harder on me.”

“What do you mean, you were in a bad place?” Dad’s concerned look throws me off. He was never the one to talk about feelings, that was Mom’s job, so to have an open conversation like this feels weird, uncomfortable almost.

“Well, I guess I should start this off by saying Romeo and I aren’t engaged.”

Dad’s eyes flash in confusion.

“We actually were barely speaking to each other when we arrived in Hawaii.”

“But . . . you seem so perfect together.”

“We were friends beforehand, but that friendship was strained, and going into Maui, we were barely able to sit near each other without fighting. It affected me more than I care to admit, and I was also feeling strong bouts of jealousy. My friend was getting married and I wasn’t even close to the idea of it. Not that I’ve been one to want to be married, but I was in a standstill. And then I saw you and Ashley together—found out your news. Dad, I hadn’t even known you were dating anyone seriously. I didn’t know about another woman, let alone someone I had such a bad history with. I realize *now* that my reaction was part of a tailspin, and I was dragged down immediately. To save face, I guess, I told you I was engaged, as well. I convinced Romeo to play along and he did. Along the way, our friendship blossomed again, and so did something else.”

Dad’s brows raise. “So, you are together then?”

“Not quite sure,” I answer honestly. “But I do know something is there, something strong. But that’s beside the point. I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry about the way I treated you and Ashley in Maui. I know I have my issues with Ashley, but I should never have acted the way that I did. I feel foolish.”

Dad reaches over and places his hand on mine. “No need to apologize. You were caught off guard, rightfully so. I should have tried harder to contact you *before* we went away, to be honest. You’re my daughter first, and you should have known that I’d been dating someone and had asked to marry her. It was just hard, with you not answering the phone. Multiple times. But, I understand where you’re coming from, and I had a long conversation with Ashley. She struggled with her guilt while in Maui, and with trying to prove to you that she was the right person for me. I know there were times when she came off harsh, mean. I spoke to her about it several times, and I know she wants to apologize for that, among other things.”

“But that’s not why we’re here, is it?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I suppose it’s not.”

Tilting my head to the side, I ask, “Why her, Dad? Do you really love her?”

He leans back in his chair and looks out the window to his backyard, where there’s a bird feeder on a pole that’s been securely buried in the ground. It’s clear he loves watching the birds feed on the many treats he puts out there. A simple act, but one that brings him great joy.

“Shortly after your mother and I divorced, I struggled to find myself. I wasn’t quite sure who I was supposed to be when I wasn’t supporting a family anymore. You girls were grown up and either in college or falling in love, your mother found joy in working with the local YMCA, and I was trying to understand what life as an empty nester was supposed to be like.” He looks me in the eyes. “I know you might not want to hear this, but I did notice the way you girls flocked to your mother more than me after we split, and even though it was painful to see how much more you three sought her attention, I understood why. She was warm, she was the caregiver, she was the one who sat up late at night with you, talking about your feelings and the boys who broke your hearts. My job was to provide, so I skipped out on those conversations. I went to work, I brought home the money, I made sure everyone had the clothes they wanted, food on the table, a roof over their head, and a little extra spending money for something fun.”

“Dad, you were more to us than that.”

He pats my hand. “I know we had our special moments, but they were few and far between. I’m not looking for sympathy, because I chose the way I handled things. If I’d wanted to be more involved, I would’ve been, but I fell into a routine instead. I permitted myself to back away from the tough conversations and only cheer your mom on while she handled them. It’s an action I regret now, because I can see the damage it’s done. But those first few years, they were hard on me. Your mom would call and tell me all about your college stories or how Marguerite was dating some guy she thought she would marry. Rather than hearing about my daughters’ lives at the dinner table, I heard them secondhand from my ex-wife.”

I try to think back to any conversations I might have had with my dad those first few years, and I realize, I didn't have many at all. The holidays, his birthday, mine. But there weren't many other times when I reached out to him.

"You were lonely," I say, the notion tearing away at my soul.

He stares down at his hands. "Dreadfully so. I went from a family of five, to a single man living for nothing, really. Your mom didn't need me, my daughters didn't need me, and yet, I took all the blame. I don't blame anyone else but myself, because I made my decisions. But the loneliness grew heavier and heavier, to the point that I started to have sickening chest pains while at work. I was granted promotions, raises. I took on more work. I drove myself hard while in the office, working into the late hours of the night so I didn't have to think too much about returning to an empty home. Then one night, while working late, I felt a sharp pain up my left arm, my breathing became labored, and I had just enough in me to call 911."

"Oh my God," I say as tears well in my eyes. "Dad, did you have a heart attack?"

He nods. "I had to have a coronary artery bypass."

Tears stream down my cheeks as I grip my dad's hand tightly. "Dad, why didn't you say anything?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest. It's something your mother asked me when I told her. I guess I didn't want to bother anyone. I went to a rehab facility, because I couldn't get better on my own, and that's where I met Ashley. She was my nurse. At first, we were just friends. Occasionally, she'd stay later and play cards with me. I think she felt bad for me. And while we were playing cards, a mutual understanding for one another developed. When I left the facility, we'd get together for tea, or even walks. And from there . . . well, things grew. It wasn't until quite a few months later that we realized you went to school with her. I knew she was young, but I didn't think she was that young. After I heard about what she did to you, because she confessed right away, I broke things off with her."



“Really?”

“I couldn’t fathom how someone could treat my girl like that.” He shakes his head. “We were apart for a few months, but not by her choosing. She apologized every day.” He squeezes my hand. “I love her, Stelly, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t let go. I told her if we did get back together, she’d have to mend the relationship she had with you.”

“Was that supposed to happen in Hawaii?”

“No, of course not. I should have made sure I saw you before I asked Ashley to marry me. I had hoped to get together with you before I asked her, to talk to you about our relationship, but we couldn’t seem to find a time that worked for both of us.”

“You mean the two calls and texts to catch up a month ago? After you’d been dating Ashley for how long?”

“Yes, you’re right. I do take responsibility for not telling you. That is on me, Stelly, and I am truly sorry. I wish now that I’d pursued you. Made sure we spoke before I asked Ashley.” *So do I. More than he will ever know.* Would I have reacted differently? Would Hawaii have been less nauseating? I’ll never know.

“I wish you had, Dad.” I sigh.

“As for the engagement, I booked the trip to Hawaii to get away, to spend time together away from work and responsibilities. To make sure I knew. I asked her to marry me the first day we were there, planning to call you after your friend’s wedding, as you’d requested. And, well, we were taken by surprise seeing you in Hawaii. I am sorry, Stelly. I’m sorry you were no doubt blindsided.” *Blindsided. That’s exactly the word that applies.* Hurt. Blindsided. Betrayed. “For what it’s worth, I can understand why you were so angry.”

“That’s good. I guess.”

With my free hand, I draw small circles on the table with my finger.

I’m not happy I was in the dark, and I’m not happy how I’ve treated him since the divorce. That is on me. But what

stings now is why my dad felt his health was so unimportant to me. *Am I such a terrible daughter that he didn't think to contact me? Was I always too busy to listen?* But to think he was so sick . . . “I can't believe you didn't say anything when you had a heart attack.” More tears stream down my face. “Did you really think we were that heartless that we wouldn't be there for you?”

“No,” Dad says softly. “I was just in a bad place emotionally.”

“But I'm your daughter,” I say through a crack in my voice. “We should have been your first call. Just thinking about you in the hospital . . . all by yourself.” A sob escapes me and I have to take a few deep breaths before I continue. “We love you, Dad.”

“I know, but it was a weird time. I know you didn't take sides all those years ago, but it felt like it, and being the stubborn man that I am, something you unfortunately get from me, I didn't want you to see me because I was sick. I wanted you to see me because you truly wanted to.”

And his reasoning clicks.

He wanted to be wanted for him, not because he was in the hospital.

“I—I didn't know we made you feel like that,” I say. “You seemed as though you were doing fine.”

“Just because someone looks okay on the outside, doesn't mean they're not struggling on the inside.”

A somber cloud descends upon me as I think about the early days of my parents' divorce. We did flock to my mom. We spent more time eating dinners together when I was in town, going shopping, just meeting up to talk. I didn't have that kind of relationship with my dad, which isn't just his fault, it's my fault too.

It's entirely my fault.

I should have checked on him.

I should have called, texted.

Instead, I left him in the dark, making him believe there was no one there for him. Making him think that he had to be in the hospital all by himself, without a family member next to him.

My throat tightens as I realize just how selfish I am. And not just with my dad, but with Romeo too. I've set up my life to revolve around me and not others. I've only considered my feelings, what I need, my aspirations, without a second thought to others, and where has it gotten me?

Alone.

Hurting the ones I love . . .

My jaw quivers and more tears fall down my face.

"Stella, come here." Dad pulls me into a hug and I allow him to wrap his arms around me.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so, so sorry."

"Shh, Stelly," he coos into my ear. "It's okay."

"I should have been there for you. You shouldn't have gone through that alone."

"I wasn't entirely alone. Ashley was there."

Just then the front door opens, and I hear Ashley call out, "Hey, is it okay for me to come in?"

I pull away from my dad and quickly attempt to wipe at my eyes, but my dad stops me. He whispers, "Don't let pride hide your emotions."

Ashley steps into the kitchen and stops when she sees us sitting at the table. "Oh, sorry." She takes a step back. "I can take another walk."

"No." I shake my head as a rogue tear falls down my face. Instead of wiping it away, I let it fall and hold out my hand to Ashley. "Join us."

The look of shock on her face doesn't surprise me. It's not as though our relationship has been heartfelt and kind. It's been tumultuous and full of jealousy from the beginning.

She takes the seat next to Dad and he places his hand on her thigh. I take a few seconds to gather myself, and when I do, I look Ashley in the eyes and I say, “Thank you for being there for my dad, when I wasn’t.”

The woman sitting across from me, the one I associated with teasing and bullying? Her face doesn’t seem so harsh anymore, but rather gentle in nature. The cunningness in her eyes seems to fade away, and instead, understanding and empathy appear. The smug grin I once thought she wore whenever she interacted with me is rather an endearing smile full of compassion. Compassion for me.

“You don’t need to thank me, Stella,” she says, her voice soft. The snarkiness, the annoying pitch to her voice, they’re gone, and I wonder if this is the girl Dad fell in love with. “It was my duty at first, and then from there, a friendship grew.” Ashley takes Dad’s hand and says, “If anyone needs to be thankful, it’s me. I know I’m lucky to be here, to have Donny give me a second chance after what he found out about how I treated you.” Her eyes connect with mine. “I’m sorry, Stella. I know there’s nothing I can say that will change the past, but I’m truly sorry for everything I put you through in high school. I’m not sure this will mean much to you, but I was jealous of you, and unfortunately, the way I handled that jealousy was poor, and it’s something I’ll always have regret over.”

“Jealous?” I ask, my brow creased. “Of what?”

She smiles kindly. “Your talent, your drive. It was obvious you were going places, would accomplish things. No matter how hard I trained, how hard I tried, I was never going to be as good as you, even though I was two years older. I couldn’t stomach it. So, I deflected. I’m ashamed of what I did, the things I said. Looking back at it all, I’m shocked you’re even able to sit at a table with me.”

“It wasn’t always bad,” I say. “There were some moments when I thought we could be friends.”

“I remember those moments, like when Coach Albert made us run lines together. When it was all over, we collapsed on the gym floor, stared up at the ceiling, and discussed who

we were going to homecoming with and what we were wearing.”

I smile. “That being one of the moments.”

“I wish I played off those moments rather than my jealousies. I’m sorry, Stella.”

“Well, it’s not as though I was any better in Maui. I did my fair share of lying and bullying, although, it seemed everything I tried to do, Romeo was the one who got the brunt of it.”

“Really?” Dad asks, sounding amused.

I nod. “The volleyball game when I accidentally pulled his pants down. *He* suffered because of my competitiveness as I attempted to keep the ball away from you. And then there was the lotion I gave you. I told you it was supposed to make you tan better—well, I gave you the regular bottle, the other bottle ended up with Romeo. It had white glue in it, and let’s just say, he thought he was shedding.”

“Oh Jesus.” Dad laughs.

Ashley eyes me with humor. “Were you trying to *Parent Trap* me?”

I slap my palm to the table. “You get it.”

“Oh yeah, that was one of my favorite movies growing up.” She reaches for a cookie and says, “I know it’ll take some time and a lot of forgiveness, but do you think we could establish some sort of relationship?”

I glance over at my dad. “I think there needs to be a lot of forgiveness.” I swallow hard, my heart still aching from thinking about my dad alone in a hospital bed, too afraid to call a loved one to be there with him. “I’m not sure I’ll ever forgive myself over not being there for you, Dad.”

Dad lets out a large sigh, and he speaks to both me and Ashley when he says, “One of the things I’ve learned over the last couple of years is this—allowing yourself to live in the past will never allow you to move forward. It’s not productive to dwell in the days that have gone by, but rather learn from them. It’ll take time, but there’s always room for forgiveness.”

Looking me in the eyes, he says, “It’s time to move forward, Stella.”



THE DOOR OPENS, and through blurry eyes, I see Greer’s face fall flat with concern as she asks, “Stella, what’s wrong?”

“Can I—can I come in?” I let out a sob.

“Yes,” Greer says urgently, taking my hand and pulling me into her house. Arlo is standing in the entryway wearing a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt that clings to his chest. His arms are folded and he doesn’t look happy, but his anger doesn’t seem to be directed at me, but rather at whatever has made me upset.

“Living room?” he asks Greer.

“Yes. Can you get us some tea?”

“Of course,” he says curtly and heads to the kitchen, while Greer takes me to the couch and sits me down.

When we’re settled, she faces me and rubs my back, handing me the box of tissues from her coffee table. “What’s wrong?”

I take a tissue and press it against my eyes, but I can’t seem to get the tears to stop, or the sharp pain in my chest to cease from aching. I don’t know how long I sit there crying while Greer rubs my back, but I do know it’s enough time for Arlo to make tea and deliver it to the coffee table.

She picks up my mug and offers it to me. I take it and quietly blow on the steaming water before taking a sip. The warm liquid feels good, spreading throughout my body as it slips down my throat, helping to calm me.

After a few more sips, I rest the mug on my leg and say, “My dad had a heart attack.”

“What? Oh my God, when? Is he in the hospital? Do you need us to go with you?”

I glance over at Greer, and that's when I see Arlo sitting on the arm of the couch, his hand on Greer's shoulder.

I shake my head. "He had a heart attack a while ago. He didn't tell anyone. That's how he met Ashley. She was his recovery nurse."

"Oh, wow."

"But he was sick and he didn't tell me because . . ." I get choked up again. I set my tea on the coffee table so I can place my head in my hands as more sobs wrack my body. "I've been so selfish."

"What?" Greer's voice sounds genuinely confused. "How have you been selfish?"

"I've been consumed with what I want, and it's been enlightening to see how it hurts the people around me. My dad . . . Brock . . ."

"Did Romeo say that to you?" Arlo asks.

"No, but it doesn't take a lot of thought or insight to realize the way I've used him for my own personal gain." I take a deep breath. "I just realized today that I'm not a great person and because of that, I've hurt the people I love."

"You are a good person," Greer says. "It's not your fault your dad didn't tell you about his heart attack. It's not your fault Romeo went along with the fake fiancé thing, if that's what you're concerned about."

"Yes, it is my fault," I say, louder than expected. "My dad didn't think anyone cared about him because we didn't put in the effort to keep in touch. And Romeo, hell, that's such a twisted situation, and I took advantage of it." I glance up at Arlo and I can see something in his eyes. I tilt my head to the side and I say, "You agree, don't you, Arlo? That I took advantage of your friend."

His jaw ticks.

He rubs the back of his head.

"Arlo?" Greer asks, confused.

He lets out a deep breath and says, “Early on, yes, I thought you were taking advantage, but it wasn’t fair of me to think that when you didn’t have all the information. You didn’t know he liked you. I did, and I was concerned. I didn’t want him getting hurt.”

“See,” I say, gesturing toward Arlo. “Even his friend thinks I’m a shithead.”

“I don’t think you’re a shithead,” Arlo says. “I think both of you need to figure out how to communicate better.”

I take a deep breath.

The hardest part about seeing myself clearly, recognizing that I have acted so selfishly, is also recognizing that I don’t like myself very much. Like, at all. Mom once told me that the key to loving someone well is loving yourself first. And if I don’t—*can’t*—love myself . . . “Well, you don’t need to worry about that, because I’m not going to bother him anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Arlo asks in a menacing tone, one I know he saves for his students.

“He deserves better than me.” *He deserves someone who has the capacity to love.*

“No,” Arlo says in a stern voice, taking a seat across from me on the coffee table. “He deserves you, but he deserves a clearheaded you.”

I glance up at Arlo. “But I—”

“Stella, he wants you. This isn’t about who deserves who. You know he cares for you. He’s willing to wait until you’re ready. He’s told you that, right?” I nod. “Then why don’t you figure out a way to move past this and be with him?”

Arlo doesn’t sugarcoat things; he shoots from the hip, and even if you don’t like it, you have to accept it because he’s not one to fuck around. He doesn’t have the time or patience for it.

“I don’t know how to get my head on straight. I feel as though I’ve failed everyone.”

“Does your dad feel as though you failed him?” Greer asks.



I shake my head. “No, he was very calm and accepting of it all.”

“Does Romeo feel as though you failed him?” Greer asks.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“He doesn’t,” Arlo answers.

Calmly, Greer says, “Then it’s all in your head.” She pushes some of my hair behind my ear. “Maybe you need to take this information, digest it, and learn to forgive yourself, because unless you do that, you will never be able to have a healthy relationship with anyone.”

Continuing, Arlo says, “We all have selfish moments in life, Stella. Ask Greer. At first, I took what I wanted from her, when I wanted it.”

Greer’s cheeks blush.

“But then she told me what SHE wanted, and that changed everything.” His commanding voice starts to break through the fog in my head. “You took what you wanted. Now what does Romeo want?”

I swallow, the lump in my throat so tight that it feels as though nothing is getting through.

“You know what he wants, don’t you?”

I nod.

“And it’s you, right?” he asks, pulling out the truth.

“That’s what he said.”

In an alpha tone, he says, “Then give him what he wants.”

## Chapter Eighteen

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### ROMEO

“I’ve never been someone to recall social etiquette, but more of an observer,” Keiko says, standing next to me, staring me down as I pour a cup of coffee for myself in the teachers’ lounge. “And from a brief analysis of your posture and sleepless circles prevalent under your eyes, I’ve evaluated your state as being in a dark mood.”

I set the coffee pot down and slowly turn toward Keiko, who’s wearing her typical first-day green dress. She and Arlo are alike in that their teaching wardrobe is predictable. Keiko will move around the halls in a dress and her white lab coat, projecting the chemist look, while Arlo is always in a cardigan.

Always.

I take a sip of my coffee and I say, “Good morning, Keiko.”

Her eyes study me through her glasses. “Although you’re attempting a cheery disposition, as to why, I can’t postulate just yet, but from the rasp in your voice and the inward turn of your shoulders, I’m not buying it.”

God, it’s too early for this.

The door to the teachers’ lounge swings open and Stella walks in looking so goddamn beautiful that it hurts. Her long

brown hair is in waves, cascading over her shoulders, and her red dress cinches at her waist but flows over her hips and down to her calves. I swear, if she were my Spanish teacher, I'd have some serious issues concentrating.

I can feel Keiko observing me as Stella walks up to us, and it feels like an invasion of my privacy.

“Good morning,” I say to Stella as she picks up a mug from the clean pile.

I didn't hear from her at all this past weekend. I have no idea how her conversation went with her dad. All I know is from Arlo's text: she wasn't in a good headspace, but he and Greer had a conversation with her that would hopefully be in my favor. From the way she's practically crawling inside herself right now, I'm thinking they're wrong.

“Good morning,” she says quietly.

“Hmm,” Keiko says, and when we both look at her, she has her hand to her chin, studying us. “I still consider myself a novice in the dating world and do not claim to acquire experience in the act of engagement, but you don't seem to exhibit the qualities of happily engaged. Which is shocking, given your display of carnal need out on the balcony in Maui.”

Jesus Christ.

Stella places her hand on Keiko's and says, “Keeks, we were never really engaged. We were pretending.”

Keiko's brows pull together in confusion. “Why would you do that?”

“It's a long story, something I don't feel like getting into right now.”

“I see.” Keiko adjusts her glasses. “Well, I expect a briefing on your reasoning by the end of the day.” She takes her tea, spins on her heel, and leaves.

When the door clicks shut behind her, I try to lighten the mood when I ask, “Are you going to write up a report for her?”

But Stella doesn't laugh.

She doesn't even smirk.

Instead, her bloodshot eyes connect with mine as she says, "I'm not sure I'm the person you want to be with, Romeo."

*Romeo?*

And it seems we're going to be doing this right here.

I set my coffee down and fold my arms over my chest. "And why do you think that?"

She seems almost dead inside. Whatever happened this weekend, it had a huge effect on her, and call me crazy, but I'm pretty sure she's currently self-sabotaging.

"You deserve someone who's—"

I step up to her and place my fingers over her mouth to stop her from talking, then I drag them to her chin and force her to look me in the eyes. "Why don't you let me decide what I deserve, okay?"

She blinks, and I see the tears well in her eyes, so I pull her into a hug and kiss the top of her head, not caring who walks in, who sees. She's in a fragile state, and even though I'd love to talk this out with her, I can sense her stubborn side roaring to life. She has it in her head that she knows what I need, when in fact, I need her. So I'm going to show her that.

"Have lunch with me today?"

"What?" she asks, confused.

"Lunch—you and me, in your classroom."

She pulls away and dabs at her eyes. "You don't want to have lunch with your boys?"

"No, I want to have lunch with you."

I see the *no* in her eyes, and that she desperately wants to tell me what's best for me, but to my surprise, she nods and says, "Okay. Lunch in my classroom."

I smirk. "Good. And let me tell you, I packed a doozy for lunch, and I don't trade."

That pulls the lightest of smiles from her. “Setting a precedent of no trade-sies? Might not be in your favor, Romero.”

“I’ll take my chances.”



“MR. ROMERO?” There’s a knock on the PE office door and a student walks in, holding the straps of his backpack, looking nervous.

“Hey, what’s up, man?” I ask, not remembering the kid’s name to save my life. A freshman in my last class, he looks just as terrified now as he did during class.

“I was wondering if I could talk to you quickly in private. I know you’re off to lunch, but I . . . I needed to talk to you about the PE uniforms.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Can I shut the door?”

“Yes, of course.” I set my lunch on my desk and give the kid my full attention. “I’m sorry, could you remind me of your name?”

“Simon.”

“That’s right. What’s going on, Simon?”

“So, my parents weren’t able to pick up the school PE uniforms, and I know they’re required.”

“Okay.”

The poor dude looks as though he’s about to cry.

“My dad lost his job this summer and things have been pretty tight. I’ve been helping my parents with grocery bills. I planned on getting the uniform myself, but I’m short about ten dollars. I wasn’t sure if I could maybe owe you? I have some lawn mowing gigs this weekend, and I’ll have just enough left over after helping my parents out to pay for the rest of the uniform.”

Fuck, my goddamn heart. I've been telling Principal Dewitt about the risks of enforcing PE uniforms for a while now. Every year she brings it to the school board, and every year they turn it down. For some reason, they want everyone in uniforms and the kids have to purchase them, themselves. And this, right here, is why the concept is bullshit.

"You don't need to worry about it, man. I got you covered."

Simon shakes his head. "I can't take freebies. My dad says we have to work for what we earn."

"Okay, how about this. I need an equipment manager for the baseball team this year. Think you can help polish helmets for me after school?"

"Really?" he asks. "Because, man, that would be really cool."

"Yeah, we can always use an extra set of hands around the field. I know the maintenance team could use some help, too. If it's cool with your parents, they'll have to sign a permission form, but I can start you out part-time. How does ten dollars an hour sound?"

"Seriously?" Simon's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets.

"I demand hard work, though." I point at him and he straightens up.

"Don't worry, Mr. Romero, you will only get the best from me."

"Good." I stand from my chair and dig into the PE uniform box. "Mediums work?"

"Yes." He holds them to his chest. "Thank you again, Mr. Romero. This means a lot to me."

"Of course." We head out of the office. "But don't tell the other students I'm a softy. I need them intimidated by me." I wink.

Simon smiles. "Your secret's safe with me. See you tomorrow."

“See ya, kid.”

I make my way through the hallways toward the foreign language department. I’ve never had lunch with Stella in her classroom before; we’ve usually shared lunch in the teachers’ lounge, and even at that, she’s usually with her girls. We’re more like after-school meal sharers. Especially when it’s at the Atomic Saloon with burgers in front of us, discussing the game.

So, yeah, I might be a little nervous.

But I think the nerves derive from her silence. Arlo texted me Sunday, advising that Stella showed up at their place on Saturday an absolute wreck from speaking with her dad. I told him not to tell me anything, because I didn’t want to find out from him. I want her to tell me.

Her door is open, so I walk in without knocking, but I’m sure to shut it behind me. She’s sitting at her desk, lunch already open, her sandwich halfway to her mouth when she makes eye contact with me.

“Sorry I’m a little late.” I pull up a chair to her desk and set my lunch down.

“Get caught up?” she asks as I eye her turkey sandwich, which is loaded with veggies. It looks good.

“With a student. New kid. His name is Simon.” I pull out my homemade chili and cornbread and watch as she eyes it. “He couldn’t afford the PE uniforms and asked if he could owe me over time.”

“What? Seriously?” She sets her sandwich down. “His parents aren’t paying for them?”

“His dad lost his job. Simon has been helping with groceries for their family. Not sure what the dynamics are, but when I offered him the uniform, he said he didn’t take freebies.”

“Oh God.” Stella clutches her heart. “What did you do?”

“Gave him a job as an equipment manager with the baseball team. Told him I’d pay him ten dollars an hour.”

“Wow, that’s . . . that’s pretty amazing of you, Brock. I didn’t know the baseball team had paid positions other than coaches.”

“We don’t.” I open my chili and let the steam out while I dig for my spoon.

Stella tilts her head to the side. Knowingly, she asks, “And how do you plan on paying this kid?”

“How do you think?” I ask, the obvious sitting between us.

“You’re going to pay him out of your own pocket?” She shakes her head. “You’re something else, Brock.”

I shrug as if it’s no big deal, because it’s not. I could retire now and have more than enough money, plus some. Giving it to someone who really needs it won’t even be a blip in my bank account. “He needs the help, so I offered him some help.”

“You’re changing his life, you know that, right?”

“Ah, it’s just something small.” I scoop up some chili, blow on it, and take a big bite. My thermos never ceases to amaze me with how hot it keeps everything.

“It’s not small to him.”

“Maybe not.” I hold out a scoop of chili and ask, “Want a bite?”

She eyes it and then leans forward. I put the spoon in her mouth, and I watch as her eyes widen. She swallows, and then she reaches for her drink. “Holy shit, Brock, that’s spicy.”

“No, it’s not.” I laugh.

She coughs a few times. “Yes, it is. Did you put an entire can of chili powder in there?”

“Not an *entire* can,” I say while laughing. “I thought you liked spice.”

“I do. But I also like to be able to taste the food.”

“Hmm.” I open the Tupperware containing my cornbread and say, “Then I’m guessing you won’t want to try my



jalapeno cornbread.”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to pass.”

I break off a chunk and bring it to my mouth. “Your loss.”

“Pretty sure it’s not.” She bites into her sandwich.

I consider asking her about Saturday, but I don’t think that’s something I want to do at school, given what Arlo told me, so I keep it casual, easy. Fun.

“Any students that you know are going to be little punks this year?”

She nods. “Oh yeah. There’s this girl in my second period class who’s fluent in Spanish and she already tried correcting me once.”

I chuckle. “Man, the balls kids have these days. I’d never even think about correcting a teacher when I was in high school and I was a punk.”

“Were you?”

I gesture up and down my body. “Certified asshole. You shouldn’t be surprised. I’m surprised my parents didn’t kick me out of the house. I thought I was the shit in high school—big man on campus, full-ride scholarship to Brentwood, prom king, all the popular things.”

She studies me. “Yeah, but you don’t seem like that guy now. You just told a kid he could be your equipment manager, a position that doesn’t exist, and you plan on paying him with your own money.”

“I’ve been softened.”

“By the students?”

I give it some thought. “I guess so, if I think about it. I never really wanted to be a PE teacher.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“It was always a fallback for me. Just in case something happened to my baseball career, I’d have a profession to fall

back on. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I was actually going to teach.”

“So, are you saying you don’t like being a teacher?”

I shrug. “I’m going to sound like an asshole, but it has its moments. Today was a good moment. I’m sure further on in the week when someone complains to me about running drills, I’m going to be annoyed with the privileged assholes we have to deal with on occasion.”

“So, then why take the job? You’ve made it pretty clear that you don’t need the money.”

I stir my chili. “At first, it kept me busy, kept me close with my buddy, with whom I felt some semblance of normalcy, and it kept me in the realm of baseball. Now, it’s more about sticking around because I’m not sure I could live without the connection to baseball. I like coaching, a lot. It might sound douchey, but it makes me think of the glory days.”

“Because you never got that closure.”

I nod. “Yeah. So over the years, I guess I’m finding that closure with every high school season that passes. Plus, it’s pretty neat having Coach Disik from Brentwood University, my old coach, asking me about prospects.”

“Has he signed on any of your guys?”

“Three,” I say. “The first recruit is a big prospect for this coming year. Stoked about that.”

She nudges my foot under her desk. “See? You’re making a difference.”

“I guess so.” I sigh. “Still think about what it would be like to coach at a higher level, or what it would be like to be playing professionally. Seeing some of my boys, like Knox and Carson—man, it stings if I get lost in my thoughts. I could be playing with them.”

“Do you think you’d ever leave teaching?”

Hell, it’s as if she knows something I don’t. This isn’t the time or space to talk about Weston, either. *Later. Later would*

*be okay.*

I shrug, not liking that I'm withholding information. "If the right opportunity presented itself, maybe."

"You know, you've never talked about that before."

"Maybe it's about time we start talking about the things that shape us," I say, glancing up at her.

Her eyes flash at mine and then back at her sandwich. "I'm not ready to talk about Saturday."

"I know. But I also want you to know this is a safe place, babe. You and me, this is a safe place."

She nods and pushes her sandwich away from her. "It's not that I don't trust you, it's that I'm ashamed, and I'm trying to deal with that shame." She looks at me. "I like you, Brock, and I know you'd never judge me, but I also feel as though I don't want to taint the image you have of me."

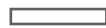
I take her hand in mine and bring her knuckles to my lips, where I place a soft kiss. "Babe, I saw you at your worst, when you were strutting around like a maniac, machete in hand, and with a prominently displayed hole in your bra. I doubt anything you tell me at this point will taint you."

She chuckles. "You said you liked the hole."

"Still do." I wink and go back to my chili. "But you take your time. Remember, you're worth the wait."

"I hope you're not wasting your time."

"Trust me, I know when I'm wasting my time, and time spent with you is anything but wasted."



"GOOD MORNING," Stella says, getting out of her car and shutting the door. "Did you park here on purpose and wait for me?"

I hand her a coffee and a small bag from Frankie Donuts. "I did."

“Are you flirting, Romero?”

“Would you care if I was?” I playfully ask.

“I would.”

“Then I am.”

She steps up closer and stops me right before placing a kiss on my cheek. “Thank you.”

“What would I need to do to earn a kiss on the lips?”

She chuckles. “Frosted jelly donut.”

“Then pucker up, babe.”

She looks in the bag and smiles. “You know me too well.”

“Not a bad thing,” I say as I set my hand on her waist and lower to press a faint kiss on her lips.

“I feel as though I should be the one who’s bringing you donuts, not the other way around.”

“Why do you say that?” We start walking toward the school.

“Because of everything I put you through.”

“Stella, you have to forget about that. We’re moving forward.”

“Hard to move forward when I still feel an immense amount of guilt.” She stops and takes a deep breath. “Sorry, you made this really kind gesture and I turned it into something negative.”

“No, you didn’t.” I turn her toward me and tip her chin up. “Stella, you have to stop condemning yourself. When I look back at our time in Maui, do you know what I think?”

“What?” she asks, her eyes watery. Hell, I don’t want her crying, not in the middle of the school parking lot.

“If it wasn’t for you asking me to be your fake fiancé, I don’t think I ever would’ve told you how I felt. I don’t think I would’ve gotten the chance to see what your lips taste like on mine, or hear the sweet sound of your moans while I’m driving in and out of you, or have the pleasure of waking up

with you in my arms. I never would've known what any of that would've felt like. So, stop apologizing to me, because I'm not sorry for what happened. More like grateful."

A lonely tear slips past her eye and travels down her cheek. "I wish I could give you more."

"I know you will, when you're ready."

"My heart is ready," she admits. "But my mind isn't."

I pinch her chin and bring her mouth close to mine before whispering, "Your brain will catch up. That heart is what matters the most." I press a kiss to her lips, and then I slip my arm over her shoulders and walk her through the back entrance of the school. This woman has had her heart broken, and is now the one responsible for breaking it. I won't allow her to believe that what she did in Maui tainted how I see her.



**ROMEO:** *Where you at, Garcia?*

**Stella:** *Almost there.*

**Romeo:** *So, you're not standing me up?*

**Stella:** *Depends—did you get the sweet potato fries or the tater tots?*

**Romeo:** *Tots, babe. Always the tots.*

**Stella:** *Then, be there in a minute.*

I smile and set my phone down while leaning back in our favorite booth. We have the perfect view of the game from my side of the booth, which means she has to sit next to me like she always does, but this time, we're alone.

The first week of school has been less than eventful. I set up Simon with his "job", and his dad called me and thanked me for the opportunity. I asked him how he was doing, and he said he had two successful interviews this week and was hoping to hear back soon. He said it looked very promising. I told him no matter what, Simon always has a job with me as

long as he works hard. *Maybe he can start saving up for something special for himself.* Stella and I have hung out every day, but this is the first time it's after school hours since last week.

The door to Atomic Saloon opens and Stella walks in wearing her coaching gear. Volleyball practices have started and she's already knee-deep in the drama on her team. She was telling me about it yesterday. It's the reason she never applied to be the head coach. She likes assisting and keeping out of the big decisions. She leaves those to Greer.

"And you ordered me a beer," she says in greeting while taking a seat next to me. "You're too good." She slides her hand behind my neck and brings my head down to hers to lay a soft, lingering kiss against my lips. I revel in the moment, which feels far too short when she pulls away.

"How was practice?" I ask when she reaches for her beer.

"Good. Just made them run the entire time. Jane and Melissa are still fighting over some guy." Stella rolls her eyes. "So, we made them run until they couldn't run anymore and told them to take the weekend to sort out their problem. If they came back Monday the way they left today, we'd be running until they lost their legs."

"Brutal." I chuckle.

"Do you ever have to deal with shit like that?"

I shake my head. "If there's anything like that, they usually deal with it on their own. If we catch wind of any fighting, we make them pay for it, so they keep things pretty quiet and sort it out on their own time."

"Maybe your players need to teach ours a thing or two. Or at least, Jane and Melissa. I could tell some of the other girls on the team, the really serious ones, were getting more and more irritated with every sprint they had to do. I'm hoping by peer pressure alone, we won't have any more problems."

I raise my beer. "I'll cheers to that." We clink our glasses just as our plates are delivered. A burger for each, no tomatoes on hers, and the obligatory tater tots. I set my pickle on her

plate and she tosses me a few tater tots in exchange. I grab the ketchup and squirt some onto each of our burgers. Stella does the same with the mustard. I also add some ketchup to a napkin that I place between us for dipping our tots in. When we're done, we both pick up our burgers and take big bites.

It feels so natural, being here with her, sharing one of our favorite meals, the game on in the background. Tonight, I don't have to hide the fact that I'm staring at her. I don't have to keep my hands to myself, and I sure as hell don't have to wonder what it would feel like to kiss her.

Stella wipes her mouth with her napkin and says, "We just went old married couple on each other."

I chuckle. "We did, but I'm okay with it."

"Yeah?" she asks, surprised.

"Why the hell not? I like being comfortable with you. Don't you?"

"I guess I do."

"So, what are you doing this weekend?" I ask her casually, hoping I can see her.

"I'm having dinner at my dad's Saturday, but that's about it."

"Yeah? Are you happy with that? Not recruiting another fake fiancé to save face, are you?" I joke.

She chuckles and pops a tater tot in her mouth. "No, I actually told my dad and Ashley that our engagement was a lie."

"You did?" I ask, feeling slightly guilty. "How did he take it?"

"He understood where I was coming from, asked where we were at. I told him I really liked you, and that maybe if I'm lucky, something will develop between us."

I lean over and press a kiss to her cheek. "Consider yourself lucky, babe, because you know I'm not going anywhere."

She nudges my shoulder. “You’re totally capturing my heart.”

“Is that right?” I ask, acting smug. I tap the side of her head. “How’s this coming along?”

“Slow,” she answers. “I think the guilt is going to take a while to get over.”

“Care to share anything?”

She lets out a large sigh and says, “Better now than never, I guess.” She turns toward me. “So my dad had a heart attack . . .”



**ROMEO:** *How was dinner at your dad’s?*

**Stella:** *Pretty good, actually. We ended up playing Scrabble after, and Ashley schooled us.*

**Romeo:** *Jealous. I’m a master at Scrabble.*

**Stella:** *I would not have guessed that.*

**Romeo:** *Don’t let the muscles fool you, I’ve got smarts too. So, it was good?*

**Stella:** *It was. I felt good leaving. I still have some issues with Ashley. That will take time to fade, but I loosened my anger tonight, and I got to see my dad interact with her. I could see why they work together. They kind of reminded me of us.*

**Romeo:** *Do they squirt ketchup on each other’s burger too?*

**Stella:** *LOL. Something like that, yeah.*

**Romeo:** *Then they’re in good company.*

**Stella:** *What are you doing tomorrow?*

**Romeo:** *Nothing. Ask me out.*

**Stella:** *When did you become so needy?*



*Romeo: The minute you kissed me in the pool.*

*Stella: My cheeks just flamed from the thought of it.*

*Romeo: Best first kiss of my life.*

*Stella: You mean that?*

*Romeo: Trust that anything I say, I mean.*

*Stella: You're making it hard on me, taking this slow. I want to be mentally healthy for you, and when you say things like that, it makes me want to drive to your place and crawl into bed with you.*

*Romeo: No objections here.*

*Stella: Don't tempt me.*

*Romeo: Just lying here, in my bed, all alone. Wouldn't mind some company.*

*Stella: Brock . . .*

*Romeo: Yes? \*innocently blinks\**

*Stella: Do you want to go on a run with me tomorrow?*

*Romeo: \*Poof\* Did you see that? That was my hope being extinguished.*

*Stella: Run and breakfast. You and me. That's what I can offer.*

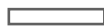
*Romeo: You know I'll take whatever I can get with you.*

*Stella: Then it's a date. Pick me up?*

*Romeo: You know I will. Wear something hot.*

*Stella: Don't wear a shirt at all.*

*Romeo: Done.*



"YOU CAN STOP STARING," Stella says from across the picnic table. We're seated close to a parking lot near Lake Michigan. There are breakfast food trucks lined up nearby. We

ran along the lake, and the entire time, I kept looking to the side to watch Stella's tits bounce gloriously in her sports bra.

She chose to wear a pair of her volleyball spandex shorts and matching sports bra, and that's it.

I was not mentally prepared.

And it showed.

"I'm not staring, just making sure your tits are still attached. They were bouncing a lot during our run. I was nervous they were going to jiggle right off you."

She finishes her breakfast taco and wipes her mouth. "I could've said the same about your cock. It seemed to be bouncing around in your shorts."

"Impossible," I say.

Her brow pulls together in confusion. "How can you be so sure about that?"

"Because, back in college, I learned from Carson that wearing a thong during runs is the best way to keep the junk trapped, but still feel breezy."

Her mouth nearly falls to the picnic table. "You're wearing a thong right now?"

"Yup." I finish the rest of my orange juice and set the bottle on the table.

"No, you're not. Are you?"

"I am." I stand for her, lower the waistband of my shorts, and snap the side strap of my man thong.

She covers her mouth in shock. "Oh my God." And then she breaks out in laughter. "Why is this something I'm just finding out about you?"

"Never asked me out on a run." I lean forward and wiggle my eyebrows. "Regretting it now, aren't you?"

"You have no idea." She stares at me, shock and humor in her eyes.

“You’re wondering what I look like in it and nothing else, aren’t you?”

“I can’t even begin to picture it.”

“Well, if you’re lucky, you might get a chance to see me in just my man thong and nothing else.”

“I hope you don’t think that’s a sexy invite, because I can’t imagine a situation where you strut out in a man thong and I don’t die laughing.”

“You sure know how to make a man feel good.”

“I wish I never knew. It’s all I’m going to think about now.”

“Think all you want, envision it, get yourself hyped up, because when the day does come, you very well might not laugh, but rather drop to your knees, mouth watering.”

“It’s amazing how delusional you are.”

I chuckle. “Delusional or psychic?”

“Delusional.” She rolls up her trash into a tight ball. “This was fun. How come we’ve never gone on a run together before?”

“Maybe because you were too busy scoring free meals off me before.”

Her eyes light up with humor. “I wasn’t scoring free meals off you.”

I give her a look.

“Okay, maybe a few, but I still got a free meal out of this run.”

“Because you’re a weasel.”

She lets out a loud laugh. “I am not a weasel.”

We rise from the table and I collect our trash, which I deposit in the nearby trash can, throwing our bottles into the recycling can. Then I take her hand and we walk back to my car, where I grab a T-shirt from my trunk and slip it on over my head.

“Covering up the goods?” she asks.

“You’ve had enough of a free show.” I shut the trunk and open her door for her. She pauses in front of the open door and says, “I had a great time.”

I smile at her. “Me too, babe.”

“Think we can make this a thing?”

“You and me? Just waiting on the official stamp from you.”

She laughs and her hand falls to my chest. “No, not us, but this running thing.”

“And there you go again, getting my hopes up.” I wink and then say, “Yes, of course we can make this a thing.”

“Good.” She stands on her toes and presses a quick kiss to the corner of my mouth before taking a seat in my car.

I shut her door and round the back of my car, taking my time as I flex my fists in frustration. *Chill out, dude, it’s going to happen. She’s practically yours anyway, just waiting for her to give the approval.*

It will happen.

She’s not going to take this away from me.

Patience.

*You said you’d wait, so wait.*

But, fuck, it feels like forever, living in this gray area, not sure if we’re officially together or not. Although, this past week has been more than I expected when we left Maui, and it’s only strengthened the bond we have. Going into next week, I’m sure it’ll strengthen that much more.

I hop in and start the car. Stella touches my arm and I turn toward her, not expecting her mouth to descend on mine. I twist in my seat and cup the back of her head gently, as my mouth glides across hers. Her tongue swipes against my lips, and I groan as I open my mouth and tangle my tongue with hers, only for her to pull away and rest back against her seat.

I blink a few times, trying to gain my bearings from the whiplash of that kiss.

“What, uh . . . what was that for?” I ask.

“I missed kissing you,” she says casually, while I’m *anything but casual* right now. I’m heated, steamed up, and ready to go for round two. Hell, ready to lay down the seats and make love to her.

I clear my throat and place my hands back on the steering wheel, my mind a pile of mush. “You don’t have to miss kissing me, babe. My lips are yours whenever you want them.”

“Which is why we’re going to leave it at that, or I very well might be seeing that thong of yours.”

“No objections here.” I smirk as I put the car in reverse. I place my hand on the back of her seat and back out of the parking spot.

“That’s hot,” she says as I put the car in drive.

“What’s hot?”

“When you back up like that, putting your hand on the back of my seat. I like it a lot.”

“Well, we’re just full of compliments today, aren’t we? If you’re not careful, Stella, I *very well might* develop an indestructible crush.”

“I thought you already had,” she teases.

“Shhh,” I say, “you’re not supposed to know that.”

She chuckles and reaches out to take my hand. I drive back to her place, a smile spread across my face the entire time. This is what I wanted months ago when I asked her out. Moments like these, where I know there’s nothing more gratifying than holding her hand in peace.

Looks as though I just needed patience.

## Chapter Nineteen

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### STELLA

“Hey, you,” Romeo says, walking into my classroom and looking handsome as ever in his athletic gear. I’ll say this, I’m quite jealous he gets to wear comfortable clothes to work while I put on a dress for God knows what reason.

*Lies. You know why you wear a dress almost every day to work now.*

Because he likes it.

Because Romeo’s eyes always light up when he sees my outfit first thing in the morning.

Because I want to impress him, hold his attention.

“Hey.”

He walks over to my desk, where I’m sitting with my lunch, places one hand on the wood top and one hand on the back of my chair, and leans down so his lips meet mine. It’s a brief kiss, nothing overly sexual, but just enough to make me want so much more.

When he pulls away, I ask, “How were your first periods?”

“Decent. Played kickball. One kid got nailed in the crotch. I sat on the sidelines with him and told him that there will be times in our lives when our junk is attacked, and it’s going to bring us to the ground, but the way we rise with pride is what

people will remember. After being crouched in a fetal position in agony, of course.”

“Such a role model,” I say with a laugh.

“Not so much. Felt like I watched the entire thing happen in slow motion, and even though I tried really hard, I chuckled.”

“Brock,” I chastise, eyes wide.

“I know, I know.” He laughs. “I tried really hard, but the look of surprise on the kid’s face was far too comical. It was as if he’d never experienced a ball to the crotch before.”

“Maybe he hasn’t.”

“He’s a sophomore. I’d be shocked if that were the case.”

“Maybe he was lucky.”

“Maybe.” Romeo nods toward my lunch. “What you got there?”

I open my lunch and pull out another turkey sandwich. “Nothing fancy.”

“You know, I’ve had lunch with you every day since we got back to school, and you bring the same thing. I never thought you’d be so consistent with your meals.”

“It’s easy,” I say. “Why, what do you have?”

He removes his thermos from his lunch pail and opens the top. “Spaghetti and meatballs.”

“Homemade?”

“Of course. You know, if you came over last night like I asked, you could’ve not only seen the man thong, you could’ve seen how masterful I am in the kitchen.”

“If I came over last night, you and I both know we’d have wound up in the shower together.”

“Nothing wrong with cleanliness.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say. “Or some shower sex.”

“That too.” He winks and then dives into his lunch.

Yeah, nothing wrong with shower sex at all, but I've been holding out. I want to make sure I do this right with him, because he deserves that. And more.

I've spent a lot of time inside my head, and I'm still struggling with forgiveness. Forgiving myself. Loving who I am, even though I'm so aware of my flaws. I can't in good conscience head into a relationship with this man until I work through that. I want to give myself freely.

And there's Maui. His confession of how he's grateful it happened helped. Significantly. I had no idea he was so nervous to cross that line with me, and when we did, it felt so natural. Even though I've put myself through an emotional wringer, I'm glad we experienced everything we did in Maui, because he was right—it brought us together.

But every time I think about launching that attack on Ashley and using Brock to help me, I feel guilty. And I don't think that's a wrong reaction, because my determination to undermine Dad and Ashley's relationship certainly wasn't a healthy, mature response. *And he deserves more.* But spending all this time with him, doing normal, fun things together, is making me realize something: I'm falling for this man. I want more of these easy times. I want more of him.

"You know, I woke up this morning a little sore from our run," he says.

"Really? I thought you ran all the time."

"I mean, not all the time. And if I do run, I run on a treadmill. I lift weights more than anything, so running outside on an uneven path, it made my legs groan when I was climbing out of bed. Aren't you sore?"

I shake my head. "Nope, feeling good. Could go ten more miles."

He rolls his eyes. "It's not a competition."

"Clearly, if you could barely handle our three-mile run yesterday."

"Okay, full of sass today. I'll remember that."



“Oh yeah?” I lean forward. “What are you going to do? Punish me?”

“Yeah, and I have no problem using a ruler on your ass.”

“Kinky,” I say with a laugh. “I like it.”

The door to my classroom opens and Keiko steps in, her lab coat firmly on her shoulders, her glasses on the tip of her nose. She pushes them up as she says, “Hello.” She stands there awkwardly and says nothing else.

“Uh, hey, Keeks,” I say after giving Romeo a confused look. “What’s up?”

“I see you’re participating in a romantic rendezvous, but I must insist, my matter is important.”

“You’re fine, Keeks, what’s going on?”

Chin held high, she says, “I have an inquiry.”

“Okay . . .”

“The Ladies in Heat Book Club requests your presence tomorrow night, after practice.”

“Tomorrow? We don’t usually meet on Tuesdays.”

“Emergency meeting.”

“Emergency?” Romeo asks. “What kind of emergency can you have in a book club?”

“A dire one.” Keiko’s hands twist together, and this is so not her. She looks uncomfortable and fidgety.

“A dire emergency?” I ask just as I hear something beyond the door of my classroom. My eyes narrow. “Who put you up to this?”

Her eyes widen. “No one.”

“Keiko,” I drag out.

“It’s an emergency, one of epic proportions.” She flings her arms in the air, making a horrible show of her lie.

I stand from my chair and walk to the door, which I fling open, finding Greer on the other side.

“Damn it, Keiko.” She stomps her foot. “I told you to be sly.”

“And I told you I’m incapable of such acting.” Keiko folds her arms across her chest.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Greer sighs and says, “We miss you at lunch. Cora and Lindsay miss you. We didn’t want to step in and ruin your dates with Romeo, but we also want to see our girl.”

Romeo stands from his chair and comes up behind me. His hand falls to the back of my neck possessively. “Sorry for hogging her lately. Although, I did enjoy Keiko’s acting job.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Keiko curtseys.

“I won’t steal her tomorrow. I’ll even let you have her right now.” He leans down and places a sweet kiss to my cheek. “I’ll text you later.” He grabs his lunch and then heads down the hall, leaving me with my friends.

“You could’ve just asked,” I say.

“This was more fun,” Greer says.



**ROMEO:** *Did you guys talk about me when I left?*

**Stella:** *No, they left too.*

**Romeo:** *What? Seriously?*

**Stella:** *Yeah, they went to have lunch with their men. Can you believe that?*

**Romeo:** *You ate lunch by yourself? You should have told me to come back.*

**Stella:** *I was going through some lesson plans. It was fine.*

**Romeo:** *So, what you’re telling me is you don’t need me to drive to your place and coddle you because you’re so distraught?*

**Stella:** *That desperate to see me, huh?*

**Romeo:** Desperate to hold you.

**Stella:** And how would you hold me if you were here?

**Romeo:** Where would we be sitting? Bed? Couch? Floor?

**Stella:** Definitely not the floor. Umm, since I'd want to keep things from getting too complicated, I'd say couch.

**Romeo:** Complicated?

**Stella:** You know, frisky.

**Romeo:** Um, pretty sure you dry-humped my dick when we were sitting on a couch. No surface is safe when it comes to me.

**Stella:** Hmm, yeah, that sounds familiar.

**Romeo:** Sounds familiar?! I can still feel the pearl string of your underwear massaging my damn cock.

**Stella:** LOL. That was hot. Okay, we're on the couch, but we're not getting frisky.

**Romeo:** Seems kind of boring, but your choice. If we were sitting on the couch, I'd either have you sitting on my lap, which is preferred, but if that's too "frisky" for you, then I'd have you propped against the arm of the couch with a pillow and your legs draped over my lap.

**Stella:** Would your hand be on my thigh?

**Romeo:** Can't imagine it being anywhere else. We wouldn't be watching anything either, just talking while my thumb rubbed across your skin.

**Stella:** Yeah? And what would we be talking about?

**Romeo:** Stupid shit, like if we were to play ping-pong against each other, who would win?

**Stella:** And what's your answer?

**Romeo:** Me, of course, because even though I'm addicted to you, I'd still destroy you.

**Stella:** Addicted to me? That the truth?

**Romeo:** You know it is.

*Stella: Well, now I wish you were here so I could kiss you.*

*Romeo: Save it for tomorrow morning. Meet you in the parking lot. Donuts are on me.*

*Stella: If you keep feeding me donuts, I'm going to have to keep going on runs with you on the weekends.*

*Romeo: What a vicious circle of life. See you in the morning, babe.*



ROMEO ROLLS down the window to his car and gestures to the passenger seat. “Get in, Garcia.”

Smiling, I round his car and get into the passenger side. I’m instantly greeted by the smell of Frankie Donuts and coffee.

“Good morning,” he says with a smile, right before leaning over the center console and pressing a kiss to my lips. “Mmm, you taste good.” He kisses me two more times before pulling away. “And you look hot too.”

I glance down at my navy-blue dress and back up at him. “I’ve never worn this many dresses in a row.”

“I noticed.” He hands me a coffee. “Seems as though you’re dressing to catch someone’s eye.”

“Possibly.”

“Trust me.” He lifts his coffee to his mouth. “You caught my eye a long time ago, but I appreciate the effort. I wore my tight-fitting Nike shirt for you today.” He flexes and it makes me laugh. “Hot, right?”

“So hot,” I answer, humor heavy in my voice. I sigh and lean my head back. “I don’t want to teach today. I want to be back in Maui, but with no awkwardness between us. I want it to be like how we are now.”

“Let’s call in sick. I’ll buy us tickets right now.”

“Don’t tempt me. Do you ever have those days? Where you just don’t want to have to deal with the students’ hormones? I like teaching, but I have no energy for the punks. Arlo and Greer are really good at speaking to all types of students. I’m jealous of their abilities.”

“Gunner is the same. The man was made to be a teacher. I feel as though I have I-don’t-want-to-teach days every day.”

“Every day?” I give him a look. “I don’t think that’s the truth. You talk about your students a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He opens the bag of donuts and hands me a jelly glazed. “I guess I just don’t think I’m good at it, and when you don’t think you’re good at something, you don’t want to keep doing it, because of the possibility of living with failure every day.”

“Yeah, but the only way you’re going to get good at something is by practicing. Come on, Coach, you should know that.”

“Practice what I preach, huh?”

I poke his side. “Might be helpful.”

“You’re right.”

“I know I am.” I study him while I take a bite of my donut. “I’m surprised you feel that way, though, because I always thought you liked teaching. You’re so immersed in the teaching community, with coaching and the teachers’ league and bringing donuts to the faculty all the time. Just seemed as though you’re a team player and you love what you do.”

Keeping his eyes trained in front of him, he says, “I guess, sometimes I consider that there’s more out there and I get in these moods. But you’re right, I am immersed in the teaching community. But do you know what we need to do? We need to prank Arlo more. When Greer was pranking him, I’ve never felt more alive.”

“You know I’m always up for taking down Mr. Button-up Cardigan.”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Then let’s get on it. What do you have in mind?”

I tap my chin. “Hmm, let me do some research. There has to be something we can capitalize on, especially when it comes to Greer.”

“Ooo, hitting him where it hurts. I like your style, Garcia.”

I smirk. “And I like you . . . *Romeo*.”



“ORDER, ORDER,” Keiko says, clanging her pen against her water glass. “As the official secretary of the Ladies in Heat Book Club, I need to announce when the minutes of the meeting should start.”

Lindsay offered to host tonight, which I was thankful for because she and Greer have the best accommodations by far. Cora and I don’t even bother because our apartments are so small, and the last time we went to Keiko’s, we weren’t allowed to sit on her furniture because she said we’re a raucous bunch and she didn’t want alcohol being spilled on her finely upholstered furniture.

Plus, Lindsay and Gunner live on the lake, like Greer and Arlo, and their views are just as spectacular. And they have a pretty impressive collection of wine, which I never shy away from.

“Keeks, we have told you several times you don’t need to take minutes.”

“Preposterous. What are we supposed to reference when we need to consider meetings in the past?”

“Our memories?” I ask.

Keiko shakes her head. “Relying on memories is an inaccurate way to document history.” She taps her paper with her pen. “Finely detailed minutes will serve us well.”

Sure . . . especially since we have yet to reference them.

Playing along, Greer taps her book on the coffee table—a book no one has read yet, shocking—and says, “The meeting has begun.”

Keiko documents the time from her watch and then starts taking notes.

God, I love her.

“First thing’s first—tell us what’s happening with Romeo,” Greer says.

With her pen held high, Keiko interjects. “I don’t see how that pertains to book club.”

“Nothing we talk about in book club pertains to book club,” Cora says while holding a large glass of wine.

“You know, I think Keiko is right,” I say. “I really think we should stick to books.”

“No way.” Greer shakes her head. “You’re going to tell us what’s happening with you and Romeo. You’ve been hanging out with him every day since school started and we’re dying to know if you’re a couple.” Greer clasps her hands together.

“Yeah, give us the details,” Lindsay says. “Gunner isn’t getting any info from Romeo.”

“Or Arlo, for that matter,” Greer adds.

Everyone stares me down, besides Keiko, who’s connected with her paper, taking notes.

“Let me guess—you’re not going to let me get away with saying nothing.”

Cora holds her wine up to me in a salute and says, “She’s quick, ladies.”

“Fine. But this stays here, do you—”

A door slams down the hall, startling all of us, as Gunner comes storming into the living room, hand pushing through his hair. When he spots us, genuine surprise is on his face.

“Shit, sorry.” He glances at Lindsay. “I forgot you were having the girls over.” His eyes connect with mine and he

quickly looks away.

“Is everything okay?” Lindsay asks, genuine concern on her face.

“Yeah.” His voice is strained, so I think we all know that’s a lie. He looks at me one more time before he says, “Just going to grab a drink and get out of your way.” He heads to the kitchen, grabs a beer, and then takes the steps upstairs two at a time.

Lindsay sets her wine glass down and says, “I’m going to go check on him. Continue with your discussion.”

“Want me to wait?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I’ll hit you up on the phone later.”

She travels up the stairs and we all give each other confused looks. “I wonder what that was about,” I say.

“I’m not sure, but it doesn’t look good,” Greer says.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Gunner angry,” Cora adds.

“Did anyone catch the time when Gunner walked in? I think I might be off a minute or two,” Keiko says, pushing her glasses up on her nose.

We all shake our heads, and she lets out an exasperated sigh and mutters, “This is exactly why I want to be more official with a clock in the center of the coffee table, so we can keep indisputable evidence of what happens during these meetings.”

Unsure, I ask, “Should I continue?”

“Yeah, we can catch her up,” Cora says. “Tell us the good stuff. Are you a couple?”

Slightly uneasy, I shake my head. “No, we aren’t a couple—at least, I don’t think we are.”

“Are you seeing other people?” Greer asks.

“What? No.” And I know Romeo isn’t. If he didn’t kiss someone for a year, there’s no way he’s seeing other people, especially with the things he’s always saying to me. No, he’s



mine and all mine. No question about it. “But we’re not official, we’re just . . . getting to know each other on a different level.”

“What does that mean?” Cora asks. “Are you doing it?”

I shake my head. “No, and that’s the best part.”

Keiko looks up from her paper and asks, “Is Romeo not proficient in bed? From what I observed on the balcony, you were quite pleased with his sexual performance.”

Jesus.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Romeo is easily the best I’ve ever been with. Controlling, possessive, alpha. Takes what he wants, when he wants it, while also making sure I’m taken care of before him. He’s—God, he’s amazing in bed. What I meant was that we’re not letting the physical side of things get in the way.”

“Are you feeling better about what happened with your dad?” Greer asks.

“What happened with your dad?” Cora chimes in.

I give them a quick rundown of the conversation we had, Keiko taking notes the entire time. “So, you’ve felt as though you don’t deserve to be with Romeo?” Cora asks.

“I think so,” I answer. “I don’t know. I’m trying to make sure I treat him well, you know? But I’m also trying to work on me.”

“That makes sense. Arlo did the same thing before he came after me,” Greer says, nodding. *Yeah. She does get it.*

“One of the things that this whole ordeal with my family has reminded me of was my feelings of inadequacy. And before you comment on that, it doesn’t matter what anyone else feels about you. Change has to come from within.” And that’s where I’m getting stuck. “Learning about how I’ve treated my dad, Ashley—it hurts. It has also torn off the scabs of a few scars.”

“In what areas are your fibrous tissues arising? I haven’t seen any evidence of those,” Keeks says, ever our loyal

wordmonger.

I chuckle. “Internal scars, Keeks.”

She sighs. And then writes that down.

“Anyway, I’m a work in progress. Brock has made me feel better about myself. He’s honest with me, has begun opening up more, and that’s helped me feel less inadequate. As if I can realize some of my dreams because he wants to be there with me.”

“You will figure it all out,” Cora says, leaning over and patting my hand.

“Thanks. It’ll get better. And with Brock? I’m taking it slow so we don’t get swept away in my needs. I want to know what his needs are.”

“And what are they?” Greer asks.

“Hold on.” Keiko flips her paper over and then nods. “Okay, proceed.”

“Me,” I say. “That’s all he wants. So that’s what I’m trying to do—give him me. Unfiltered, raw me.”

“Let me guess, he’s infatuated,” Cora says with a smirk.

I feel a blush creep up my cheeks. “I mean, he did say he was addicted.”

Cora fans her face. “Ugh, why do you all have men and I’m the only single one?”

“Are you in fact single?” Keiko asks. “Has your divorce gone through?”

Cora’s face lights up. “Soon. My lawyer is sending me the papers to sign in the next week or so.”

“Ooo, does that mean we get to go on a trip to celebrate?” I ask.

“Yup. I’m starting to plan our rendezvous in Las Vegas.”

“And what does that mean about Pike Greyson?” Greer asks while wiggling her eyebrows. “Are we going to see you around the school hallways during lunch?”

Cora takes a large gulp of her wine and says, “Probably not. I tried talking with him at the barbeque and he really wanted nothing to do with me. Tough pill to swallow.”

“I wouldn’t take offense to it,” Greer says. “He doesn’t really talk to anyone. Arlo even invited him out for drinks and he declined. I’m not sure that he’s a people person.”

“I’m not looking for conversation,” Cora says. “Just some carnal needs to be released, and from one look at him, I know the guy could do that for me.”

“Easily,” I say just as my phone vibrates next to me. A text from Romeo.

I pick it up and read.

***Romeo:** I know you’re hanging with the girls, but just wanted to let you know Carson Stone hit a grand slam and I’m pretty sure I got a boner over it.*

I snort, pulling the attention of everyone.

“Uh, what do you think you’re doing?” Greer asks. “We’re not supposed to be talking to our men during girl time.”

“How do you know it’s Brock?” I ask.

Cora points to above my head. “The heart emojis sprouting from the roots of your hair are a dead giveaway.”

I roll my eyes and set my phone down, even though I’m itching to text him back. All in good time.



“I THINK that’s the last glass,” I say, handing it to Lindsay.

Greer was the first to leave after receiving multiple text messages from Arlo about being horny, which disgusted Cora and forced her to the drive-thru of Dairy Queen, where she proclaimed she’d eat her feelings.

After that, Keiko left because she said minutes didn’t need to be taken anymore if all the members of the book club

weren't present, and there was a pressing documentary about an octopus teacher on Netflix she wanted to watch.

"Thank you for staying back and helping," Lindsay says while drying her hands off on a kitchen towel. "I'm actually glad you stayed. I wanted to talk to you."

"Is everything okay?" I ask, noticing that she hasn't been the same since she spoke with Gunner upstairs. "Is Gunner okay?"

She shakes her head. With her voice lowered, she says, "He's really hurt." She glances over her shoulder and asks, "Can I ask you something? And if you don't feel comfortable answering, I get it, but anything to help Gunner."

"Of course," I say.

"What do you know about Romeo's possible job in Idaho? Did he say he was going to take it?"

Uhh . . .

What?

Idaho?

What the hell is she talking about?

I blink a few times, feeling as though the wind was knocked out of me with that one question. "A job?" I ask, my throat growing tight. "He, uh . . . he didn't say anything to me."

Immediate regret falls over Lindsay's features as her hand goes to her chest. "Oh shit, he hasn't said anything to you?"

Panic starts to creep up my back as I shake my head. "No, he didn't."

Lindsay looks away and says, "Forget I said anything."

"Uh, no, you don't." I force her to look at me. "What do you know?"

Tears start to well in her eyes. "I didn't mean to gossip. I thought you knew, given how close you two have been lately. It wasn't my intention to break the news to you."

“Lindsay, I know you’re not vindictive like that, but if you know something about Romeo, please tell me.”

She sighs and places her hand on the counter behind me. “When Gunner came storming in here, he had just gotten off the phone with a guy named Adam Lee. I guess Romeo and Gunner knew him from college. Anyway, he was calling because Romeo applied for a job this past summer to be head baseball coach at Weston University in Idaho. Adam was calling to grab a reference, even though he knew he didn’t really need one. The athletic director wanted one anyway.”

“And Gunner had no idea?”

Lindsay shakes her head. “He didn’t even know Romeo was thinking about leaving, let alone applying. Has Romeo said anything to you?”

I think about our previous conversations, realization hitting me harder than expected. I slowly nod. “He’s mentioned a few times how he wishes he was more involved in baseball, how he doesn’t think he’s good at teaching PE. But I didn’t know he was actually looking to leave.” My stomach aches, thinking of him taking a job somewhere else. “Did he get the job?”

“No idea. But Gunner is pretty pissed Romeo never said anything to him.”

“I could see that.”

Lindsay places her hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

I swallow down the lump that’s forming in my throat and say, “Yeah.” It sounds strained, but that’s because I’m holding back the tears that are threatening to fall. “I’m okay.”

“How does this affect what’s going on between you two?”

I give it some thought. How does it affect *us*? Stella from a few weeks ago would probably be pissed if something like this was brought up without her knowledge, especially since feelings are involved, but I’m trying to put myself in other people’s shoes, trying not to take the selfish route. Brock’s needs are important to me, so if this is the direction his life is taking, I won’t jump up and down in a tantrum like I did with my dad. Men are more naturally reticent, something I now

understand from the text messages my dad and I have shared over the last few weeks. Perhaps Brock didn't think I'd be capable of reacting selflessly. Perhaps he thought I'd be part of his future at Weston, somehow. Or perhaps, as much as he loves spending time with me, it's been more intense because he knew there was a finish point.

A tear falls down my cheek as I realize exactly how I need to feel. "It's going to be okay," I say with a smile, even though it barely reaches my cheeks. "He deserves this. I know how much he wants this change."

"But what about you two?"

I shrug as another tear falls down my cheek. "Maybe we were just meant to be friends."

## Chapter Twenty

### ROMEO

I stretch my feet across the coffee table and tip back the rest of my beer as the Bobbies take the field after a stupendous inning. Twelve to three and going into the eighth inning. Unless they majorly fuck up, they're headed for another win.

As I set my beer down on the side table next to my couch, there's a knock on my door. Confused who's visiting me, I stroll across the floor in nothing but a pair of sweatpants and open the door.

"Stella, hey," I say, surprised and excited at the same time. "What's going on?"

"Can I come in?" she asks, her voice wary.

Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good.

"Yeah, of course." I push the door open and she walks toward the living room, where she takes a seat on my couch. "Need a drink, babe?"

She shakes her head. "I'm good."

"Okay." I shut the door and join her on the couch, where I put the game on mute and turn toward her. "Not to sound skeptical, but I'm surprised you're here. Makes me think there's something wrong." When she looks away, my heart tumbles. "Is there something wrong?"

“I need to talk to you, but I don’t want you to get mad.”

“That’s a great way to start a conversation,” I say, meaning it to be a joke, but it falls flat. “What’s up, Stella?”

“You know how you talked about wanting to move on and maybe coach a college team or something like that?”

“Yes,” I drag out.

“Well . . . I know.”

Uh . . . what the hell is she talking about?

“Know what?” I ask.

“I know about the job in Idaho.”

How the fu—shit, Gunner.

“And I want you to know, I want you to take it.”

Okay, I was not expecting that.

Was not expecting that at all, and for some reason, anger starts to boil up my spine. She wants me to take the job? The job I haven’t even been offered yet? Just like that, *see ya, bye, it was nice knowing you?*

“You want me to take the job?” I ask, wanting to clarify.

“Yes. It’s what you want, Brock.”

“Ah, so you know what I want, then?” I ask, my voice clipped.

She rears back slightly. “I’m not trying to make you mad.”

“You’re not?” I laugh and stand from the couch. “Could’ve fooled me.” I drag my hand over my face.

“I don’t understand. Why are you getting angry?”

“Are you really that dense?” Her eyes widen and I realize I used the wrong choice of words, but then again, I’m at a point of no return. The anger has taken hold of my emotions.

She stands as well. “Did you just call me dense?”

“Well, that’s what you’re being, Stella.”



She folds her arms across her chest. “How am I being dense?”

“You’re really confused about why I’m angry? You have no idea why I’d be upset that you came into my loft, late at night, to tell me to leave for another state without a blink of an eye?”

“I’m trying to tell you it’s okay to leave.” Her voice rises. “I’m saying follow your dreams. How is that offensive?”

“Because—what about us?” I ask, shouting while throwing my arms out to the side. “What about what we have? Do you plan on moving with me? Is that why you’re so casually okay with this?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “My life, my job is here.”

“I see. So, just like that, I’m dispensable to you.”

“You’re not dispensable to me, Brock. I’ve been selfish this entire relationship. I’ve taken what I’ve wanted. I know this is what you want. I know you’ve been wanting to move on. The opportunity is there, so take it. You can’t make a decision based off what little we have here, what little there is between us.”

“*Little?*” I ask, my voice cracking. “You think what we have is little? Wow.” I turn away from her while gripping the back of my neck with both hands. “*Little*. That’s how you’d describe the feelings you have for me . . . *little*.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it?” I ask, turning on her. “Because, right now, it seems as though what we have between us is just as real as our fake engagement.”

“I meant it—I meant . . .” she stutters, wringing her hands together. “I’m not—hell, Brock, I’m not good enough for you. We both know that. You need someone who doesn’t have so much self-hate. You need someone who can make you happy, who you don’t have to watch over or worry about.”

“Funny, because I thought you did make me happy. Then again, you seem to know everything about our relationship and

my feelings, so please, tell me how I'm feeling right now, Stella?"

"You don't have to be an ass about it."

"Excuse me as I try to catch my breath. Do you realize you literally knocked the air out of my lungs a few minutes ago? Poof—just like that—you're throwing in the towel and letting me go. How did you think that would make me feel?"

"I'm not throwing in the towel. I'm giving you an out."

"I don't want a fucking out," I shout. "I don't need you making decisions for me, when I can make them for myself. Fuck." I push my hand through my hair.

She backs up, fear etched in her eyes. "I wasn't trying to tell you how you feel. I was trying to be helpful."

"You telling me you don't want to be with me? That's not fucking helpful."

"I'm not saying I don't want to be with you, Brock. I'm saying take the opportunity. Don't say no because of me. We don't know where these feelings will lead. We're not even boyfriend and girlfriend, Brock. Yeah, there's attachment there, but there isn't any sort of commitment. So, why not take what you want?"

"No commitment, huh?" I nod, my hands now on my waist. "I guess I was wrong, then, because there was commitment on my end. There was fucking airtight commitment, but I see that those feelings were one-sided. Stupid me for assuming that you could actually look past the fog in your head and see what's standing in front of you." I take a step forward. "A man who's infatuated with you and would do just about anything to make you happy."

"I don't want you to make me happy," she says. "I want you to make yourself happy."

"And why don't you understand that you make me happy?"

"Because, Brock, you can't base your entire life off a relationship that could or could not work," she shouts. "Look

at my parents. They're in their late fifties and finally getting to live their lives. I don't want that for me. I don't want that for you."

"Do not compare us to your parents. That was a different time, different circumstances. You can't let what happened to them affect what happens to you."

"But I can learn from it," she shoots back.

"So, then what has this all been?" I ask. "You and me—what has been the point? If you don't want to end up like your parents, why are you even bothering talking to me, hanging out with me, getting my fucking hopes up that maybe, just maybe, you'd look at me the way I look at you?"

She opens her mouth to say something, but then shuts it. "I—I don't know," she finally says.

"And that's the problem right there. You don't know what you want, when I know exactly what I want. But what I want doesn't want me back, so what's the point? There's only so much rejection a guy can take."

"What are you saying?" she asks, her eyes welling in pain.

I walk past her toward the front door. I grip the handle and say, "I've tried to get you to look my way, to give me a goddamn chance, Stella, but it's clear to me there's no chance." I open the door and grip the back of my neck. "I'll take the fucking job, if it ends this goddamn misery."

"Brock—"

"I suggest you leave." I look her in the eyes. They look so sad. When she doesn't move, I add, "Now."

A tear slides down her cheek as she heads toward the door. "This isn't what I wanted to happen," she says quietly. "I was trying to be selfless."

When she stands in front of me, I glance down at her and say, "You've done nothing but break my goddamn heart tonight. If you think that's selfless, then mission accomplished."

"Brock, please." She reaches for me but I step back.

“Leave, Stella. Don’t make me say it again.”

Solemnly, without another look back, she walks out of the loft. I slam the door behind her and then grip the ends of my hair as I shout, “Fuck.” I slide down the door until I hit the floor.

*Why doesn’t she want me?*

*Why can’t she commit to me?*

Why is she trying to push me away, when all I fucking want is her? She’s what makes me happy. She’s what wakes me up in the morning, excited to go to school. And these last few weeks, we’ve been more connected than ever, so what the actual fuck is she thinking?

She doesn’t want to be selfish?

Taking herself away from me, that’s selfish, but no matter what I say, she doesn’t get it.

And that hits me hard, because reality is starting to set in. I fell in love with a girl who doesn’t feel the same way about me.



“YOU’RE HERE EARLY,” I say as Gunner walks into our shared office in the PE department.

He slams the door, leans against it with crossed arms, and asks, “Care to explain what the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know. Seems as though you have a good handle on all the information.”

“All I know is when I asked you in Hawaii why Adam Lee was calling me, you lied. What the actual fuck, man? You’re going to take a new job, in a different state, and not even tell me?”

“First of all, I didn’t get the job yet. Second of all, I applied when I was at my fucking lowest, when I didn’t think I

could come to school, knowing Stella works here. And third of all, how dare you fucking tell her?”

“I didn’t. Lindsay did, and the only reason she said anything was because she thought Stella already knew. I was caught off guard yesterday. And excuse me for thinking we were best friends, but blindly finding out you’re not happy with your life here came as a bit of a shock.” He pushes off the door. “Dude, what the hell? I thought we had a thing going on here. Do you really hate it that much?”

Seeing where Gunner is coming from, I lighten up on my anger and say, “I’m struggling, man. I was struggling at the end of the school year because of all the shit with Stella. I just felt as if I wasn’t giving the kids what they needed, and I knew I cared more about baseball than anything.” I look up to the ceiling. “I don’t know, maybe I’m chasing after something that no longer exists.” I lean forward in my chair, hands clasped in front of me. “Do you ever miss it?”

“The game?” he asks.

“Yeah, the game. The thrill of it all, feeling the dirt under your cleats—don’t you miss it?”

“Of course I miss it,” he answers. “But I also know that shit happens for a reason, man. When I was playing baseball, I thought I was at my happiest, but I was so fucking wrong. If I didn’t get hurt, if I didn’t retire, if I didn’t take this job with you? I may never have run into Lindsay, and then I wouldn’t have found out that I’m Dylan’s dad. Does it suck that I’m no longer playing the game I love? Sure, but would I trade everything to go back to stand on the mound one more time? No fucking way. This is what happiness is to me. Maybe you need to figure out what happiness is to you.”

“I thought I knew what it was,” I mumble. “But she doesn’t share the same sentiment.”

“I think she’s scared, man. I think she’s scared to actually allow herself to feel the way she does about you.”

“That’s bullshit,” I say. “We’re grown-ups, for fuck’s sake. She either likes me or she doesn’t, simple as that.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Gunner says. “Grown-ups carry baggage, and it’s all about matching up with the person who’s willing and able to help you carry that baggage.”

“What more do I have to do to show her I’m the one who wants to carry her baggage? I’ve done everything I fucking can, and she wants nothing to do with it.” I lean back in my chair. “It’s over, dude. It’s fucking over.”

Gunner falls silent as he exhales. “So, what does that mean? If you get offered the job, are you going to take it?”

“Yeah,” I answer. “If it gets me out of this purgatory I’m living in, I’ll fucking take it. Start a new goddamn life.”

Gunner slowly nods and then turns toward the door. “Good to know, man.” And then he leaves the office.



**ARLO:** *You’re moving to Idaho?*

I glance at the text from Arlo and groan. Here comes the lecture. I consider ignoring him, but he’s a persistent bastard and I know his texts will only come faster if I don’t respond. Might as well get it over with now.

**Romeo:** *News travels fast.*

**Arlo:** *Gunner told me you’re considering a job there. What the hell, man?*

**Romeo:** *Funny how no one is happy for me.*

**Arlo:** *Because we all know you’re running away.*

**Romeo:** *I’m not running away.*

**Arlo:** *Really? How are things with Stella?*

**Romeo:** *Fuck off, man. I don’t have to put up with this shit.*

**Arlo:** *That good, huh?*

I toss my phone to the side and turn up the TV, letting the announcers of the Bobbies game drown out the negative chatter in my head.



“HEY, MR. ROMERO,” Simon says with a wave as he walks into the assembly. “Got more work for me tonight?”

I’m wearing jeans today, so my hands are stuffed in my pockets as I say, “Yeah, stop by the office after school. I have some jerseys for you to sort.”

“Cool, see you then,” Simon says with a smile.

The kid is a hard worker and always doing things faster than he should. I told him the other day that if he wanted to make any money, he needed to slow down. He didn’t take my advice.

The last few days have been hell, to say the least. I’m not really talking to any of my friends. Arlo tried texting me again, but I ignored him. Gunner barely speaks to me in the office, and Stella . . . well, let’s just say I’m parking somewhere else in the morning so our paths don’t cross. I’ve done a good job avoiding her all week by steering clear of the teachers’ lounge, eating in my office, and not even attempting a walk toward the foreign language department.

But today is the day I know I’ll run into her.

Every year, when school’s back in session, we award the kids who excelled the previous year. Arlo takes the mic and lists off the students and their accomplishments. It’s dreadfully boring, but at the end, there’s some pep rally bullshit that usually gets the kids excited. But during the assembly, the teachers all congregate together to keep an eye on the students and make sure they’re not doing anything they shouldn’t be doing. There’s no way I can avoid Stella here.

“Hey, Romeo,” Greer says, walking up to me with a kind smile. She’s mellowed since getting married, as though she’s just in a constant state of contentment, and I couldn’t be more jealous.

“Arlo send you here?” I ask, looking out over the students.

“No. You’re my friend too. I came to check on you.”

“I’m fine. You don’t need to check on me.”

“You don’t seem fine,” she says. “You seem really angry, actually.”

Talking quietly, I say, “Pretty sure if the person you loved pushed you out of your life, you wouldn’t be very chipper either, Greer.”

“You love her?” Greer asks, surprise in her voice.

“I thought I did,” I answer honestly. “I don’t know what I think anymore.”

“Did you tell her you loved her?”

“What’s the fucking point?” I ask. “It’s not as if it would matter. My words don’t matter to her. My actions don’t matter. Nothing matters. She thinks she knows what’s best and that’s that. End of story.”

“She’s hurting too, you know.”

“I’m sure she is,” I say, just as my eyes land on Stella, across the gym. She’s walking with Keiko toward the teachers’ section. She’s wearing a pair of black pants with a red shirt tucked into the high waist. Her hair is in soft waves over her shoulders, framing her beautiful face.

Fuck . . .

How could I possibly forget how gorgeous she is? How could I forget how much I love this woman? How could I forget how much I wish she was mine?

Her eyes flash up and when she sees me, her steps falter for a second before I watch her visibly straighten her shoulders and continue to walk in my direction.

“You should talk to her,” Greer says, pulling me away from the trance I was in.

I shake my head. “There’s nothing left to say.”

When Stella reaches the teachers’ section, she settles in a spot on the opposite side of where I’m standing, making it clear that even though we have to be in the same area, she’ll put as much distance between us that she can.



“You’re just going to give up like that?” Greer asks me.

I lean in closer and say, “She’s the one who gave up. She’s the one who pushed me away. This isn’t on me, Greer.”

“Yeah, but you’re not making it easy on anyone. What about Gunner and Arlo?”

“They’ll get over it,” I say before taking a step away. I’m not about to stand through this entire assembly talking to Greer about this shit. As far as I’m concerned, it’s over and done with.



*ARLO: What are you doing?*

*Arlo: Dude, it’s Friday night. Are you out?*

*Arlo: We’re coming over.*

*Romeo: Don’t bother.*

There’s a knock on my door, and I groan. “Fucking hell,” I mutter, staying seated on my couch.

Another knock. “We know you’re in there. Open up,” I hear Gunner say. He’s here too?

I sit up, and my head swirls with exhaustion and dizziness. I take a few deep breaths, the alcohol heavy on my tongue. I glance at the nearly empty bottle of whiskey and smooth my hand over my eyes.

Hell.

Lifting my body off the couch, I stand, wobble, and then catch myself before I fall back onto the couch. A few more deep breaths and I’m walking to the front door. I open it but don’t wait for them to enter; instead, I stumble back to the couch, where I plop down and lean against the cushion.

I hear the door click shut as Arlo says, “Holy shit. Gunner, get him some water.”

Arlo comes up to me and forces me to look him in the eyes, but all I see is blurriness. “Did you drink that entire bottle tonight?”

“Nah, half of it,” I say.

“Jesus fuck, Romeo. Please tell me you’ve eaten something.”

“Just leave me the fuck alone,” I say, sliding to the side so I can close my eyes, but Arlo doesn’t let me. Instead, he sits me up as Gunner brings me water, and he forces me to drink.

But it does nothing. I’m too far gone. My eyes shut and I don’t remember anything until I wake up to the sound of running water.

And then a blast of sunlight as my curtains are flung open.

“Ah, fuck,” I say, covering my eyes with my arm.

“Morning, sunshine,” Arlo says, his voice growing closer. He strips my arm off my face and forcibly sits me up. My stomach rolls, and before I know it, a bucket appears in front of me, and I use it shamefully. I spend the next what seems like half hour retching into the bucket until there’s nothing left inside of me.

Gunner takes the bucket from me while Arlo hands me some Gatorade. I drink small sips and take deep breaths in between.

“Regretting the booze?” Arlo asks, sitting across from me on the coffee table.

I breathe through my nose and say, “No. I’d do it again.”

“You’re not that guy, Romeo.”

“I don’t even know who the fuck I am,” I say, rubbing my eye with my palm. “I’m not a shitty friend, and yet, this past week, that’s what I’ve been. I’m not someone who sulks and drinks his problems away. I didn’t even fucking drink my night away after having to retire. But last night I had more booze than I’ve had in a month and I’d do it all over again. Anything to end this crippling ache that’s taking over my chest.”

Gunner walks back into the room and takes a seat next to me. “Then stop being a bitch about it and do something.”

I shake my head. “There’s no use. She’s checked out. But you two—you’re the ones I owe the apology to.” I take a deep breath, helping to settle my stomach again. “I’m sorry for not telling you earlier. I should have said something. Honestly, I didn’t think I’d even be considered.”

“You fail to realize who you are,” Gunner says. “Brock Romero has a record trailing behind him that any team would be lucky to have. You think Coach Disik comes to us for recruits because we’re his old players? No, he comes to us because of how we’re training these players, the impact we have on them. I’m not concerned about you not getting the job, I’m concerned about you getting it.”

“Is that what you really want?” Arlo asks. “To move?”

I shake my head. “No. What I want is for Stella to let go of all the insane thoughts scrolling through her head and just feel. She’s trying to backtrack and put Band-Aids on things because she thinks it’s what people want. But it’s not. It’s not what I want. I just want her. But I don’t know if I can stay here, with her. I barely survived the assembly, hence last night. I can’t keep avoiding her, especially since we’re all in the same friend circle. The easiest thing would be to move.”

“True,” Gunner says. “But when have you ever chosen easy?”

“Never,” I say. “But maybe it’s about time I do.”

“What does that mean?” Arlo asks.

“Weston University called. I got the job. I’m going to take it.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

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### STELLA

*You can do this.*

Head held high, I walk into the teachers' lounge, hoping I don't run into Romeo.

Pretty sure I won't.

He was a master at avoiding me all last week. The only reason I knew he was still here at school was because I heard a kid mention him in one of my classes and because I saw him at the assembly on Friday. God, did that hurt, seeing him there, looking so handsome but also distraught. He didn't have the same pep, the same cheer that he normally carries in his eyes. He looked defeated.

I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was taking my feelings out of the equation and helping him chase after his dreams. Apparently, I was wrong. Which has only made me feel more lost. *I hate myself a little more.*

When I don't see Romeo, I exhale and walk to the coffee maker, where I reach for a mug to pour myself a cup. There are two female PE teachers in the corner that I don't know too well, but when I hear them say Romeo's name, my ears perk up.

"He's not here today?" Natalie asks Heather.

“No,” Heather—uh, I don’t remember her last name—says. “There’s a substitute this morning.”

“Do you know why?”

“I heard Gunner say he was in Idaho.”

They start to walk away when Natalie asks, “Idaho for what?”

As they open the door, Heather says, “From what I heard, touring a university.” And then the door shuts behind them.

I don’t realize I’m gripping my mug so tightly until my hands are searing against the hot surface.

“Shit,” I say, quickly setting it down and placing my hands on the cool surface of the countertop.

He must have taken the job.

Isn’t that what I wanted? For him to go after what he wanted? To be happy?

Then why do I feel so devastated?

The lounge door opens and Kelvin and Keiko walk in together, deep in conversation about something science-y. I don’t even understand what they’re saying most of the time.

Keiko looks up and spots me. She studies my face for a few seconds and then says, “You don’t appear to be happy.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

Kelvin chimes in—which is rare—and says, “I’ve learned quickly when a woman says she’s fine, she’s in fact not fine.”

“Great observation, Kelvin,” Keiko praises him. “And very accurate. Although *fine* is supposed to represent the basic contentment of a human being, society has twisted the word to express unhappiness with a twist of snark.” Keiko looks me in the eyes. “Why are you acting”—she uses air quotes—“fine? Something troubles you.”

Even though her bedside manner is lacking, she’s observant. “I don’t really want to get into it, Keeks, but thanks for asking.”

“See?” Keiko turns to Kelvin. “Wonderful catch on reading her internal thoughts by cluing in on external factors. Well done, Kelvin.”

He bows his head. “I do find myself more in tune with the females’ senses thanks to your tutelage.”

“And I feel more in tune with the male anatomy and what produces timely and satisfying ejaculations from your tutelage.”

I can’t right now.

Not with these two.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I say, moving by them.

Keiko doesn’t reach out to stop me, but she does say, “If it’s because of Romeo, I’d say your heart is trying to communicate with your brain, but the wires are crossed.”

“What?” I ask, turning around.

Keiko is standing there, holding Kelvin’s hand, looking . . . happy.

“Your heart clearly wants Romeo—that’s evident in the way you long after him. But your mind seems to lack that knowledge or it’s dismissing it without fully considering all the variables. It seems as though you need to reset and allow your brain to catch up.”

“Very well said,” Kelvin praises her, and for the first time, I see Keiko lean against Kelvin to rest her head on his shoulder.

It’s sweet.

It’s simple.

It’s what I want.

I know that. But I don’t think it’s possible to have anymore.



“HEY, DAD,” I say, walking into his house. He pulls me into a hug right before Ashley comes up to me wearing an apron and gives me a hug as well.

“You don’t look so great,” Ashley says, stepping away. “Is everything okay?”

I came over to teach Ashley how to make tamales properly. Marguerite and Angel are coming over this weekend to speak with Dad, and Ashley wants to impress them. I know they’ll appreciate her efforts, especially since I told both of my sisters to be kind and to listen with open hearts. I don’t think Dad has been more grateful for the opportunity to talk to all of his girls. And I know my open heart was a big part of making that happen.

Needing a safe place to talk, I shake my head and say, “No, everything’s not okay.”

“What’s going on?” Dad asks, bringing me to the couch, where we all take a seat.

I lean back on the cushion and say, “I think I’m in love.”

“With Romeo?” Ashley asks.

I nod. “Yeah, and I told him to leave.”

“What?” Dad asks. “Why would you tell him to leave? And leave where?”

“To Idaho. I found out he applied for a job at Weston University to be a head baseball coach. It’s something he’s talked about wanting a few times, but I knew he was attached to me at the time and I didn’t want him making a decision about his career based on me, when we didn’t even know where we stood.”

“Ah, I see.” Dad nods. “Let me guess, he didn’t take it well.”

“How do you know that?” I ask.

Ashley chimes in and says, “Easy. The guy is clearly obsessed with you and you pushing him away for a new job probably doesn’t settle well in his mind.”

“Exactly,” Dad says. “Are we right?”

I look off to the side. “He wasn’t happy. But what was I supposed to do?” Deflated, I say, “I feel so fucked up in the head. I love him, I know I do, but for some reason, I can’t seem to cross over the line to claiming that love. Something is holding me back.”

“The fear of falling,” Ashley says. “I felt the same way about your dad. I knew I liked him. I knew I shouldn’t, given our age difference, and it took me a while to actually accept what my heart wanted. The fear was real. It was heavy in my chest. I’d deny him, I’d miss his phone calls, forget his texts. All I was doing was hurting both of us.”

“It wasn’t a great time in my life,” Dad says. “I can only imagine how Romeo is feeling.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter. I think he took the job. And I’m in no place to quit my job and fly to Idaho to see if we could work things out.”

“I bet if you asked, he’d stay,” Ashley says.

“And have him resent me?” I shake my head. “No, I can’t do that either.”

“Maybe long distance?” Dad asks. “If you could withstand that, you could withstand anything.”

“Not sure he’d even be interested in that at this point.” I sigh. “I really messed everything up. When did I become such a hot mess? I used to have it together. Now look at me. Making up fake engagements, unable to process my own damn feelings, comparing my relationship with Romeo to you and Mom.”

“Ah, Stelly, you didn’t.”

I nod slowly. “Unfortunately, I did. And I didn’t even mean it. Yeah, I think there’s some fear there from seeing you two divorce when I thought you were doing okay, but I’m not that person, who takes my parents’ experiences and applies them to my life. I think I was just drowning, grasping, trying to hold on to anything so I didn’t reveal myself.”



“And why don’t you want to reveal yourself?” Ashley asks.

I roll my teeth over the corner of my mouth. “I think . . . because I don’t like the person I’ve been, and I don’t want him to see that.”

Dad takes my hand in his. “Romeo has known you a long time, right?”

I nod.

“And you’ve been real with him, right?”

I nod again.

“Then he knows the real you. You don’t have to hide from him. He sees it already. And he wants to be with you. Shouldn’t that tell you everything you need to know?”

God . . . I think he’s right.

“That’s, uh, that’s what he’s been trying to tell me. That he wants me.” My conversations with Romeo flash through my mind. All the times he’s told me he wants me, needs me. How I make him happy. The genuine tone in his voice. The sincere look in his eyes, the desperation of trying to get his point across. “Oh God, I really fucked things up.” I put my face in my hands and lean forward. Dad and Ashley both rub my back.

He’s stuck by my side through the crazy. He’s seen me at my worst and has still wanted to be near me. He’s called me beautiful when I’ve felt anything but beautiful. He’s held my hand when I needed it, made me laugh when I thought laughing wasn’t possible. And the week after we got back from Maui, it felt as if we were growing something bigger than I ever expected, something that would last a lifetime, and I went and messed it up.

“It might not be over,” Ashley says.

It’s kind of her to think such a thing, but I don’t think I can take her word on this.

“I wish I could say the same thing.”

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“DID YOU SEE ROMEO’S BACK?” Greer asks as she sits down at the teachers’ lounge table next to me.

“I didn’t,” I say just as the door opens. Gunner and Romeo both filter in, deep in conversation.

My back stiffens and immediate longing falls over me as I take him in. Wearing a pair of Nike athletic pants and long-sleeve T-shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, he looks really delicious. His eyes lift up from the conversation with Gunner, and when he spots me, his brow pulls together.

“Have you two talked at all?” Greer asks while Gunner and Romeo walk to the fridge and retrieve take-out boxes. Looks as though they must have had dinner together last night, because they both have leftovers from the same Chinese restaurant. It irks me that I didn’t even know he was back—or that he was leaving—and that he called Gunner first to have dinner with. Not that I’ve any right to claim otherwise, but I used to be the person he’d call whenever he wanted to go out to dinner.

*That should tell you something right there, you moron.*

“We haven’t spoken,” I mutter softly.

“Maybe today is the day,” Greer says, and before I can ask her what she’s talking about, she raises her hand and calls out, “Romeo, Gunner, over here.”

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“Helping you out.”

“Bringing them over here is not helping me out,” I whisper as they approach.

“Hey,” Greer says. “How was Idaho?”

“Good,” Romeo says, glancing at me quickly and then back at Greer. “Beautiful.”

“So I’ve heard,” Greer says. “Never been, though. Have you been to Idaho, Stella?”

She could not be more obvious, and it only makes my cheeks flush more and more.

“Can’t say that I have,” I answer.

“Interesting. Maybe you could tell her about it,” Greer says as she stands. “I have to ask Gunner something personal, so I’m going to borrow him for a second.” She motions to me and Romeo. “Go ahead, talk amongst yourselves.”

She pulls Gunner to the side, leaving me with Romeo. Really smooth.

Honestly.

Romeo glances down at me.

I look up at him.

And we just stare awkwardly at each other. I miss his face. His soulful, playful eyes. The way his lips feel running across my neck, my jaw. I miss the feel of his five o’clock shadow under my touch and the way he quietly whispers little words of encouragement into my ear. I miss being able to stare into his eyes without feeling the need to say anything. I miss laughing with him, spending time with him, hearing him call me *babe*. I miss his texts, his phone calls, our dinner dates, his mini rants about baseball.

I miss him.

He clears his throat. “Tell Gunner I’ll wait for him outside.”

“Did you have fun?” I practically shout, not wanting him to leave.

He’s partially turning away when he asks, “What?”

“In Idaho. Did you have fun?”

He studies me for a few seconds before saying, “Yeah, it was nice.”

“Cool,” I reply awkwardly. “Glad you had fun.” When he starts to turn away again, I ask, “Did you catch Walker Rockwell’s homerun last night?”

“Nah, haven’t watched a Bobbies game in a few nights. Been busy.”

“Oh,” I reply. “Well, it was a bomb.”

He nods. “Okay.” And then he turns and walks away, taking my heart with him. Whereas before, he carefully held it, it’s now dragging on a string behind him, crashing into everything along the way.

Greer sees Romeo take off and says something to Gunner before joining me. Quietly she asks, “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I answer. “Absolutely nothing.” Actually, that’s not true. It was everything I never wanted to see and experience. Brock has let me go. He’s worked out I’m not worth the wait, that I do come with too much baggage to deal with. That even though he said I was the one he wanted to be with, he can walk away. The gratefulness has gone, and anger has replaced it. And he’s leaving. Leaving me. So, *nothing* didn’t happen. Everything awful did.

My emotions start to take over again.

*Do not cry.*

Not here.

Not now.

*Hold it together, Garcia.*

When I look to the side, Greer is crazily texting on her phone and muttering something under her breath.

“What are you doing?” I ask her.

“Getting the girls together. Emergency book club meeting tonight.”

“Greer, don’t—”

“No.” She points her finger at me. “Just, no. We’re fixing this and we’re fixing it tonight.”



“EVERYONE HAVE THEIR DRINK OF CHOICE?” Greer asks.

We hold up our glasses.

“Snacks have been passed around?”

We all nod.

“Keeks, are you ready to start the meeting?”

Keiko taps her poised pen.

“Then let the meeting begin.” Looking at me, Greer says, “One of our ladies in heat is in need. She thinks she’s not good enough for a man, and we’re here to tell her she is.”

“Romeo is lucky you even looked at him,” Cora says before taking a giant gulp of her drink. “Where does he get off not talking to you? Frankly—”

“I was the one who pushed him away and screwed everything up,” I admit.

“Oh.” Cora takes a second. “Then are we here to get Romeo back?”

Greer nods.

“Well, I can help with that. I can be all about grand gestures, you know, since we read all the romance books.”

“No one reads the books,” I say.

“Speak for yourself. Keiko and I are the only two who truly read them. Isn’t that right, Keeks?”

“They’ve been a positive source of sexual education for me and Kelvin.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “Based on his chilly response today, there’s no way he’d even consider a reconciliation. And he’s moving, so—”

“He’s not,” Lindsay says, pulling all of our attention. “Gunner told me last night that Romeo turned the job down.”

“He did?” I ask, my throat tightening.

“Yeah. He didn’t give a reason. Just said he wasn’t taking it, and that was that.”

Greer claps her hands. “This is fantastic news. This means we have a chance at piecing this all together.”

“What if I’m not ready to piece it all together?”

“Ugh, stop with the bullshit,” Cora says. “We all know you love him. You’ve probably loved him for a while and just never realized it. Stop going around in circles and just go after what you want. We all have issues, we all are far from perfect, but at least we can live our lives being far from perfect with someone who tends to complete us. Look at Arlo, for crying out loud. I never thought he’d ever get married, but then Greer entered our lives and they’re two happy motherfuckers. Love makes you happy, and love with the right person makes you content. Don’t you think it’s time to just sit back, relax, and be content?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Then stop fucking around.” She stabs her finger on the table. “It’s time to stop being that annoying, wishy-washy girl, and go after what you want.”

“You think I’m annoying?” I ask, slightly insulted.

“Uh, yeah. Everyone does.”

I glance around the room and no one looks me in the eyes.

“You guys seriously think I’m annoying?”

Greer sighs. “Not annoying, just—”

“Annoying,” Keiko says while staring down at her paper.

“Keiko, you think that?”

She lifts her gaze up to me and says, “Yes. It’s frustrating watching you fixate on the wrong thing, when you could be concentrating on the right thing. The right thing is your relationship with Romeo. Everyone can observe the way you two actually feel for each other, but you’ve been paying too much time toward the negative aspects in your life, such as

how you've treated people and your selfish tendencies. You apologized, no reason to harp. Forgive and forget. Move on. That's how Kelvin and I got through the *Pirates of the Caribbean* fiasco. Forgive, forget. Move on."

Nothing like your socially awkward friend telling you exactly how it is.

"She's right," Greer says. "Move on." She raises her hand. "All in favor of Stella moving on, raise your hand."

All the girls raise their hands.

"Majority vote wins, which means you must move on. Keeks, make note of the motion."

"Noted."

"It doesn't work that way," I say.

"It does here," Cora says. "You've had your moment. Now we're going to get your man back."

"I don't know."

"Did Romeo ever tell you about the baseball game?" Greer asks.

"His last baseball game?" I ask.

Greer shakes her head. "No, the baseball game he took you and Cora to."

I think back to the games I went to with Romeo. I never went to—oh, in the fancy seats. "What about it?"

"Did he ever explain what the day was supposed to be?" Greer asks.

"Uh, not that I know of. I thought it was just a baseball game. Was it the anniversary of anything?"

Greer shakes her head again and scoots her feet under her as she shifts on the couch. "Romeo has liked you for a while. I mean . . . a while."

Lindsay nods.

"And last school year, he finally got the courage to ask you out on a date."

“He didn’t ask me out on a date,” I say.

“You didn’t think it was a date. He did.”

Oh God.

“But . . . I invited Cora.”

“Exactly,” Greer says.

“Oh, I remember that game. You two were sitting in the front together, talking baseball, making me feel like a third wheel,” Cora says. “And then went back to—oh no.” Her eyes flash to mine and I recall that night.

“Romeo took us back to meet some of the guys, and I ended up kissing a rookie,” I say. “And shortly after that, that’s when he started to act weird with me, and everything began to fall apart until we got to Maui.”

Greer nods. “He wanted to ask you out then and instead has held out. This isn’t a fly-by thing for him, Stella. When he says he wants you, he wants you.”

“Gunner told me that story too,” Lindsay says.

“I can’t believe I didn’t read the signs,” I say as I continue to think of that night. “He was super excited when I said I’d go to the game with him, which I thought was weird since it wasn’t our first time watching a game together. And then when I showed up with Cora, I remember him being angry for a second before we started watching the game. He kept getting me drinks and food. At one point, I caught him staring at me, and there was a moment when he held my hand.” I press my hand to my forehead. “God, I’m an idiot.”

Keiko clucks her tongue. “Or you’re both abhorrent communicators.”

“I second that,” Greer holds her hand up.

“Me too,” Cora says.

Lindsay slowly raises her hand at me and shrugs. “Sorry, but you two are a train wreck.”

“What it comes down to is you both like each other—honestly, I think you both love each other, but you’ve been



friends for so long, you've had trouble crossing the line while trying to preserve what you have just in case one or the other of you doesn't feel the same way."

"That sounds very accurate," Cora adds.

"Which means, you both need to jump together."

"Hear, hear," Keiko says, head buried in her paper.

"And how do I do that?" I ask.

Greer smirks. "The grand gesture."

Cora clutches her drink. "God, I live for grand gestures."

"It has to be big," Lindsay says. "Something that will knock him off his feet."

"Something that means something to him," Greer adds.

"Something that will solidify it for him that you're the only one for him," Cora says.

"A presentation of adoration, which will cement your binding infatuation," Keiko chimes in.

I look around the room, wondering what that grand gesture would be, when it hits me. A large smile spreads across my face and all the girls cheer.

"I think I know what I'm going to do. But I'm going to need your help."

"That's what we're here for," Greer says.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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### ROMEO

“Seriously, great seats, man,” I say as we take a seat after the seventh inning stretch. Arlo came into the PE office this morning and waved three tickets to the game in front of my face and told me they were behind home plate. He wasn’t kidding. I couldn’t say yes fast enough.

This is exactly what I needed.

A night out with my guys.

This past week I went to Idaho to visit Weston University. I toured the campus and the facilities, and spoke to the staff, as well as the athletic director. The campus was beautiful and everyone was nice enough, but something didn’t feel right. That night, I visited my parents and gave them the rundown of my crap of a life. How I thought working at Weston was what I wanted to do, to be at the collegiate level. I was nearly in tears when they talked about my retirement from baseball, and my heart ached when we talked about Stella. And then Mom said something that has stayed with me. “Brock, it’s not that Stella is pushing you away. It’s that you’re not willing to lay down the bat. You may not have been able to say goodbye to professional baseball, but that doesn’t mean you need to keep running until you find what you think is missing. You’ve found it. You love working with Gunner, you love the challenges the kids give you—good and bad—and you love

that, for a while, you were the one Stella relied on. Trusted in. Perhaps if you stop running, you'll realize that you've already found your place—your contentment—and she'll be able to catch up and find that in you too. Trust in you.”

And of course, like all moms, she's right.

As I've looked back over my interactions with Stella, I see that whenever I've felt even a tiny ounce of her rejection, I've run. Avoided. Exploded. Been an asshole. Even though I told her she was worth the wait. *If you stop running, you'll realize you've already found your place.*

I thought the grass was greener on the other side.

It wasn't.

I flew back to Chicago knowing one thing: this was where I belonged. I belonged with those kids, with my players, developing their skills and helping them reach the next level. I belonged with our friends, the ones who have stuck by my side even when I was a dick to them.

And then there's Stella.

Hell, I still don't know how to handle that situation. It's uncomfortable being around her. That much was evident when I ran into her in the teachers' lounge and Greer forced us to speak. I couldn't get out of there fast enough, and not because I didn't want to talk to her, but because I didn't know how to. My mind went blank and conversation dried up. That's never happened to me with Stella. Even when we were fighting, we still found something to fight about, and we fought long and hard. But this new side, this uncomfortable side, I didn't know how to handle it, so I fled.

“It's a good thing the Bobbies are winning,” Gunner says. “Or else I'd be heckling.”

“You've been heckling the entire game,” I say, chuckling again when I think of how he trolled Knox Gentry so bad that he finally turned around and told Gunner to shut the fuck up. With a smile of course. We're former teammates, after all.

“I'd turn it up a notch, really hit them where it hurts.”

Arlo tips his beer back and then asks, “With college secrets?”

“Yeah, is there any other way?”

Arlo chuckles and shakes his head while finishing his beer. “I’m going to the bathroom and then I’ll grab another beer before they stop serving. Anyone else want one?”

“I’m good,” I say.

“I’ll take one,” Gunner says. “And be a good host and grab us some popcorn in a helmet.”

“Hey, if you’re grabbing popcorn, then I’ll take another beer,” I add. “Salt makes me thirsty.”

“Anything else?” Arlo asks in an annoyed tone.

“That’s it, Daddy,” Gunner says, causing Arlo’s eyes to narrow.

“Don’t fucking call me that.” He takes off up the stairs, two at a time.

“He realizes we can just order with the waitstaff here, right?” I ask.

Gunner casually shrugs. “Maybe he likes the human annoyance of standing in a line. The guy is his own person.”

“You’re right about that.”

Gunner finishes his beer as well and says, “You know, I don’t think I’ve said this, but I’m really fucking glad you didn’t take the job in Idaho. I don’t know what I’d do without you, man.”

“It didn’t feel right. For many reasons, but one of them being that I didn’t get to coach with you. It’s one of my favorite things here.”

“That and the teachers’ league, right?” Gunner chuckles.

“Of course. We need to assemble our team, by the way. We’re playing soccer this year and I fear we aren’t going to have a strong team.”

“Why they picked soccer I have no clue. I heard all the schools grumbling about it, and word on the street is they might be changing it to kickball.”

“Really? If that’s the case, we’ll dominate.”

“Easily. Fingers crossed the switch is made, or else it’s going to be a long fucking league of teachers trying to chase each other around on the soccer field.”

I laugh and relax some more, feeling lighter than I have in a while.

“You know things will clear up with Stella, right?”

“Wow, way to take a left turn, man.”

“You were saying I was one of the reasons you didn’t take the job. I’m assuming she’s another reason?”

I groan and say, “And here I thought we were going to make it through the whole game without mentioning her.”

“You thought wrong.” He turns toward me. “Seriously, it’ll get better. I know it will. I mean . . . you still like her, right?”

“Hell, man.” I lift my hat and push my hand through my hair. “I don’t like her, I love her. For some crazy, asinine reason, I love her, and that’s not going to fade.”

“I know how you feel. When you love someone, it’s pretty impossible to shake that love away. It sticks with you, buries inside you, and makes you feel whole.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Give it time. I’m sure it’ll all sort out.”

“You sound confident,” I say.

“I think when you experience love yourself, you know when it’s going to work out. It’ll work out for you two.”

Arlo comes back with popcorn and beer for us and we spend the rest of the game cheering on the Bobbies, shooting the shit, and ignoring everyday life. As the game comes to a close, the Bobbies take the win, and we hang back as the

stadium starts to clear, the announcer in the background telling everyone to drive home safely.

The announcer is interviewing Knox, and when he's done, he walks up to the net behind home plate.

"Good game, man," Gunner says.

He smirks. "Your heckling tells a different story."

Gunner laughs. "How are Emory and the baby?"

"Perfect," Knox says. "Hey, I was hoping you guys would stick around here. I have to get changed, but would love to talk."

"Sure," I say. "Where should we meet you?"

"Stay here. I'll let the ushers know and have them bring some pizza down. We can enjoy the stadium lights and catch up."

"Sounds perfect," I say.

Knox takes off and we remain in our seats, watching the stadium quickly clear out.

"Never really get to see this side of things," I say, waiting for the grounds crew to come out and start tending to the field. "Where's the grounds crew?"

"Not sure," Gunner says, looking around. "Why, do you want to spray down the field?"

"I wouldn't be opposed to it. Remember that time in college Disik made us prep and chalk the field ourselves, because he didn't think we were being respectful enough to the ground we walked on?"

Gunner laughs. "And then Disik caught Carson chalking the lines in just his jockstrap and jersey and we ran for fucking hours after that."

"Mature," Arlo says in his snooty tone while Gunner and I both laugh.

We spend the next half hour reliving our college years. Pizza is brought to us, as well as plates and more beers.

“How much does Knox think we’re going to eat?” I ask, looking at the five pies that have been dropped off.

“Maybe he’s hungry,” Gunner says just as a player decked out in gear walks onto the field.

“Is that a bat boy?” I ask, looking at how short the person is, but as the words fall out of my mouth, I notice the long brown ponytail hanging out the back of the hat. Then she turns toward the field, glove on her hand, ball in the other. She tosses the ball a few times and then makes eye contact with us.

Another player comes out onto the field, this one a touch taller with another ponytail. Then another player, and another. The last player is wearing familiar green glasses. Oh, Jesus.

“Please tell me that’s not who I think it is.”

Arlo and Gunner stay silent as Knox and Carson walk out with some bats, balls, and a pitching net. Still in their uniforms, they set everything up, and then Stella jogs up to the net with a helmet and a bat. Looking nervous, she says, “I think it’s time you take the field again.”

Knox opens the gate that leads to the field, and nods for me to join them.

In total shock, I sit there, unable to comprehend what’s happening.

“Dude, come on, one more thrill on the big stage,” Gunner encourages, as I stare at Stella, stupefied. When I don’t move, Gunner lifts me up from my chair and pushes me toward the entrance to the field.

Carson walks up with one of my old jerseys and slips it over my shoulders as I keep my eyes locked on Stella.

“Uh, maybe we should give them a moment,” Gunner says as he directs everyone toward the mound, providing some privacy.

Standing in front of me, Stella is drowning in my jersey, just like I thought she would be when we made our bet back in Maui. But she looks fucking adorable.

“I know this isn’t school,” she says, her voice shaking, “but I am wearing your jersey.”

“And why is that?” I ask, finding my voice even though it sounds hoarse.

“Because I took the fun out of things.” She steps closer and I can see her hands shake. “I have a few things to say to you, but do you think we could play a little ball first?”

I glance toward our friends, who are all patiently watching us. “Are you pitching?”

“Planned on it,” she says.

Looking her in the eyes, I reach out and adjust her hat. “Then game on, Garcia.”

A smirk crosses her face and together we walk farther out onto the field. Carson, Gunner, and Knox take the outfield. The girls attempt to fill in the infield, and Arlo stands behind the plate in his loafers and jeans. Either he didn’t know what was going on or he had zero intention of playing. Whatever it is, it makes me laugh.

I take a wooden bat in hand, prop the helmet on my head—as I don’t fully trust Stella’s pitching capabilities—and I step into the batter’s box.

Muscle memory takes over. My back leg digs into the dirt. My arms round toward the pitcher’s mound as I lift my shoulder. I tug on my jersey sleeve to give my arm more room to rotate.

“Hope you’re ready, Romero. I’m bringing the heat.”

I tap the bat to my back and then hold it in position as Stella winds up and pitches. The ball sails in at a snail’s pace and then hits the ground before it slowly rolls across the plate.

I laugh out loud. “Really bringing the heat, Garcia.”

“Just warming up.” She shrugs and then stretches her arm as she wisely decides to pitch from in front of the mound instead of on the actual mound this time.

“Oh-kay,” I drag out, getting into position again.



She winds up again and throws the ball. This time, it's at the perfect height. I swing my arms across the strike zone and make contact with the ball, sending it right down the left field line. Lindsay squeals as the ball zooms by her.

“Please don't kill me, I have a son.”

I laugh as I jog toward first and then hit up second when I see that Knox is taking his sweet-ass time getting to the ball.

Unsure of what's happening next, I see Arlo pick up the bat and get into the batter's box.

“Yes, Mr. Turns Me On is up,” Greer shouts. “Show off to me, handsome.”

Not expecting much since I've never seen Arlo play baseball before, I'm impressed when he hits a ball into right center field. I round third and score.

We spend the next half hour trading in and out of positions, cheering each other on while also knocking each other down a notch when needed. Carson and Knox hit left-handed, so they don't necessarily kill the girls with their bats, and Keiko impresses me when she steps up to the pitcher's mound and pitches to Stella, striking her out. From then, Keiko is nominated as the pitcher and we continue to filter in and out.

Joy fills me as I spend the night with my friends, playing a game that I love, on a field that brings me back to some of the best days of my life. However, those days are quickly becoming overshadowed by this night.

“Last up at bat,” Knox calls out. “Bottom of the ninth, Romero. Think you can hit us in?”

I walk up to where Stella is standing by the bats. She hands me the one I've been using and winks. “You got this, Brock.”

Fuck, I love her so much.

I take the bat and get set up in the batter's box, soaking in this moment one last time.

The stadium lights shine above us as the fog starts to settle in, casting a haze over the lit-up field. The grass begins to perspire and the dirt turns one shade darker. My friends are

scattered around the field, cheering me on, and Stella stands behind me, cupping her mouth and letting out a wallop of a chant.

“Let’s go, Romeo,” she says before clapping.

*This* is the send-off I missed. This is the closure I think I’ve been looking for. A closure to an old chapter in my life, enabling me to start a new one.

Holding back tears, I get into position. Keiko winds up. She throws the perfect pitch right down the middle, and just like old times, I power my hands through the strike zone and connect with the ball. It flies off the bat, making the sweetest sound known to man, and speeds toward the outfield. I toss the bat and start running while watching the ball. When I think it’s going to drop, it doesn’t.

It keeps going and going until it barely makes it over the fence.

Carson, Gunner, and Knox toss their gloves in the air and start yelling while running toward the infield. The girls cheer and clap, and I round the bases. When I hit third and see Stella standing by home plate, jumping up and down clapping, tears well, and I realize that coming home means so much more in this moment.

I’m coming home to her, where I belong.

My foot hits home plate just as I’m tackled to the ground by the guys, minus Arlo, who’s holding Greer’s hand and walking toward us. Someone rubs my head, someone else shakes me, and Gunner screams in my ear how much he loves me. The celebration lasts obnoxiously longer than it should. But when they finally pull away, they all part and move back as Stella steps forward.

“Girls, why don’t you start on the pizza that’s probably cold by now? Carson, Knox, and I will retrieve the homerun ball, and Arlo . . . well, go brush off your loafers.”

He flips off Gunner while everyone else laughs and retreats, leaving me with Stella.

She nods toward the dugout and I follow her so we're offered more privacy. When we sit down on the bench, I speak first. "Did you put this all together?"

"I did." She twists her hands together nervously. "I had some serious help, but I wanted to give you something that was taken away from you unfairly." She looks away and takes a deep breath. "God, I'm nervous." She looks me in the eyes and continues, "I also took something away from you unfairly. I took away your decision, your decision on where we stand."

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Yes. I haven't handled our relationship very well. I failed to recognize when you asked me out on a date—"

"They told you about that?"

She nods. "I'm glad they did, because it made me think back to all of our interactions and how foolish I've been. You were right, you've liked me for a long time, and if I'm being honest with myself, I've liked you for a long time too. I've been too scared to cross that line in fear of losing you altogether. But I lost you anyway." She rubs her hands on her thighs, constantly fidgeting. I want to stop her, to hold her hand, but I want to hear what she has to say first before allowing myself to touch her. "I failed to recognize the little touches, the smirks, the nights we spent together and what they all meant."

Her eyes connect with mine, and I get lost in her dewy pupils as they become misty.

"But losing you made me realize how foolish I've been. How moronic I was, and how poorly I've handled everything. And when I heard you were in Idaho, my heart dropped to the ground. I thought I had lost you forever and there was no possibility of ever being able to tell you . . ." She pauses and swallows what seems like a lump. "To tell you that I'm head over heels in love with you, Brock."

The corners of my lips turn up.

"I believe I've loved you for a long time, but I never allowed myself to acknowledge it. I've accepted my stupid

past mistakes, and I'm learning to love myself again, which I knew was necessary to be able to love you more deeply. I know I'm asking a lot, and I know I have a lot of damage to repair, but I love you, Brock, and I want to be with you. I want to be your girl, the one who you come home to, the one you watch the game with, and the one you never let go of." She reaches out and takes my hand. "Please tell me I still have a chance."

I study her and wet my lips, trying to decide how to approach this.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes," she says, her voice tight.

"Why did you do this? Set up tonight?"

Looking confused, she says, "Well, it was a grand gesture."

"But why this?"

She wipes away a stray tear. "Because I thought you needed this closure, this moment. Because I wanted you to have the chance to take me home from a game. Because I knew it was important to you." She speaks with sincerity. "Because this was the first thing that brought us together, this game, I wanted it to be the thing that brought us back together." Another tear falls, and this time, I reach out and I wipe it away. "I'm sorry if—"

"I love you too," I say, stopping her from saying any more. "I've loved you since the first moment you started eating off my plate without asking, and that love has grown over the months into this overwhelming, all-consuming infatuation that I can't shake. No matter how hard I try, or how many stupid things you do or say."

She snort-laughs.

"I love you, Stella, and I'll always love you, because you *are* my girl. There's no changing that."

I slide my hand to her cheek and pull her forward where I press a soft kiss to her lips. She sighs in relief and then climbs

on my lap, straddling my legs.

“Please tell me I didn’t mess everything up.”

I press another kiss to her lips. “Oh, you messed a lot up.” I laugh. “But it’s nothing that’s irreparable.” I shift her hat backward so I have better access to her lips. “I’ll tell you this, though, this time, you will be going home with me.”

She smiles and runs her hands to my cheeks, where she grips me tightly. “I want to go home with you every night.”

“I think that’s something we can work out.”

She leans forward for another kiss, but I stop her. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to tell you, babe—what you did for me tonight, it means more to me than anything. I’m not sure you will ever understand how special it was, but it just reminded me why I fell in love with you.” I smooth my thumb over her cheek. “You get me.” I bring her lips close to mine and whisper, “Thank you. Thank you so fucking much.”

As our lips connect, I can’t help but think how lucky I am. Yes, we’ve had some ups and downs, the downs being heavier than expected, but I know for certain, no matter what comes our way, we’re going to be able to work through it. Together, we’re going to put the past behind us, where it belongs, grow from what we’ve learned, and move forward. Together.

We were made for each other, and that’s never going to change.

## Epilogue

### ROMEO

“Take your pants off.”

I groan and flop on the couch. “No fucking way.”

“You promised me your cock tonight and I take those promises seriously.”

Stella stands over me, wearing a silky, red bridesmaid’s dress, hand on her hip, a serious look in her eyes.

We just spent the entire night eating and dancing our lives away while celebrating the nuptials of her dad and Ashley. It was a small, intimate wedding, no more than thirty people, which included Stella and her sisters, as well as her mom. Luckily, I’d already met one of her sisters prior to the wedding or else I’d have been overwhelmed. They’re very loving and fun people, just like Stella, which meant I kept getting food shoved in my face or pulled out onto the dance floor.

Now, my stomach hurts and my feet ache.

“I promised you that before I was twirled around and stuffed with every variation of tamale.” My hand falls to my stomach, where I’ve already undone my button-up shirt. “My belly aches. Will you rub it?”

“I’ll rub something else if you take off your pants.”

“Babe.” I sit up and lean against the couch, only for her to climb on top of my lap. “Can’t you see that I’m suffering here?”

She shakes her head. “All I see is my hot boyfriend in a suit, the buttons of his shirt undone, looking fine as hell, and an invitation to be fucked . . . like he promised.” Her hands slide up my chest and then rub over my pecs, her fingers toying with my nipples, and despite being exhausted and my stomach hurting, my dick stirs.

“Stella, please don’t make me hard.”

“Never thought I’d hear you say that,” she says as she reaches behind her and unzips her dress, letting it fall to her waist, revealing a strapless, see-through black bra. Her hard nipples poke at the fabric, enticing me even more.

“Hell.” I reach up and rub my thumb over a small nub. “When did you get this?”

“The other day.” She starts to rock on my cock. “When you were out with the boys and you left me all alone. I decided to do some lingerie shopping.”

“Then I should leave you alone more often.”

A month ago, Stella moved into my loft. She brought her shoes, her clothes, her kitchen things, and a plethora of other belongings that made me realize we needed a bigger place. We needed a place that would help us start a family one day. And after a month of finding out that I’m thoroughly attached to this girl, that I’d be proposing at some point because there’s no way in hell anyone else is going to claim her, I decided to go house hunting.

Without her.

Why would I go without her?

Because she doesn’t think we need a house, even though I know she wants one.

Because she won’t spend the money that I know I have for the perfect house.

Because I want to surprise her.

“I’m being serious, Brock,” she says, her hips starting to slide over me. “I want you.”

“And I’m being serious.” I groan. “I don’t feel good.”

“But you’re hard.”

That I am. I’m really fucking hard.

“You’re just going to have to let it wilt away.”

She laughs and shakes her head before getting up and letting the dress completely fall off, revealing a garter belt and matching thong.

“Are you trying to kill me?”

“I’m trying to fuck you.” She takes my hand and pulls me up from the couch. She moves me through the loft and to our bedroom, where she turns around and pushes my clothes off my body. I let her, because even though my stomach is full, God, I want to fuck her.

I want to fuck her every goddamn day.

When she reaches for my briefs, I stay her hands and say, “Hold on, I want to show you something.”

“Is it your penis?”

“Jesus fuck, you’re horny.” I chuckle. I sit her down on the bed and reach into my nightstand to retrieve a folder.

Confused, she asks, “What’s this?” when I hand it over to her.

“Open it.”

“Nudes?” She looks far too excited.

“Nooo,” I drag out. “It has nothing to do with sex. Just open it.”

Capitulating, she opens the folder and pauses. Her eyes find mine and then she looks back at the piece of paper. “What is this?”

“A house.”



“Yes, I see that. This is the house that’s two doors down from Arlo and Greer, the one with the big oak tree in the front yard that I said would be the perfect tree for a swing.”

“It is.”

“Why are you showing me this?”

“I’m showing you this because I bought it for us.”

“Stop, are you serious?”

“Dead serious, babe.”

“You bought us a house?”

I nod. “Yeah, I bought us a house.” I move her hair behind her ear. “I’m in this for the long run. I want marriage with you, children, pets. I want us to start a life together, not here in this loft that’s meant for someone who’s single. I want to start a life with you in a house that’s warm, inviting . . . and has plenty of room for all of your things.”

She laughs and then sets the folder down, only to throw her body at mine. I roll back onto the mattress and laugh as I move her so I’m the one on top. Her hand cups my cheek. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Just investing in us, babe. The best investment I can think of.”

“You can afford it?”

I roll my eyes. “Stella, I could afford ten of those houses, plus some.”

Her cheeks blush. “So, you bought us a house.”

“I bought us a house.”

“Do you know what this means?”

“What?” I ask, moving my lips to hers.

“That I’m madly in love with you, and you’re going to have to get over your aching belly, because I don’t need to fuck you tonight, I need to make love to you.”

“Now, that I can get on board with, because I’m madly in love with you too. Always you, Stella. Always you.”

Keep reading for a link to an EXTENDED EPILOGUE about Stella and Romeo and for an excerpt from Carson's story, **The Dugout.**

And if you haven't already read Greer and Arlo's story, See Me After Class, click [HERE](#)

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## Excerpt - The Dugout

### Prologue

CARSON

Everyone knows me as the easygoing, fun-loving guy without a care in the world. You know who I'm talking about, right?

The guy who cheers when a couple kisses, who says stupid shit like YIPPEE when he's excited, the guy who has no shame in shimmying his bare, bright white ass to his friends just to make them laugh.

I'm also the guy who is magically smart, can lead an entire bar to harmoniously sing any Taylor Swift song, lucks out in everything he does, and has impeccable taste in clothing—despite wearing a baseball hoodie every Monday. A dude must make himself feel better when the Monday blues hit and a hoodie does just that.

But have you guessed it? Do you see where this is going?

I'm not that guy anymore.

Nope.

Easygoing and fun-loving? Not anymore. I spit venom at whoever dares to be in my presence. You know the old man who throws endless piles of shoes at the street youths as they walk by? That's me, minus the incontinence problem and mothball smell.

My days of singing Taylor Swift with a crowd are over. Instead—if I even make it to a bar—I bury myself in a corner

and sneer. Oh boy, do I fucking sneer. I sneer at anything and anyone that even *attempts* to look at my face.

That impeccable fashion sense I was boasting about? Gone. I think I've been wearing the same pair of athletic shorts for a month—not really—but maybe it's a little true.

And the guy who lucks out in everything he does? Ha, my luck was cut short at the beginning of the season thanks to the square ass, dirty dick named Kirk Babcock, also known as Kirk BADcock by my team.

What did this Badcock do, you ask?

If you're thinking he poked me with said bad cock, you need to get your mind out of the gutter.

What he did was even worse than winging his willy around on the baseball field.

So bad that you might need to brace yourself ...

**\*\*FLAILS ARMS\*\***

He committed a sin against all baseball etiquette.

The cardinal sin.

The biggest sin of all sins.

Are you sitting? I don't want you to faint from the blasphemy I'm about to share.

Deep breaths, everyone ...

He ... damn it, he slid late ... at practice.

Gasp, I know.

I told you it was bad ... my balls are shriveling up into my taint just thinking about it.

The dumbass freshman, who had too much juice in his junk, decided to book it to second during a practice game while Holt and I were fleshing out a double play. The dingleberry slid into second base two seconds too late.

Why is this a problem?

For those of you who might not be in the know—don't worry, I won't hold it against you—back in 2016, the gods of baseball developed a new rule; all players sliding into second must hit the ground first before touching the bag to avoid injuring the opposing players.

Layman's terms: don't be a dickhead and hurt people.

Apparently, Badcock didn't get that memo, because the little turd nugget charged second base like an out-of-control steam train ... just as I slid my foot across the base for the out. His dirty slide took my leg out, twisting me in the process, and tossed me to the ground.

As I fell, I heard a resounding snap that would make any grown-ass man throw up into his lap, followed by an immense amount of pain shooting up the back of my leg.

The motherfucker—stenchy bad cock—ruptured my Achilles tendon.

Like Achilles himself, I buckled to the ground and wallowed in pain while holding my leg, as if I let go, it would detach from my body and float right on up to heaven where it belongs for the many good years it gave me.

Badcock proceeded to fling his helmet off his head, get in my face, and apologize profusely, making up some excuse about tripping over his own damn feet.

Yeah, okay, fart breath.

I'd like to see the tape for a full review, because I'm questioning the shit out of that statement. Tripped, my left nut.

If I was a freshman and got hurt, I wouldn't want to rip the skin off Badcock's scrotum, maybe just give him a swift lodge of my foot up his ass. But ripping scrotum skin, nah.

But guess what? I'm not a goddamn freshman.

I'm a fucking junior, and if you know anything about baseball, you know being a junior in college is one of the most important times in a guy's life.

Because that's the year you're eligible to be drafted.

DRAFTED.

Brentwood University is known as a breeding ground for exceptional baseball players; it's where the scouts come to find their next top prospects. If you want to play professional baseball, you either choose to go into the draft right after high school or be recruited by Brentwood. I chose an education so I had a possible career to fall back on in case something happened to me ... like rupturing my Achilles tendon.

Can you guess where this is going?

Strike up the violins, because a sob story is coming your way.

I was ushered off the field and straight to the state-of-the-art training room where, after an excruciating physical exam, I had an ultrasound. It was then confirmed I'd be out of commission for the season. I underwent surgery, had the stupid thing stitched back together—let's take a moment to be physically ill over the thought of that—and then put through an extensive rehab, missing my chance to be drafted.

You read that right, I was not drafted. My best friends were ... I was not.

Because no one wants an injured player, even if he has tons of promise.

Even if he was the best second baseman in the country.

Even if he was supposed to be drafted in the first round.

Not one single team wanted to take the gamble to see if I could make a full recovery.

Isn't that just peachy?

So needless to say, Kirk BADcock stays as far away from me as possible.

As for me, I'd like to say I'm not a bitter man with a chip on his shoulder, but that would be a massive lie.

I have the biggest fucking chip on my shoulder, so big that I named him Aloysius and I high-five him every morning,

agreeing that we're going to try to make at least one person's life miserable that day.

My suggestion, if you see me around campus? Steer clear, run away, duck and hide, because I'm a polluted motherfucker with an equally rotten Aloysius on my shoulder ready to raise hell in your life.

Carson Stone is out for vengeance thanks to one moronic bad cock.

## Chapter One

### MILLY

"Fuck."

Bat and helmet are tossed to the ground as the opposing team jogs off the field.

Yikes, that can't be a reaction the coaching staff looks for from their players.

"Stone, get your ass in the dugout," Coach Disik yells across the field, hands propped at his hips, a look to kill plastered on his face. Yup, doesn't seem like they like that reaction at all.

"Oooo," Jerry, one of my best friends, says next to me. "Someone's in trouble."

"Yeah, Disik is not going to like that," Shane, my other best friend adds, just as he stuffs a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

"Stone is having one shitty season." Jerry leans over and grabs a scoop of popcorn for himself but instead of unhinging his jaw and taking down a fistful of food like Shane, he pops in one piece at a time like a civilized human being.

"It's only the start of the season," I say, feeling bad for the guy. Once the lead-off hitter who led the country in hits, steals, and RBIs as well as fielding percentage, he's fallen from grace after his injury last year and can't seem to get it together his senior year.

Muffled yelling springs from the dugout, but since we're sitting directly behind it, we can't quite hear or see what's going on, but once Brentwood takes the field and Carson is not standing at second, we understand completely.

"Damn, Disik is heartless. Took out Stone and replaced him with Babcock. That's just savage."

I wince, watching the sophomore, who took Carson out at practice, field some grounders from Romeo at first base.

Rumor on campus is Babcock was out to get Carson from the beginning, and he took the one chance he had to take out the All-American second baseman and send him to the DL. And the infamous dirty slide, which has been heard around Chicago, was not an accident, but intentional.

Babcock was jealous of Carson's talent and stats, wanted the limelight, wanted everything Carson had. Some conspiracy theorists even go as far to say that Babcock reviewed tapes for hours on the way Carson would sweep across second base when turning so he knew exactly where to strike.

At least, that's the word on the street.

You know how people love to gossip about tragedy.

I don't believe a word of it.

I've seen Kirk around campus; he's a klutz and doesn't seem to have a mean bone in his body. If you want to know the truth, I think he was an idiot freshman trying to prove his place on the team and got overzealous, taking out the wrong person.

That's me just giving the guy the benefit of the doubt.

"I don't blame Disik. Look how Stone's been playing, he deserves to be benched."

I pick up my cup from my drink holder and suck down a large gulp of Sprite before saying, "Carson's been playing a great second base. There hasn't been any issues there; it's his bat that's suffering."

"And a player without a bat is a nobody," Shane says, as popcorn flies out of his mouth while he speaks.



It's true. You can be the best infielder or outfielder in the world, but if you're not swinging the bat, you're worthless. The only player on the team who can get away with a .200 batting average is a pitcher, not a former All-American second baseman.

"You should give him batting advice," Jerry says, nudging my shoulder.

"Yeah, okay," I scoff. "Let me just step into the dugout and offer my help. I'm sure they'll welcome me with open arms." I roll my eyes. "They have the best college baseball coaching staff in the country, so the last thing they need is a kinesiology major butting her head into the dugout, offering suggestions."

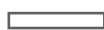
"From the looks of it, Carson Stone should take any help he can get." Jerry brushes off his hands. "Come on, we have to get to the field."

I check my watch. Crap, we're going to be late if we don't start moving.

Standing together, we vacate our seats and head out to the parking lot where Shane's blue Corolla is parked in a money spot. The Brentwood baseball stadium is enormous, has a rooftop for rainy days, and costs far too much money to even think about. If I ever wonder where my tuition is going, I only have to look at the seats I was just sitting in.

"Google Maps says we're going to get there a minute early, so we better book it," Jerry says. "Do your best work, Shane."

Two hands on the steering wheel and a determined look in his eyes, Shane revs the engine to his sensible sedan and says, "Don't worry, I'll get us to the church on time."



Five minutes late doesn't look good to parents who are trusting three college students to coach their eight-year-olds.

Shane blamed it on the red lights, but Jerry and I know the truth; he drives like an old man who's lost his glasses. Head

perched forward, chin nearly kissing the steering wheel, and hands constantly on ten and two, he drove the streets like the wheels were trying to trudge through quicksand.

It will be the last time we let Shane be in charge of driving.

“Hustle up,” Jerry calls out as the kids run from foul pole to foul pole and then back to home plate.

Turning to my co-coaches, I say, “So I’m working with the boys on the tee. Shane, you’re doing soft toss into the net; Jerry, you’re pitching from behind the screen.”

Jerry stretches his arm over his head. “Yup, I’m ready to strike some suckers out.” A former pitcher in high school, Jerry has a hard time toning it down sometimes when pitching to the kids. He calls it his turbo arm, but I call it his death arm.

Reinstating the rules, I place my hand on his shoulder and say, “Remember, they are eight, so turbo arm needs to stay on lockdown. We don’t need parents coming at us with a lawsuit because you can’t control yourself.”

“I dare them to sue me. I’ll flash them my student loan debt and say good luck.”

Sighing, I reply, “Please take it easy on them. We need to instill confidence in these kids, not break them down into emotional messes.”

“Breaking them down is how you build them back up.” Jerry winks at me.

“I’m serious.”

He rolls his eyes. “I know. Don’t worry, I won’t mow them down with my pitches, but I’m also not going to lob them in. These kids need to learn how to hit.”

Shane pats Jerry on the back. “That’s why we recruited Milly. If she can’t get these kids to hit, no one can.”

We break into our different sections, and I wait over by the tee with a bucket of balls and my practice bat so I can demonstrate techniques while teaching the kids at the same time. Finishing up their laps, I take in the bright blue sky and

the cool breeze that picks up the freshly cut grass scent around us. Baseball season, my favorite season of all.

Growing up with three older brothers and a dad obsessed with baseball, I had no choice in the matter of what sport I liked to watch. They started me at a young age, taking me to every Chicago Bobcat game my parents could afford, decking me out in Bobcat gear, and sticking me in front of the TV whenever the game was on, listening to them analyze every swing, every pitch, and every catch.

I became addicted.

I spent my weekends driving from ballpark to ballpark with my parents, watching my brothers play, offering them my advice and encouragement. I soon became my brothers' good luck charm and they started to fight over whose game I attended during the season. My parents got so sick of the bickering they finally wrote out a schedule of what games I attended based on importance.

I have what seems like hundreds of scorebooks stacked in my parents' attic from watching my brothers play. Scrapbooks full of newspaper clippings, of pictures of them on the field, of their stats that I would print out and share with them. I was their own personal historian and coach when it came to their baseball careers. They all went to college on full-ride scholarships for baseball, but only one attended Brentwood, my oldest brother, Cory. He plays for the Baltimore Storm now, six years deep in a contract, playing first base, and absolutely killing it this season so far.

Rian and Sean, my other brothers, own a Division One training facility outside Chicago where they train athletes looking to move on to Division One programs. They focus on agility and power, working in heavy weightlifting and quick cardiovascular spurts to drive up the heart rate. Last year, they were named the best gym in the area and are now expanding to a second location. I couldn't be prouder, and I also like to think I had a little piece in their success. Being hardcore baseball fans has benefitted all of us in some way over the years.

“Coach Milly, do I have to wear my batting gloves?” Dennis, the runt of the team, asks as he stumbles over to me, pants too big, and helmet covering his eyes.

I catch him right before he faceplants into the grass and squat to his level so I can help him with his helmet and pants.

“You don’t have to wear them if you don’t want to, Dennis.”

He holds up a hand where one of the gloves is on backward. The fingers are barely filled by his small hands, and the fingertips of the glove look like deflated balloons.

*Oh Dennis.*

“Were these your brother’s gloves?” He nods. “Well, they seem a little big, and they might get in the way rather than help you.”

“I thought so.” He takes the glove off and then smiles a toothless grin at me. “I can put them in my back pocket like the big leaguers. Like an accessory.”

“Do you mean accessory?”

“Yeah, like my mom has necklaces. I have batting gloves.” He turns around in a short circle for a moment, trying to reach his back pocket and when he does, he shoves the gloves inside, making his little butt very large on one side. “There. How do I look, Coach?”

I smile kindly at him. “Like a ballplayer.”

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