



My Silver Fox

FAKE FIANCE

CAMI CALVIN

My Silver Fox Fake Fiancé

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Chapter One

Scott

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

T At least, that's what I tell myself to ease the lingering pain.

The most frustrating thing?

I should have been over it a long time ago.

Maybe it was being back in the club. Maybe it was the lights and music, the smell of alcohol and clashing perfumes, or maybe it was the servers bustling about. Everything about being in my new club in Marathon, Florida reminded me of *her*.

But the cruel irony of being reminded of her was that it went hand in hand with remembering how she left me in New Orleans.

Without so much as a goodbye.

Every time I saw a waitress with dark hair, I was reminded of that summer years ago.

Before... everything.

But, as always, I forced myself to shake off those thoughts and focus on the moment. What I was doing right now. What I was dealing with here.

It was the first time I was physically inside this club, looking it over and getting a feel for the vibe.

“She’s something, isn’t she?”

A voice broke into my thoughts, and I turned to see my bar manager, Les, grinning at me.

“It was a massive investment risk buying this place sight unseen, so I’m more than a little relieved with how nice of a venue this is.”

“It’s one of the most popular in Marathon,” Les replied. “We were all very disappointed when the previous owner had to sell.”

He had a look of genuine disappointment on his face, but he quickly corrected himself as though he was afraid that he had offended me.

“Of course, we were all very happy to hear we had a new buyer so quickly. And even more grateful you didn’t change over the staff, either. We have a pretty fast turnover among the waitresses, but there are many other employees here, such as myself, who have worked here for years,” he said.

I nodded. Truth be told, I was still fresh out of the Navy. Fresh for me, anyway. It had been just over a year, and I’d just now gotten back into having an active role in the clubs. I owned all the clubs my father had left me when he’d passed away, and since his passing, I’d added more than half a dozen more to the list.

“I have a strong appreciation for a team that knows how to govern themselves,” I told him. “I like knowing I can leave my

clubs unsupervised for a period of time if needed, and they're not going to fall apart."

"Of course," Les said with a nod. "And I can assure you right now I could run this place with my eyes closed and one hand tied behind my back."

I smiled at his joke. "I don't think I'm going to ask that of you. But there are a few things I would like to go over, should you have the chance. Not right now, of course, I have a list of other things I have to get done. But I'd like to go over some paperwork and make sure we're on the same page moving forward."

"Just say when, and I'll be there," Les agreed. "I'm here six days out of the week."

"That can be the first change if needed," I offered. "Should you want to have a full weekend?"

He shook his head. "Thank you, but I like working, and I love it here. Good people, good atmosphere. Good ownership."

He reached out and patted me on the arm as he spoke, and I nodded again, though my face remained as stoic as always. I was satisfied with the bar area, which, at two-thirty in the afternoon, was filled with tourists. The bar was fully lined with customers, and their conversation was loud and boisterous, which was exactly what I wanted to hear.

The dining area was closed for the moment.

I changed things up since arriving in Marathon the week before. The first thing I wanted to do was to close the entire dining room at two so the staff would have the time to clean up the area and have it set up for dinner.

“Come with me,” I told him. “You are the manager of the dining hall too, yes?”

“I am,” he said. “Hans! Mind the bar for me while I step away!”

One of the other men who had been behind the bar stepped forward, and Les tossed the towel he had draped over his shoulder into a bucket before following me to the dining section.

“It’s strange to have it so quiet this time of the afternoon,” Les commented.

“It’s much better for business to close for a few hours to prepare for dinner,” I replied. “Otherwise, you wind up with a mixed shift, and there are few things I find more amateur than having a mixed shift.”

“A mixed shift?” Les asked me with raised eyebrows. He clearly didn’t know what I meant, and I fought to remain patient with him as I briefly explained.

“If you start serving dinner at five but continue to serve lunch until four-fifty-nine, then come five-twenty, you’re going to have a dining room full of people eating lunch and dinner at the same time. How does that look for the people who came in around four-thirty? How does it look for the

people who came in right after five and saw what was on the lunch menu?”

“Fair point,” Les said. “But I would suggest to anyone who was annoyed with the menu change that they come in at a different time the next day.”

“But suppose they are passing through?” I pressed. “Think about it, Les. A lot of the people who came through my Bourbon Street place were on vacation. There was a very good chance anyone who came through was only going to be there for that particular meal. Same here in Marathon.”

Les nodded as though he understood, but I sensed he wasn't grasping the significance of what I was trying to say.

“Do you see the problem?” I asked.

He started to nod once more, but then gave up and shook his head.

“I don't ever want a customer to hear we don't have something they would like off the menu. It's one of the things I pride myself on and something I have no intention of changing. When it's lunchtime, you don't see the dinner menus. When it's dinner time, you don't see the lunch menus. You have the menus set out that are backed with the ingredients in the kitchen, and that's it,” I explained.

“I see,” Les said. “So, you're clearing the dining room to ensure everyone is served the same options, yes?”

“Exactly,” I told him. “This isn't something you run into over at the bar, which is why I'm not worried about closing

that down this time of the day. But on this side, I would like to make sure we have the chance to not only clean up the dining hall and give the kitchen time to prepare for dinner, but I want to ensure there aren't any lingering guests in here who came in late and didn't have the time to finish before the next course is available."

"I have to admit, that is an excellent move professionally. Our previous owner was worried if he were to close at all during normal business hours, that he'd miss out on customers."

"I don't give a damn if the previous owner was taking guests to the moon," I informed him. "What I care about is that the customers who come through now know what to expect. It's also going to save the wait staff the headache of having to explain to anyone that they came in just three minutes too late to have the lunch menu."

"I guess I've never thought about it that way before," Les said. "But what about the wait staff we have working here during the afternoon?"

"What about them?" I asked.

"What are they going to do with themselves?" Les elaborated. "It's not going to take six servers to handle the cleaning and resetting the tables for dinner. And I'm sure you're already aware that the wait staff doesn't have much to do in the kitchen. We are very efficient when dealing with such things."

“That’s one of the many things you and I are going to go over when we sit down and go through the paperwork that I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. I have often been the one in charge of scheduling, but I’m not sure I want to have that kind of involvement now that I’m easing back into this. I do, however, need to know who we have working here and what hours they normally work. There’s still the chance I’m going to let a few people go before all is said and done.”

“Understood.” Les nodded.

He looked nervous, so I smirked.

“Of course, your position is safe so long as you keep maintaining what you’ve been doing. So far, you have been keeping up with the changes in the most satisfactory manner, and I want to see that continue. I don’t see a reason to change what you’re doing or your level of management in the club so long as you can maintain both. I would rather not have to bring in another manager if I can help it.”

“Of course,” he said quickly. “I’ll be able to handle it. I’ve been working here for ten years, and there has not been a thing that’s happened that I can’t deal with. This is new, but I am willing to learn, and I know which staff members are also able to keep up with the change.”

“Excellent,” I said. “I do believe that’s all I need from you right now, so you can head back to the bar or whatever it is you do with yourself this time of the afternoon. I have work to do in the office, so if you need anything before you leave, let me know.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Les said with his wide smile. He lingered for a moment as though there was something he wanted to bring up, but if there was, he changed his mind without telling me what it was before he headed back to the bar.

I was glad as I was not really in the mood to deal with anything the general manager of the club would bring up at the moment. There weren't a lot of things I intended to change about the club, but the few things I did intend to change would be big changes for the people who had been working here.

I had little patience to retrain staff, and I hoped I wasn't going to have to worry about dealing with incompetency. From what Les said, however, it seemed the staff would be able to adapt easily enough to new ways of operating.

Sounds drifted into the dining room from the kitchen, but I decided to head to my office instead of going in there. I figured I'd deal with the list of things that were waiting for me in there before dealing with the changes I wanted to make to the menu. The reviews for the club were high enough to assure me the food was good, and that was fine with me for now.

As I headed into the hall toward my office, the front door of the club opened and then closed. I didn't pay much attention to it until I turned to step into my office. It was then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a familiar flash of dark curls and I froze.

I was used to having moments of shock and assuming a waitress was someone she wasn't, but there was something

about this one that really caught my attention. There was something so familiar about her I couldn't ignore it.

That had to be... could it be?

She was the perfect height – about a foot shorter than me. I remembered this perfectly as the top of her head would lie directly under my chin when I held her. She had shiny, jet-black hair that was long and thick, the bronze-colored skin I always thought appeared to be glowing under the lights of the club – or really anywhere we went, for that matter.

I couldn't see her eyes, but I didn't need to see those bright green eyes that reminded me of summer grass to know, without a doubt, the woman I had just glimpsed was the woman I had been dreaming about for the past couple of years.

It was—it was *her*. The only woman who had ever broken my heart.

Chapter Two

Lenny

It wasn't my intention to ever take a job working in a club again. Not after leaving my last job working in an establishment like that.

Not that I hated the job. It was the memories that got to me.

It was difficult reliving the things that went through my mind every time I stepped inside a club.

It didn't matter if I was in New Orleans, New York, California, or Florida. Every club had the same basic qualities, and those qualities reminded me of that summer of endless passion. The summer I had fallen in love with my boss and had acted on those feelings.

But life had different plans.

This time, life's direction came in the form of my best friend and college cohort, Hannah DiSalva.

We had grown extremely close in the past couple of years at Duke University, and I had to admit, I had dreaded what would happen when we were out of grad school. I'd built my life around going to school and earning my degree, fantasizing about what life would be like after I graduated and went back out into the real world to get a job.

But it seemed like grad school flew by faster than any of my other years in school.

Now, faced with the overwhelming truth I was out of school and had to start my real life, I wasn't sure what to do with myself.

It was Hannah who had come to me the month before, her eyes bright with excitement, her mouth in the wide smile she so often had.

“Why do you look like the cat who swallowed the canary?” I asked, looking up from my magazine.

She flipped a travel catalog in front of me.

“What's this?” I asked.

“A catalog,” she replied with a grin.

“Well, I see that!” I laughed. “I mean, what are you doing with it, and what am I supposed to gather from you dropping it on me like this?”

“Look at the page,” she directed.

“Marathon, Florida?” I read. “What's in Marathon?”

“Hot guys, beaches, relaxation, you name it,” Hannah replied with her grin widening. “And you know what? We're going.”

“Hannah,” I said. “You know I don't have the money for a vacation right now!”

“Who said anything about a vacation?” she asked. “We're going to live there.”

“Live there!” I cried.

“Yep.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You just plopped a vacation catalog in front of me and told me we are going to live in one of the featured locations. Sometimes I’m not sure if you’re even aware of the things that come out of your mouth.”

It wasn’t like this was a completely new idea. She and I had often talked about doing something crazy together right out of school before settling down in life. What that crazy thing would be wasn’t fully decided, but it wasn’t entirely surprising to me that she had come up with moving to a vacation destination.

“I’m more than aware,” she said. “And that’s why I came to tell you the good news.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” I told her.

“Come on!” she said with a laugh. “Think about it. We are on the verge of getting out of grad school, and then what? We just go home to the same places we grew up and flaunt our newfound pieces of paper that tell the world we should be taken seriously? I don’t think so.”

“So, to avoid doing that, you want me to go to Marathon?” I asked.

“Why not?” she asked. “You make it sound like I’m crazy when I’m pretty sure you’re the one who isn’t properly connecting the dots here. Do you really want to hop into real life, both feet, headfirst, all of those things? I don’t. I mean,

don't get me wrong, I know everyone has to grow up, but I'm not seeing why we can't move down to Marathon for a while and see how we like it."

"See how we like it as in plan on staying?" I asked.

"If the shoe fits," she said with a grin. "Think about it. People need therapy all over the world, and even though it's a huge destination location, you can still set down roots there. Or anywhere in the Florida Keys, really."

"I'm not so sure about that one," I said.

"You think they have it all figured out down there?"

"No," I giggled. "I'm not sure I have what it takes to just move down there and open my practice. You know young therapists tend to have to work their way up from the bottom."

"Sure, just like anyone," she said. "I'm going to have to start from the bottom and work my way up, too. I'm just saying, it sounds like a real adventure to me, and I feel like this is really our last chance to do something like this."

"We're graduating," I told her. "Not dying."

"No, but once we've settled into our lives, here come the men, then the babies, then the houses, then all the other things. Your career and your family are going to take all your time, and by the time you have the chance to save up for a vacation, you're not going to want to go somewhere adult like this. You'll want to go to Disney World or something."

"Don't hate on Disney World!" I laughed.

She gave me a look, and I laughed again. “Okay, okay, I’ll be serious. I’m just saying. I don’t know. For as amazing as it sounds, I’m not sure I would have enough clients down there to be able to keep a roof over my head. Places down there have got to be expensive, right? I’m not living in a vacation home.”

“Duh, we’re not going to be able to afford that, even if Pete is coming.”

“Wait, what?” I cried. “What do you mean ‘Pete’s coming’?”

“Okay, don’t freak out,” she said.

“How do you expect me not to freak out?” I asked. “You know I can’t stand that guy.”

“I know, and that’s the beauty of it. You don’t have to. Marathon isn’t huge, but it’s not like it’s tiny, either. Just because Pete’s going to be heading in that direction doesn’t mean you can’t.”

“But is he going down there for any reason in particular?” I asked. “Did you made mention that you and I are going to be moving there?”

“Well, I was pretty sure you were going to say yes when I told you about this,” she retorted.

“So, you went ahead and said so in front of him, and now he’s going, too?” I rolled my eyes. “Fuck, you have got to get your shit together, girl.”

“It’s together,” she said. “Together to the point, I thought you and I could get a place together, figure out the next steps in our lives, and have a good time at the same time. It’s not the end of the world if we go down there and it’s not what we want. We can always change our minds.”

“So, what’s the big deal then if we happen to go out into the real world and then decide that we want to give Marathon a shot?” I ask.

“Because you know that’s not how it works,” she replied, her tone dry. “You don’t go out and try to fit into the real world, then all of a sudden pull back and decide you’re going to go out and live in some beautiful place like Marathon without the whole world deciding that you’re being irresponsible or something.”

“That’s fair,” I admitted.

She did have a point.

If we were going to make this move, we would have to do it right out of school rather than going home or to anywhere else and trying to make our way in the world. If we put this off, it wouldn’t happen.

“How far have you thought this through?” I asked. “If we’re not living in a vacation home and just a regular old apartment, how are we going to pay for it? And I don’t know about you, but I’ve not really got the money for a deposit just lying around, either.”

“My parents already said they would give me a deposit on my first apartment,” she said. “I haven’t told them where that’s going to be, but they didn’t put any stipulations on it, either. All you have to do is sign as a temporary guest, and they’ve got the rest.”

I paused. There was a lot of appeal to that. Not to mention this was the very thing we had been talking about doing for months now. And with her parents taking care of the deposit, that meant it was a place practically being handed over to me with no strings attached.

“Alright, fine,” I said.

“Really?” she gasped.

“What do we have to lose?” I laughed. “I mean, I can’t say I’m not going to be mean to Pete, but whatever.”

“He’s asking for it anyway,” she laughed as she hugged me. “This is going to be great! I can’t wait!”

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And just like that, we moved to Marathon, Florida.

I had to admit, the few weeks it had taken us to find an apartment and move to Marathon were pretty much a blur for me. There was a large part of me that didn’t even believe it was real until we were actually here, and even then, it took me a few more days before it finally sank in that this was my home now.

I had to have a source of income, and finding an entry-level job in the therapeutic field was just as daunting as I suspected

it would be.

So, I took a job at the local club. From what I read online, it was a hopping place, popular with tourists coming through and looking to hire wait staff. God knew I had plenty of experience doing that, so while it was difficult for me to get back into the flow of working in a club, I forced myself to go through with an interview and subsequently take the job when it was offered.

I learned as I filled out the paperwork that the venue had recently transferred owners, but that didn't bother me. I was a new hire, so I figured I'd just learn things the new way if any changes were being made to the system. I was easygoing, and all I really wanted to do was show up, get the job done, and go back home to enjoy the sunny Florida paradise I was living in.

Everything was practically perfect down in Marathon, I had to admit.

The only real thorn in my side was Pete.

Sure enough, he had insisted on traveling down to the same island that Hannah and I moved to. I did my best to avoid him, but living on an island in the Florida Keys, I could only do so much.

So, when I was heading into work for my shift and felt someone putting their hand on my arm, I whirled around, assuming it was Pete. He didn't work at the club, but that didn't mean he wasn't there at the bar.

I had long rehearsed the tongue lashing I would give him, and the words were about ready to come flying out of my mouth when my jaw went slack.

My eyes met with the same dark brown eyes I had gazed into for hours on end. Those eyes would forever remind me of hickory, and that was the first thing I thought about when I saw them. There was the same thick, salt-and-pepper black hair that I always loved to run my hands through.

It was the same chiseled jawline, the same tall, lean, yet muscular physique. Tattoos covered his strong arms, disappearing under his shirt though I knew there were more lying beneath that taunt fabric. And he was tall. The perfect height to wrap me up in his arms and let me rest my head against his chest. My ear would sit right over his heart, and I would listen to it beating as he rested his chin right on top of my head.

My mind immediately went blank with the shock of it all.

It was the man I had practically ghosted years before. The one I hadn't been able to get off my mind ever since. The one who was the reason I hadn't ever gotten serious with anyone else in grad school.

Scott Brouhard was staring right back at me.

And he too looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

Chapter Three

Scott

“Is it really you?”

The words finally came out of my mouth. They'd been running through my mind on repeat since I saw her and kept running on a loop all the way up to the point I reached out and touched her arm.

It was almost like a moment taken right out of a movie. The moment I touched her she whirled around, and at the same time, one of the staff members turned on the music out in the dining room. I knew that was a matter of timing for the next shift, but it didn't make the moment any less magical.

After all, when she turned and looked into my eyes, her eyes just as emerald green as I remembered them, her hair a rich, curly black, her nose turned up in the cutest way I had ever seen, there was no doubt in my mind that this was really her.

Lenny Landry, the one who got away, as I so often thought.

Or, more accurately, the one who ran away.

“Scott?” she breathed. Though she phrased my name as a question, I could tell by the recognition in her eyes that she knew it was me from the moment our eyes met.

Immediately, I'm carried back to years ago.

The nights she and I spent together, making crazy love in my office. Her sitting on the edge of the desk, her being bent over the desk. Her pushed up against the wall as I pumped

myself into her again and again. The way she would arch her back and cry out when she came, the way she would moan and scream my name.

It was as though all the things I had fought to keep locked away came rushing forth, flooding my mind even more than they had over the past two years.

“It’s me,” she managed, her voice still little more than a whisper. Though she’d maintained eye contact with me the entire time, I felt her eyes searching my face. She’d said my name, but I felt she doubted her senses. Perhaps she was dreaming. Perhaps I was dreaming. It had been quite some time since I had been to a club that reminded me so much of the one I had up in New Orleans, but there was still no denying the fact she was right here in front of me.

“I have so many questions,” I said at last. “I almost can’t even believe it’s you standing here with me right now. What are the odds?”

She spoke again, but her words were drowned out by the sound of the music pounding over the speakers, along with the way my ears were ringing from the shock of the moment. I wanted to pinch myself on the arm despite the fact my hand was still touching her bare skin.

I felt her warmth, the same warm skin I had been able to explore in so much more detail before now. The same skin I had come to know and loved deeply. I could almost say I had worshipped her body at the time.

The one and only woman who had ever made me break my singular rule of not sleeping with an employee.

I couldn't hear what she was saying, and it was impossible for me to read the look on her face. The shock was still there, along with something I could only describe as nerves. But, along with both emotions that were etched on her features, there was the same warm smile I had grown to love.

It wasn't fully on display, but I felt if she was willing to trust her senses and realize once and for all it really was me, then she would give in and give me that beautiful grin.

“Come on,” I told her, pulling her arm. “Let's go where we can talk.”

I didn't know if she could hear me, but her mouth moved in response, and she did come with me as we walked out of the dining room and into the hallway I'd been in moments before. It felt like time had stopped with Lenny here. Like a little bit of my past—really the only part of my past I yearned for—just walked back into my life, and I had no idea what to make of it.

We walked through the hall, but instead of going straight into the bar, I pulled her to the side, into my office with me. I kept the door open despite my urge to yank it closed and kiss her senseless. But then, after all this time, there was a chance she wasn't even single anymore.

In a horrifying moment, I realized I no longer knew anything about her.

A single day could be life-changing, God only knew what two years could do to someone. Part of me wanted to ask her, but another part of me wanted to ignore the fact it had been so long since we'd last seen each other and just dive in as though we hadn't ever been apart.

Still, I had to control myself, and though she was the one and only person in the world who could make me lose control, I fought to maintain my composure with her standing in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her.

“I was showing up for my shift,” she said.

“I think the bigger question is, what are *you* doing here?” she asked. “I thought you were in the Navy or something.”

“I got out,” I said. “I was on leave when we worked together before if you remember. I'm out officially now. I didn't want to re-enlist after my time was up, so I decided to invest in more clubs.”

“What's wrong?” she asked with that smirk of hers. “Was six not enough?”

I scoffed. Always a smartass. But it was one of the many things I loved about her. It was nice to see that that much hadn't changed, at least.

“I call it building my empire,” I said with a shrug.

My statement was followed by a silence that quickly grew awkward. A million things were running through my mind, and I wasn't sure what to do with myself. I couldn't settle on a

single thought no matter how hard I tried, and there were a thousand things I wanted to ask her.

It was purely ironic she was working for me all over again, but I refused to let my mind even go in that direction right now. There was no way I could open that can of worms without it going right back to what we were doing before.

And that would lead to the question of the century: why the fuck did she leave like that?

She opened her mouth as though she was going to say something else when a shout rang out from the end of the hall. It came from the bar end, so I knew it really could be anyone yelling about really anything. But the way Lenny reacted when she looked up the hall and saw the person made me wonder just who it was.

I couldn't stop myself from glancing out the door of my office and looking up the hall, only to see some pretty boy dressed like a preppy jock walking our way.

“Helene!” the guy said when he was closer. “I thought you came in the other door. I was waiting for you at the bar to buy you a drink before you went on shift. Didn't you get my text earlier?”

“I can't drink when I'm on the job,” she said. I relaxed slightly, realizing that she must know who this guy was. But her body language still told me she wasn't thrilled with him being here, and that put me on high alert to do something if need be.

“You weren’t going to drink on the job. You were going to drink with me before you got on the job,” he replied.

“Then I would be drunk while working, and that’s the thing I’m avoiding,” she said as she shook her head.

It was then that this guy noticed me. He took a step back into the hallway, reacting strongly. It could have had something to do with the fact he was drinking, I realized that, but I was still watching him carefully. As soon as he gave me a reason, I was going to have him removed from the club immediately. And with the way he was already acting toward her, it wasn’t going to take much for me to be able to say he was harassing the staff.

“Is this creep bothering you?” he asked her.

I almost laughed, though I saw no humor in what he’d said. It was the fact he referred to me as the creep when he was the one who had brought that reaction out of her that I found humorous.

I wasn’t sure who this guy was in her life, but he clearly knew her. On the other hand, the fact that he called her by her first name, Helene, told me he didn’t know her well enough to call her Lenny. Anyone who was even remotely close to her knew she hated her first name. If he didn’t know that or worse—didn’t care—then he wasn’t as close to her as I was.

“No, not at all,” she managed after only a brief moment of hesitation. “He’s not a creep, Pete, you need to fuck off already.”

“Oh yeah? Not a creep? You just happen to be showing up to work and walking into small rooms with other guys? I don’t know, sounds like a creep to me,” the guy called Pete said.

“Look, she told you to fuck off, bud,” I chimed in. “Why don’t you take the hint and beat it? I don’t want to have to get security involved, alright?”

“I didn’t do shit, and who are you to think you can have me removed for doing anything,” Pete argued with me. It was immediately clear he could get belligerent with me in a heartbeat, and that would only piss me off more. Even if Lenny wasn’t standing right in front of me, I couldn’t stand it when someone came into my club and was a jerk to me or to anyone else for that matter.

“I’m the owner. Not only can I have you thrown out of the place, but I can also have you barred from coming here again, so you better watch it when you deal with my wait staff, punk,” I growled at him.

“Oh, he’s your boss, is that it?” Pete asked. “Sorry to come call you out right in front of your boss. How embarrassing.”

“He’s my fiancé,” Lenny blurted out.

I did a double take, but then, so did Pete. He was clearly caught off guard just as much as I had been, but at the same time, I was perfectly okay with her telling this guy I was engaged to her.

On the other hand, it only served to open up a whole new list of questions in my head, and I had to bite my tongue to

keep myself from saying anything. Then again, that was Lenny. It was one of the many reasons I had fallen in love with her in the first place.

She was a woman who did what she wanted, said what she wanted, and knew what she wanted.

And there was no telling what would come out of her mouth next.

She was still the same old Lenny.

I hardly dared to think she was exactly the same as before, but then, I couldn't stop myself.

If only I could get rid of that question that was burned into the back of my brain.

Why did she run?

Chapter Four

Lenny

There was dead silence in the small room for a few seconds, and I kicked myself for saying Scott was my fiancé. I had no idea where that even came from, let alone why I was so quick to blurt it out.

But once the words were released, there was no taking them back. All I could do was hold my breath and hope to God Scott would go along with the lie. The look of surprise on his face told me he hadn't been expecting that out of me, and I didn't blame him. Not after what I'd done.

The few seconds, though they were incredibly brief, felt like they'd lasted an eternity.

They were broken with Pete bursting into laughter. He was drunk, so his already obnoxious laugh was only exacerbated. Spit flew from his mouth, and Scott made a disdainful show of looking at where the droplets had flecked his shirt. He maintained his judgmental look as he pulled a kerchief out of his back pocket and dabbed at the place, though the entire implication was clearly lost on Pete.

“Don't fuck with me,” Pete said, acting as though he could hardly contain more laughter. “Seriously. I would know if you were engaged, trust me on that one.”

I opened my mouth to correct him. I had long wanted to give him the tongue-lashing of a lifetime, but before I had the

chance to get started on him, Scott cut in.

“I wouldn’t be so sure on that one,” he said as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into him. “If my friend was as big of an asshole as you are, I probably wouldn’t say much about my personal life, either.”

My heart swelled with triumph, but what really sealed the moment was when he kissed me. It wasn’t just a kiss on the cheek or a quick peck on the lips. He kissed me deeply, claiming me for his own. It felt like the kind of kiss that someone would give their fiancé in front of an asshole like Pete, and I felt on top of the world.

But the one thing that surprised me, perhaps most of all, was the way I wanted to kiss him in return. My lips eagerly searched for his, moving over his with the same delicate need that I’d always had. Of course, as soon as our lips met, the same need for him filled my very soul.

There was a physical ache in my chest as more memories than I even knew possible had come rushing back to me, and I could have burst into tears myself.

I didn’t know why I wanted to cry. I was the one who had left Scott. And I’d done it in the shittiest way possible, too. But it wasn’t only the way I had left that ate at me. No, it was the fact that I had left at all. I never forgot him or what we shared together, and I hadn’t even realized how much I wanted it back before we kissed in that office.

I closed my eyes, leaning back and letting myself get lost in the moment. Oddly, it had nothing to do with Pete anymore. It

was that he was waking me up all over again to what we had shared together at one time and what I had fantasized about us sharing again.

The kiss caused me to lose track of time, and when Scott finally lifted me from being tilted back in his arms, Pete was gone.

“What the fuck are you doing being friends with an asshole like that?” Scott asked me.

“We’re not friends,” I told him. “He was in grad school with me, and I moved down here with my best friend. He followed. Uninvited, unwanted. But it’s a free country, so there’s not much I could do about it.”

“You live in Marathon, then?” Scott asked.

“Moved here about a month ago. I didn’t know you lived here or that you owned this club, either,” I admitted.

“Why Marathon?” Scott asked. “No offense, but it doesn’t exactly say to me it would be the place you’d pick as home.”

“My roommate, mostly,” I said. “She wanted to give it a shot living in a place like this before we settled into the real world. If I’m honest, I’m not even sure I’m done with school. I could well decide to go back for my doctorate.”

Scott winced, and seeing his reaction caused me to do the same. I knew it was a sensitive subject, and I really was talking without thinking. I made a quick promise to myself to watch what I said.

“So, you’ll be here for a couple of months then,” Scott said. “Good. I prefer the employees who are going to be in it for the long haul.”

His entire demeanor changed, and I could practically feel a wall going up between us. Not that I blamed him for that, but at the same time, a panic surged through me as my heart desperately wanted to keep that from happening.

“Scott,” I said, but his phone rang before I could say anything else.

He put his hand up to stop me, pulling his phone out and checking to see who was calling. He answered, but I wasn’t getting the impression he wanted me to leave.

“Scott speaking,” he said. “Yes. I’m at the club right now. I’ll be here for another hour or two. Tonight? That works for me. Yes. See you then.”

He hung up the phone, and I bit my tongue. I wanted to ask if that was his wife or girlfriend, but after the kiss he’d given me, opted out of making a comment like that. There was enough tension in the air right now.

There wasn’t any need to add to it.

“I need to start my shift,” I said. “Thanks for playing along with the whole fiancé thing. That sort of just came flying out of my mouth before I could think of something better to say.”

“Any time,” he told me. “It wasn’t anything to me.”

“We can drop it now if you’d like,” I continued. “I don’t need to spread to the whole club that you and I are engaged. It

might end up being the word on the street, though, with Pete. He's not known to shut his mouth, and once my best friend finds out, I'm sure things are going to take an interesting turn."

"It's your call," he said. "If you want me to play the part and go out with you and your friends to keep the façade going, that's fine with me."

"Really?" I asked, not bothering to hide my surprise. "You would do that for me?"

"Why not?" he shot back. "It's not like I was the one who put an end to things with you before."

"Well, I was going to meet them for a few drinks at a brewery tomorrow evening and you're welcome to come if you're available," I said. "Nothing major, just my best friend Hannah and a few of our friends who will be driving down from Miami. All from school, so there's that."

"That's fine with me," he said matter-of-factly. "Sounds like a good time, really. And I haven't been here that long myself, so it would be nice to get out and see some of the other venues Marathon has to offer."

"Then it's a plan," I told him with a smile. I didn't want to let on just how excited the prospect made me, so I forced myself to maintain the same level of enthusiasm as I pulled out my phone. "Let me give you my number so we can touch base. I'll meet you there?"

"Unless you want me to pick you up?" he asked.

"It's not far to walk anywhere here," I said.

“Your call,” he replied with a shrug.

“I’ll think about it,” I told him. “But odds are I’m going to walk myself there. I just like walking around this place. It’s so tropical, I feel like I’m on vacation whenever I’m out and about.”

“Fair enough,” he told me. “Let me know when to be there or at your place or wherever.”

“I will,” I said. “See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

I hesitated for a moment longer, sensing that this was quickly going to get awkward. There were so many things that ran through my mind, so much I wanted to say to him. But nothing felt fitting in the moment, and I didn’t want to say anything that would ruin the interaction we’d just had with each other.

I headed out the door and back up the hall, walking toward the kitchen with more pep in my step than I had had in a long time. I was completely caught off guard by seeing Scott. Of all the people who could have purchased this place, it was him. And for him to see me walking in for my shift, that was good timing in itself.

I didn’t know what to do with all the thoughts and feelings that were running through my mind, and my immediate reaction was to call Hannah and vent to her about the entire thing. But I knew I couldn’t do that, either.

I hadn't ever told her about the summer I spent with Scott or the wild things he and I had done together. Though Hannah was closer to me than anyone else in my life right now, that was one subject I had kept locked away, though I wasn't even sure why I'd done that myself. Perhaps I was so angry with how I had walked away from the relationship with him that I didn't want to be honest about it with anyone.

If I didn't talk about it with my best friend, then I didn't have to deal with it or the emotions that went along with it at all. But now that he was back—and he was back in a very real way, I was going to have to talk about it at some point. Though I knew it was going to be an awkward conversation when it did happen.

It was also the kind of conversation I wanted to have with her in person. I didn't want to try to explain the whole thing over text or the phone, so I'd have to wait for the chance to catch her face-to-face, which could be tricky with our different schedules these days.

Then again, she would be at the little hangout thing we were doing the following evening, so at the latest, she would find out about Scott then, even if it was going to catch her by surprise, too.

“Wipe that smile off your face and get to work,” Kyle, the head host, barked at me when I reached the kitchen. “I expected you here twenty minutes ago!”

“Sorry, the owner of the place wanted to have a word with me,” I said. I left out the details, of course, but I hoped that

would keep me out of trouble. “You can check in with him on that if you’d like.”

“Don’t let it happen again,” he said. “There’s a reason you’re scheduled when you are, and you have to be reliable enough to make it in by that time.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, not wanting to get into an argument with him.

“Get the tables set. We’ve got half an hour before we open, and I’ll be damned if we’re late by even five minutes.”

“Yes sir,” I said again. “I’m on it.”

He muttered something as I grabbed the pile of menus and headed for the dining room, but I most certainly didn’t wipe the smile off my face. I was pretty sure there wasn’t anything that could get me to stop smiling at this point. Not with the afternoon I’d just had.

I went from thinking I’d never see that man again to having him play the part of my fake fiancé, and he was the one who said he was okay with it.

I didn’t know where this would lead or if it would lead to anything, really. But I also didn’t care.

This afternoon had been a dream come true. My wildest fantasy comes to life.

I vowed to love it as long as it lasted.

Chapter Five

Scott

I'd always considered myself an easygoing individual, but I'd never felt so conflicted about being put on the spot like I just had been in my office.

I had no idea what to say when she told the pretty boy asshole that I was her fiancé. There were a lot of things I could be, but to say we were planning on getting married wasn't the first thing that came to mind when I thought about Lenny.

But then, when I did allow myself to think about Lenny, I thought about all the things I loved about her—and I knew why she was the one girl who had gotten me to break all my rules for her.

Even that kiss we'd shared was the most electrifying thing I had ever done. Even more so than the intimacy we'd shared when we were together for that one summer.

It felt like a lifetime ago at this point, but I had to admit, with that one kiss, it all came rushing back to me faster and harder than I could have imagined possible.

“Les!” I shouted from the doorway of my office.

The bar manager came running down the hall to find out what I wanted, and I motioned for him to come into my office.

“Yes?” he asked. “What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me who does the hiring around here,” I said.

“I do,” he replied.

“For the dining hall, too?”

“For the entire club. Is there a problem?”

“I was wondering about one of the employees. Helene?” I asked with raised eyebrows.

“What about her?” he questioned. “She’s one of the new hires, and from what I understand, she’s already got a lot of experience working in clubs. I haven’t had any complaints about her so far, but if there is a problem, I’ll be sure to address it.”

“No, there’s no problem,” I said. “I wondered if she had given you any kind of time commitment for her working here?”

“She said she’s on the fence about going back to school in the fall, but she’d give plenty of notice before she did if that was the route she took. I didn’t see an issue with that, so I hired her,” he replied honestly. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” I said again. “I know her from another club where she’d worked before. Honestly, she’s one of the best employees I have ever had, so I was hoping she would be sticking around for the long haul. That’s all.”

“She said if she’s not leaving for school then she’s likely not leaving the club, at least not for now,” he said. “But you know how it is with kids coming out of college. They feel they have all the answers in life, and I’m not sure how long she plans to stay. I didn’t pry into her personal life, clearly.”

“Of course not,” I told him. “That’s not our place. Thank you for passing along what you know about her. That’s all I needed from you for now.”

“Yes, sir,” he smiled.

“Oh, wait, there is one other thing,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Are you planning on doing more hiring?”

“You mean personally?” he asked.

“I mean, are we still in need of employees?” I clarified.

“Not at the moment. But there is a high turnover with the wait staff. I feel I am always on the verge of losing one, so I keep a running ad out there for applicants. It’s made clear with the applications that are put in that they stay valid for up to six months, and I try to pull from those if someone doesn’t work out.”

“And I’m sure they don’t always work out that way,” I guessed.

“More often than not, they don’t, but I still keep them around in case someone starts and doesn’t stick around.”

“That’s good thinking,” I told him. “Okay, thank you, that’s all I needed.”

He gave me a nod before walking out, heading back to his place at the bar. I headed to my desk and sat down, taking a breath. I wanted to get through the list of important paperwork I had in front of me that afternoon, but after the interaction I’d

just had with Lenny, I didn't know if it would be possible for me to focus enough to get anything done.

She was older, more experienced, and more filled out than she had been before. She looked more like a grown woman, but she was every bit as sexy as she had always been. The way she moved spoke of confidence that had been lacking before, and I found it an even greater turn-on than what I'd felt toward her in the past.

I laid my head against the back of the chair and let out another breath of air. I had been confident I would never see her again. I had not only accepted that, but I had also chosen to live my life with that in mind. Even with all the times I had mistaken someone else for her, deep down, I felt it wasn't ever going to turn out to really be her.

But today it was, and I had no idea what to make of this sudden turn of events.

Even with the little changes about her, she was still very much the same Lenny I had fallen for years ago. And that left my mind spinning.

The fact we were going out together the following evening also blew my mind. It was a development in my life I'd never imagined happening.

But I was willing to go along for the ride.

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“Oh good, you made it,” Lenny told me when I walked up to her. “I'm glad you found the place.”

“As you said, most things are walkable in this little town. It’s not like there were many places for it to be,” I told her with a flashy smile. “You look good.”

“Thanks,” she replied, flushing a crimson color as she did. She wore a fitted, really short cocktail dress that left incredibly little to the imagination, somehow without showing skin. It screamed sexiness, and I had a difficult time not putting my hands on her right there in the middle of the sidewalk.

But we were just pretending to be engaged, and I wasn’t sure where the boundaries were. Was this going to be the kind of thing we acted out in front of her friends, or was she going to want to play engagement behind closed doors as well?

I would ask her about it at some point, but right now wasn’t the time.

“I just texted Hannah and told her I got here,” Lenny said. “She said the rest of the gang is inside if you still want to meet everyone?”

“I showed up, didn’t I?” I asked her with a smirk. “I wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of coming here in the first place if I was going to bail. But why didn’t you come with your roommate?”

“I made up an excuse as to why I was running late,” she said. “I wanted to come in with you. I haven’t really talked to her about any of this, so she’s going to be just as shocked as the rest of the group when they see us. But whatever.”

“Flying by the seat of my pants is the way I do most things,” I told her. “As you know.”

“Yes, I do,” she grinned.

I reached for her hand, and she took it with a look of relief on her face.

“Are you nervous?” I asked.

“A little,” she said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s been so long since—” She let the words hang in the air.

“I know,” I said.

We dropped the subject as Lenny led me into the brewery. It was a busy enough venue but a lot quieter than the club. Of course, it was. But I was still glad for that. I wanted the chance to make an impression on her friends, and I figured it would be a lot easier to do that without the distractions that went along with being in the club.

There was a table in the corner with another table pushed nearby, and about ten to twelve younger people were gathered around. They were talking and laughing with each other, and I immediately recognized the asshole I had dealt with in my club the day before.

“Alright everyone, I’m sorry I’m late, but I wanted you to all meet Scott, my fiancé,” Lenny beamed as she looked around the table.

Pete rolled his eyes and looked away, and there was a clear, surprised reaction etched on the faces of most of the other people gathered around. Really, the most shocked face belonged to a young woman whom I guessed was her roommate she'd mentioned, though the girl didn't say anything at the moment.

"Scott, these are my friends from school," Lenny continued. "You've already met Pete, and this here is Hannah. She's my best friend and roommate and the reason I moved here in the first place."

"That's right," Hannah said with a nod. I got the impression she was putting up a front and dying with questions on the inside, but she knew how to maintain a good poker face.

Lenny continued with the introductions around the table, and I greeted all of them collectively when she reached the final person.

"It's great to meet you," I said. "I've heard so much about you, I'm glad to get to put faces to names at this point."

"Well, that's great," Pete said. "Because we've heard jack shit about you, and I'm sure I'm not the only one who is full of questions."

"Pete!" Lenny cried, but I put a stop to her anger.

"It's alright, baby, I'm sure they do have a lot of questions. They're your friends, after all. Since we decided it's time to go public with our relationship, it's only fair to them that we take the time to answer, right?"

“Fair enough,” Lenny said as she sat down on the bench seat next to Hannah. She made a motion to her friend to get her to move over, making enough room for me to slide in next to Lenny.

Hannah was saying something to Lenny as I sat down, but she was speaking too low for me to hear what was being said. But Lenny replied in just as low of a tone, so I figured it wasn't anything I should be worried about.

On the other hand, the rest of the group was more than accepting of me being there. I was welcomed in as though I was an old friend, which I found surprising. No one seemed to mind me except, of course, Pete. There was something about him that left me feeling he was planning a sabotage or an inquisition.

I didn't know what it could be, but I didn't like the guy, and I felt there was reason for it. I always trusted my intuition, and I made a mental note to keep an eye on him. I put my arm around Lenny, draping my hand casually over her shoulder as she talked with her friend.

It wasn't much, but it was a gesture Pete saw and once again rolled his eyes over.

There was something sinister going on with that guy.

I could sense it.

Chapter Six

Lenny

“Spill it,” Hannah said.

“What?” I asked as innocently as possible.

“You know what!” she replied, not bothering to hold her voice down. “Where the fuck did you find a stud like that? And you’re engaged? How old is he? I have so many questions, I don’t know where to even start.”

“I’m sure you don’t, and I know you’ve got questions, but we’ve got to get back out there,” I told her. “It’s not very nice to have him meet you and then disappear into the bathroom.”

“You’re the one who said you’ll be right back,” she told me as we headed for the door.

“But you didn’t have to follow me! I mean, most of the guys out there aren’t going to be here more than this weekend. They’re going to wonder why we both vanished since they’re here to see us in the first place!”

“That’s true,” she admitted, but she wasn’t about to let me off the hook. “I’m still going to get the inside scoop on this.”

“You will,” I promised her. “But not right now.”

We headed back into the bar and over to where the group was seated. Most of the friends gathered were only staying in Marathon for a few days, and they’d come to visit Hannah and me before moving on with their vacation plans of Island hopping in the Florida Keys.

I wasn't sure if they would find anything to talk about with Scott left alone, especially with Pete being out there. I could only imagine him being the one to dominate the conversation and likely doing what he could to put Scott on the spot in as many ways as possible.

But, when we got back to the table, the conversation seemed to be flowing easily, and from what I could tell, Pete was doing his best to ignore Scott as much as he could. I wasn't sure if that was how he had behaved the entire time I'd been gone or if he was putting on an air of indifference now that I was back.

Either way, I ignored him as Scott rose and let both Hannah and me back onto the bench seat. He sat back down and put his arm around me, and I leaned into him. I caught Pete staring at me as I settled in, but I simultaneously realized I felt entirely comfortable being in Scott's arms.

It was the safest I'd ever felt with Pete in the same room, and I knew that had to mean something.

But the conversation quickly took another turn once Hannah and I were back with the rest of the group, and it centered entirely on Scott and me.

"So, you have to admit, no one saw this coming," Sara, one of our friends, pointed out. "I mean, sure, an engagement announcement would typically be a surprise anyway, but we didn't even know you were seeing anyone."

"I know, I know," I said. "I guess I just didn't want to have my relationship wind up being the focus of things. I knew the

day would come when I would tell everyone about Scott and everything, but I really just wanted to focus on getting through school.”

“Makes sense,” Hannah said. “Though I’m surprised I had no idea about this myself. I thought you and I were close enough I would have known you’d met someone.”

I pinched her, and she squealed and laughed as she jumped on the bench seat. “What was that for?”

“I actually knew Scott before we were roommates,” I told her. “I’ve known him a long time, as far as you guys know.”

“Where did you meet?” Pete asked, clearly still skeptical about the entire relationship. “I’m really good with faces, and I haven’t seen yours around.”

He stared straight at Scott as he spoke, and I had a feeling he was asking Scott about how we’d met. But I answered before Scott had the chance to say anything wrong. There was no reason to lie about how we met, after all, but I felt that with this being my group of friends, it made the most sense for me to be the one to answer the questions about us.

“I actually worked at one of his clubs,” I said. “A couple of years ago. I was a server, he was obviously the owner, and I guess you could say that we really hit it off. He knew how important it was for me to finish my education, so when the time came for me to get back to that, he worked on his businesses, and he was just finishing up his enlistment in the Navy while I went off to school.”

“Aww,” Hannah said as she clutched her chest right over her heart. “That is the sweetest thing.”

“Don’t make me sick,” I told her with a laugh.

“So have you been together this whole time then?” Sara asked. “I commend you for keeping that up. I can’t say I would have been able to make it all the way through school with all those hot guys there.”

I laughed. “Again, the reason I was there was to get through school, and that was it. I figured the rest of my life was already figured out with Scott and what we were doing together, but I wanted to have my degree. I guess you could say that made it a lot easier for me not to give dating a second thought while between classes.”

I felt Hannah’s gaze on me, and I figured she was probably thinking about the times when we discussed the cute guys who were in the classes we shared. It wasn’t hard for me to guess she was probably wondering why I hadn’t said anything about Scott then, but she didn’t say anything. I was grateful for that, but I hoped it wasn’t something she would press when the two of us were alone.

“I don’t know,” Pete said at last.

“You don’t know what?” Hannah asked him.

“I just find this whole thing strange,” he replied. “Like, why would you not mention at any time you had a boyfriend when you were clearly seeing someone you were serious enough about you got engaged like right out of school?”

“She told you,” Sara said. “She was focusing on school, and she didn’t want her having a boyfriend to be a thing. Not everyone is tied up in the idea they have to have a significant other.”

She rolled her eyes, and both Hannah and I laughed. Pete looked pissed, and he clearly wasn’t going to let this go. Not easily, at least.

I wasn’t too worried about him being able to poke any holes in my story. After all, I was already telling the truth for the most part, but there was still something about him that made me nervous. He just had a way of looking at me, and now at Scott, too, that left a sour taste in my mouth. I knew I couldn’t trust him on a good day, but he seemed to be more of a snake than normal over this situation.

“So, tell us more about yourself, Scott,” Hannah said. “Since Lenny here was way too secretive about everything all this time, we don’t know jack about you, and I’d like to. I mean, if someone is going to be engaged to my best friend, I’d like to know they are at least worthy of being with her.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” I laughed. “I’ll make it up to you somehow, okay?”

“Bet. Though that’s not getting you off the hook,” she said as she turned back to Scott. “Where are you from? What do you do besides own clubs? How many clubs do you own? Do you know famous people? How did you wind up coming down here?”

“Enough already!” I spoke. “I wanted you to meet him, not give him the interrogation of a lifetime. You’re going to scare him off before I get the chance to walk down the aisle at this point.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Scott said with a grin. “I don’t mind. And besides, they do have a right to know. Like I said already, you didn’t tell them for the simple reason you didn’t want to have all these questions when you were trying to get through school. I told you then, and I’ll tell you again now that you have to deal with it sometime, whether it was going to be then or now.”

“You did tell me that,” I admitted. “But just because you were right about this doesn’t mean I’m happy about it. I told you then I didn’t want to go through all the questions, and that hasn’t changed. I just don’t have the excuse anymore about school.”

“I know a few famous people,” Scott said, turning to the group. “I was in the Navy for years, and I currently own eight clubs, this one in Marathon is the newest, which is why I’m here. I knew this was a good investment. Or, should I say, it seemed like it would be a good investment. And when Lenny told me she was going to be here for the summer at least, I figured it would be a good place for her to work. It just felt like a smart business decision, you know?”

“Makes sense,” Hannah said. “I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t go to school for business.”

“You would have failed before the end of the first year,” Pete said.

“Fuck off,” she shot back. “I’m still not sure how you got the invitation to come out with us tonight. I was pretty sure I said that we should keep it on the down-low, so you didn’t show up.”

“Wow, feeling the love,” he said as he put his hand on his chest. Hannah rolled her eyes, and I knew she was being as truthful as she dared toward him. She sugar-coated what she was saying with a bit of teasing, but she said what I was thinking. And what I wanted to say, too.

“Still, I just can’t picture the two of you together,” Pete said as he turned back to us. “I would have to say I’m way more your type than this chump. Do you really want to get tied to someone who has these businesses keeping him glued to work?”

I nearly argued with him, pointing out that the clubs Scott owned were in several states, so he clearly wasn’t stuck anywhere. But Scott interjected before I had the chance to make any comments at all. I couldn’t quite say I was surprised. In the little time he and I had been together around Pete, he seemed to instantly pick up on my disdain for the guy.

And he was good at saying things that kept us from getting into a full-blown argument.

“Clearly, you don’t know Lenny very well at all,” Scott announced to Pete as he pulled me closer to him. “If you did, you would quit trying to force something with her that so

clearly doesn't work. But then again, the more I get to know you, the more I'm realizing you don't know half as much about Lenny as you seem to think you do."

Hannah's jaw fell, and I was sure mine did the same. I hadn't expected a comment like that out of Scott, even if he was entirely right about Pete.

It took only a moment for me to realize there was stunned silence around the entire table. It was like no one knew how to handle the situation, as no one really had the balls to stand up to Pete or his bullshit.

I didn't know what to say to break the silence. But Hannah was the one who broke the tension as she started to giggle.

I joined in, and so did Sara and the rest. Only Pete sat with a stone-cold silent glare at Scott, but Hannah continued.

"Scott's got a real point with that one," she said. "This is Lenny, it's nice to introduce you two."

"Fuck off," Pete snapped, but that only caused the rest of us to laugh harder.

It was so nice to have Scott next to me, I almost let myself believe this was more than just a show.

Almost.

Chapter Seven

Scott

I'd gone to the bar to meet Lenny and her friends, expecting to only be there for a couple of hours before everyone dispersed.

But the two pitchers of beer turned into four, then six. There were some bigger drinkers in the group, along with those who didn't drink as much, and I continued to sip on my own beer throughout the night as the conversation flowed.

I felt that I had made my point to Pete, and I was satisfied with the way he was glaring at me throughout the evening. He seemed to be trying to come up with some sort of one-liner or come back to the things I said that would catch me off guard, but little did he know, I had dealt with so many of his breed through the years, I knew what to expect.

I wasn't about to let him get the upper hand in any sense, and that was all there was to it.

Lenny was clearly enjoying herself, and that was my main goal. The whole reason I had agreed to this crazy idea of pretending to be her fiancé was for the sake of making sure this other guy left her alone. I wasn't too hopeful tonight would be enough to get him off her back entirely, but it was enough for him to get the message for that night anyway.

As the night wore on, more of the group were getting drunk, and I started to wonder if they were going to make it until

closing.

“Do your friends need to get going?” I asked Lenny in a low tone. “Sara looks like she’s about ready to fall asleep right here at the table.”

“She’ll be fine,” Lenny told me with a wave of her hand. “She always does this. Don’t worry. She’s going to get her second wind before long, and then it’s on.”

I laughed. “I was wondering if we were going to make it to closing down the bar, but I’m not sure I want to make it past that.”

“Me neither,” she said. “Thank God I don’t have to work tomorrow, but I still don’t want to be up all night if I can help it.”

“If you did have to work tomorrow, it’s not like your boss doesn’t know what you were doing the night before.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good or bad thing,” she said. “I mean, if you’re out here with me getting in trouble, then do I get in trouble when I get to work in the morning?”

“Only if you don’t make it on time, and I do,” I teased her. “Pretty sure if you and I are out doing the same thing and I manage to make it in, you have the moral obligation to do the same, or you’re going to have to explain yourself.”

“Ok, boss, but like I said, I don’t want to be out past closing. What time is it anyway?”

She turned from me and directed the question toward Hannah, who checked her phone.

“One-fifteen,” Hannah said. “Why? Don’t tell me you two are going to head out and leave me with the rest of these fools alone.”

“Not a chance,” Lenny said. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Even if we are going to be here two more days, I don’t want you to go running off too soon,” Sara said as she seemed to be waking up some. “I’m going to miss you guys. And I hate that we just now get to meet Scott only to have him leave, too.”

“Technically, you’re the one who is leaving, and Scott’s staying here,” Lenny said.

“Same difference,” Sara replied. “I don’t want to have to move and be a grown-up!”

“I want to stay right here forever,” Hannah said. “I mean, not literally. I think this bar would get pretty drab after more than a day.”

“If you were going to be stuck somewhere, I’d say it would be better to be trapped in one of Scott’s clubs,” Lenny said.

“I mean, sure, but I don’t want to watch the two of you making your moony eyes at each other all the time, either,” Hannah said as she stuck out her tongue and pointed down her throat. “I get so grossed out with all the lovey-dovey stuff.”

“Says the most hopeless romantic I know,” Lenny laughed at her friend. “You are the one who engages in the worst PDA whenever you have a guy in your life. I don’t know what you’re talking about with me.”

“That’s crazy, I mean, you did manage to keep your relationship a secret from the entire world for like two years!”

“I told you I’m sorry!” Lenny said. “You need to lay off the beer, you keep forgetting that I said I’m sorry and I’m going to make it up to you somehow.”

“I’m not sure how you plan on doing that,” she said with a shake of her head. “But you better. I’m not happy with you keeping secrets from me.”

“And I promise I won’t do it again,” Lenny said. “Pinky promise.”

“Hey, what about the rest of us?” Sara asked as she put her finger forward.

The rest of the group laughed, and Lenny let Sara sloppily include herself in the pinky promise she made with Hannah.

“Go home, Sara, you’re drunk,” Hannah told her with a laugh.

“No wonder you didn’t want to bring me around sooner,” I chimed in. “Your friends are nuts.”

“And you caught them on a good night. You should see how crazy they get when we bring hard liquor to the table,” Lenny said with a laugh.

“Did someone say we’re doing shots?” Sara asked. “I’m totally down for a round of shots.”

“If you drink anymore, you’re going to be so sick in the morning you won’t be able to do anything but get up and run

to the bathroom,” Lenny told her. “You said you don’t want to miss out on any of the time we have left this weekend, so you better slow down.”

“You all might want to start on the water,” I suggested. “Or all of you are going to have quite the headaches when you wake up in the morning.”

“He has a point,” Hannah said.

“You keep saying that.” Pete rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you date him? You seem to think he’s right about everything.”

“Date Lenny’s fiancé?” Hannah asked as she wrinkled up her nose and looked at me. “I don’t think so. I mean, no offense, but I think you and Lenny look way better together than what you and I would.”

“None taken,” I said. “But at least Pete’s starting to see other people’s needs outside of his own. Maybe there’s been some real progress made here tonight.”

Everyone but Pete laughed, and he slammed his hand down on the table.

“Look, fuck you, man,” he said. “I don’t know where you came from, and I don’t know why the rest of these dumbasses are just going along with this story as if you really are dating, but I don’t believe it. I refuse to believe she was dating someone for two years and never said a single word about it to anyone.”

“Why would I lie about this?” Lenny asked. “I told you already why I didn’t say anything, and now I’m coming clean

to you guys because we're done with school and I'm ready to move on with my life. It's not rocket science, Pete."

"And it's not the truth, either," he said. "I don't know why you're lying, but I'm sure there is some sort of mutual benefit the two of you are getting out of this. I'm not sure what that is, but I'm going to get to the bottom of this and mark my words, when I do, I'm going to tell everyone what is really going on."

"Knock yourself out," I said. "You know, Lenny, I'm starting to wonder if your friend here wants to be one of the groomsmen at the wedding."

"I don't know if I want Pete in our wedding," Lenny said. "Sorry, Pete. I'm sure you're going to wind up showing up whether you're invited or not, but I just don't see you fitting in with the wedding parties."

"I would rather lick the bottom of my shoe than go to your wedding to this chump," Pete said. "I would be the guy telling the world that this is a bad idea. Trust me, when they ask if there is anyone who objects, I'm objecting."

"You know, on that note, I think you might not be invited after all," I told him. "And more than that, I might have to put you on a list of people who are barred and have security make sure you aren't around when it's time for the nuptials."

"What are you talking about? What kind of people have security at their wedding?" Pete sneered.

"The kind who don't want people like you coming in and making a joke out of everything, and if you throw a fit during

the ceremony, I'm not sure I would be able to handle myself," I told him. "I don't want the footage to wind up on the internet, especially since I'm sure you're not going to end up in too good of a condition afterward."

"Unbelievable," Pete said with a shake of his head.

"Well, the bartender just gave last call, so should we pack up?" Hannah asked. "We better get walking if we're going to get Sara all the way back to her hotel room before she passes out."

"I'll make sure she gets there," Pete said, but Hannah refused.

"Girls stick together," she said. "Lenny and I are going with her."

"Do you mind?" Lenny asked me. "It's not that far of a walk from here, and Hannah's right. We always make sure each other makes it somewhere safe before we leave for the night whenever we've been drinking."

"Of course, I don't mind," I told her. "I think that's a great thing to do. I wish more people were like that with each other. There would be a lot less tragedy in the world if they did, I swear. I'll come with you."

"Agreed," Lenny said.

We rose and I insisted on paying the full tab despite the protests from the rest of the group.

"You don't have to do this," Lenny hissed to me.

“For the show, remember?” I whispered back. “Just like this.”

I leaned forward and kissed her, and though she kissed me back, I felt the tension in her body. I was sure she was dealing with the same conflicted feelings about this as I myself was, and it was almost satisfying to know it wasn't all one-sided.

“Alright, let's get Sara to bed,” Hannah said as she clapped her hands. She helped her friend to her feet, and the two of them walked ahead of Lenny and me as we headed out the door.

“You don't have to go with us if you need to take off,” Lenny told me, but I insisted.

“I want to make sure your friend makes it back to her room safely, too,” I said.

“You're such a gentleman,” she told me with a smile.

The other guys took off, and I felt Lenny relax a bit. But I didn't point that out to her. I could tell she really wasn't a fan of Pete, and the possessive way he behaved toward her left me concerned.

But he was gone now, and for as long as she was here, we'd keep up this little charade.

Still, I worried.

Not about Pete, but about us.

This was only a charade, and that bothered me. I hadn't ever gotten over the way we'd split up the first time, and the

thought of losing her again killed me. But I'd agreed to this crazy idea, so I had to uphold my end of the bargain.

Even if I did sense my feelings for her coming back.

Chapter Eight

Lenny

“Get some sleep; you’re going to wish you got more than you have already when you wake up tomorrow,” Hannah told Sara.

“You guys are the best, you know that? I love you so much,” Sara drawled. “Really. I don’t deserve you. You’re the best.”

“Give us a call when you wake up,” I said. “And let us know just how much and what kind of Gatorade you’ll want.”

“I love you guys,” Sara said again.

“Come on,” Hannah told me. “She’s on her way out, and I’m tired, too.”

“Same,” I said.

We made sure to lock the hotel room behind us, leaving Sara to sleep off the rest of her night. I knew she would be hungover as hell the next day, but she would have to learn that lesson herself.

The walk back to our apartment wasn’t far, so it didn’t take us long to get there.

I was surprised Hannah didn’t say anything about Scott the whole way back. Scott had walked us to the hotel, but he left when we walked Sara up to her room. With us finally being alone together after leaving Sara, I figured she would be all over me looking for information.

But it didn't last long.

As soon as we were back in our apartment, she jumped into the topic.

“So, where did this guy really come from, and what's with the whole storyline about him?” she asked me. “I'll admit it's pretty genius to get yourself a pseudo fiancé to keep Pete off your back, but I'm a little hurt you didn't include me in your idea. I could have had so much better questions prepared to ask if you had.”

“Okay, okay, hold up there a bit,” I said, collapsing into one of the chairs in the living room. She sat on the couch along the opposite wall, throwing one leg over the arm as she looked over at me.

“Explain,” she said. “I'm all ears.”

“So, what I said about him and how we met, that was true,” I said. “In fact, it was true all the way up to when I said I went to school.”

“You met him when you started working at his club, and you started dating, then what happened?” Hannah asked. “You said you were long-distance for the time you were in school, but if that's not true, then what?”

“I kind of ghosted him,” I admitted.

“What! How could you? I'm not saying this about the ghosting, it's more like, how could you *not* stay with someone so hot?”

I chuckled, but shook my head.

“I know. I’ve kicked myself over it ever since. I guess it was one of those things where I was kind of freaking myself out. I don’t know how to really put it into words. Like, I guess we were dating, but we weren’t. More like hooking up.”

“But did you like him?”

“Obviously,” I laughed. “But we never went public with our relationship, mostly because of the fact I was working for him. I didn’t want the other people who were at the club to hate me and think I was getting special treatment because of the fact I was sleeping with the boss, you know?”

“Fair enough,” Hannah said. “But that doesn’t change the fact you could have stayed together when you left for college. No one would have known any better.”

“Sure,” I said. “But I’ve wanted to be a therapist forever. Like, it’s been my dream for as long as I can remember. When Scott came into the picture the way he did, like when we were hooking up, I felt myself falling in love with him. I was afraid if I stayed with him, then I wasn’t going to keep pushing myself to get through college. I didn’t want to give up on my dream to be a therapist, especially for some guy.”

“Mad respect on that front, but did he want you not to be a therapist or something?” Hannah asked. “I’m not following why being with him meant you weren’t going to be able to go to school or complete your degree. If he had an issue with it, then he’s an asshole and you shouldn’t be even using him at this point.”

“No, he never did say I couldn’t or anything like that. I mean, I think it was more what was going on in my head at the time than what he was doing. He’s significantly older than I am by 15 years, and that made me wonder what I was doing. Like, why would I put all my time and effort into school when I’ve got this guy who can take care of me?”

“Because you’re a driven young woman and you have control over your own life,” she laughed. “Just because you’re with someone—even someone 15 years older and rich—it doesn’t mean you can’t do what you want to do with your own life. And who cares if he’s older than you anyway? Older guys are hot and experienced.”

“He’s hot as hell. Always has been. And you know, he’s like a fine wine: only getting hotter with age if you ask me,” I giggled.

“Girl, you better believe it,” Hannah said with a shake of her head. “If you told me that you came up with this guy on some website or something, I was going to figure out where so I could sign up for one. I mean, hello handsome!”

“Right?” I agreed. “I never thought I’d see him again, so when that happened, I was just blown away with how hot he was. I must not have been as awkward as I felt I’d been, but damn, I was flustered on the inside!”

“Okay, you’re going to have to back up for me,” Hannah said. “So how did you meet up again? Like how was that even a thing? Marathon might be a solid vacation choice, but I still

feel like the odds of the two of you running into each other are pretty slim.”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s the other thing that was true. You remember when I went to that job interview for the club, I told you that they had just changed ownership? Well, it worked out because Scott was the one who had just made the purchase. So, on the front that he said he was the new owner of the place where I worked, well, that was also true.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Hannah said. “You mean you didn’t want to tell anyone you were dating when you were with him before, but when you start working for him in this new place, you jump straight to being engaged?”

I laughed. “Okay, that’s where I’m not even sure what I was thinking. Like, I was just getting to work yesterday afternoon, and Pete was there.”

“Fuck,” Hannah said. “That guy needs to get a life. Seriously.”

“For real,” I agreed. “But he was there and drunk and he said he was hoping I would show up with enough time to be able to have a drink with him before my shift. I told him that was a stupid suggestion, but he wasn’t letting up. But before that, when I first walked into work, Scott was there.”

“So, Pete came up to you when you were already talking to Scott?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “Scott was amazed that I just so happened to be there, but before we even had the chance to

talk that much, Pete came over with his stupidity on full display. You know how he gets when he's had a couple of drinks. It was even worse than usual."

"You're telling me. I can't even count how many times I've wanted to kill him," she said as she rolled her eyes.

"Right? So, when he came up to us with his arrogant ass attitude, I don't know. Telling him Scott was my fiancé was the first thing that came out of my mouth. He didn't believe me, but Scott totally went with it at the time, then said he didn't mind keeping up our little charade if it would get Pete to lay off," I explained.

"Girl, that's a keeper right there. I would be all over that shit if I were you," she told me.

"Obviously, I am," I said. "Which is why we did that whole thing tonight. It was actually really nice to have him right there and having his arm around me and everything. It made me feel all of the things that I used to feel when I was around him before, you know?"

"God, I don't know how you didn't wind up going home with him," she said. "I know we're trying to hang out with our friends and all, but you know what I mean. I would be like, sorry guys. I saw you for two years now, I'm done. Have a nice life."

I laughed. "Well, I guess I'm not too sure how far this is going. Like, he was being so sweet to me tonight, but I'm not sure how that's going to translate into the way we treat each

other behind closed doors. I feel like we've got to talk about it."

"Why? He's hot. You're hot. I'd just do it if I were you. Especially if the sex was good before."

"Girl, you can't even imagine how good of sex it was. Like, it was why I wasn't hooking up with anyone when I was in college. I just didn't want to get in bed with someone knowing how good it was with Scott. I don't think there's anyone else out there who is going to make me feel those things again," I sighed.

"Maybe this is fate's way of giving you another shot together," she said with a shrug. "I don't know. It just seems like it was too perfect for you two to come back together the way you did for it not to have more to do with fate than anything."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not going to push for anything, but I'm not holding back anything, either. I'm kind of just riding this out and seeing where we end up, you know? I don't want to let myself get all attached again if he's not interested. I know I hurt him with how I left before, and I guess it might be selfish of me, but I don't want to get hurt now."

"That's not selfish," she said. "It's smart if you ask me. I don't blame you one bit for not wanting to get hurt. But you know, if you just sit down and talk to each other, you could figure a lot of this shit out without having to play the game, you know?"

"You make it sound too easy," I teased.

Hannah laughed, but a yawn interrupted it. “Damn. After all this, I’m not sure if I’m going to be up by the time Sara calls us in the morning.”

“True that, I’m ready for bed,” I told her.

We both bid each other goodnight before heading to our rooms, but I couldn’t get Scott off my mind. The fact that he and I were so good together was the only thing I could think about. And with what Hannah said about us having a second chance, well, I wanted that more than I would ever admit.

But I also meant it when I said I didn’t want to get hurt here, and after what I already pulled, I was scared that would happen. I didn’t know what Scott wanted, and short of him being a nice guy, I wasn’t sure how serious he was about helping me out with my current situation.

The only thing I knew for sure was that being around him, even for the short time I had been, was enough to get those feelings going again. Emotions I thought were long gone came rushing back to me.

And along with those feelings came other desires.

Desires only he could satisfy.

Chapter Nine

Scott

I ran my hand over her soft skin, grabbing one of her tits and squeezing. Her erect nipples stood tall, begging for my mouth to be on them. I sucked on each one, taking my time and paying proper attention to one before moving to the other, causing her to moan and writhe under my touch.

Her body was perfect in every sense.

She was lean but so incredibly smooth. It was a combination I found tantalizing, and I was utterly intoxicated by her. Every time she put her hands on me, a thrill ran through my body, and I was sure my cock had never been harder for anyone else before.

She was so smart and so sexy; I couldn't get enough of her.

I'd hooked up with women before, but this was the first one who really kept my attention. This was the only woman I'd ever been with who made me think of things like marriage and building a life together. She was the first one I felt capable of being with. She wasn't a girl who needed me to entertain her, nor was she the kind of woman who felt desperate to be with me.

The confidence she exuded was so incredibly alluring that I found myself aroused by her long before we wound up between the sheets, and it never took long before she was dripping wet, and I was also dripping with desire.

There was never any rush to what we were doing, and I was okay with that. I didn't want to rush, despite the fact that I had to fight to keep myself from climaxing quickly with her. Not that I ever came too soon, but I wanted to maximize the time I had with her, the time we got to spend rolling around in bed together.

Our lips met, and she took my bottom lip in her teeth, pulling her head back and taking it with her, letting go only when it had stretched as far out as it could go.

I moaned, almost growling with desire as I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into me, kissing her harder than before. Now it was my turn to tease her with my tongue. I slipped it between her lips and circled the roof of her mouth with it.

She moaned, pressing her hips into mine, begging me to be inside her. I slid my hand down her body, resting it between her legs. I slid my fingers between the lips of her pussy, relishing in how wet she was.

I slowly inserted one of my fingers, then another, her pussy responding both times. The tightening of her walls drove me insane as I imagined how good it would feel to have my dick inside her. The anticipation was part of the pleasure in the moment, and when she grabbed my cock with her hand and stroked, I nearly climaxed right then.

“I need you inside me,” she said. “Please. I need you.”

“Are you sure you want me?” I asked.

“I’ll always want you,” she told me. “Always. Just you.”

I shifted on the mattress, moving over the top of her as she positioned herself beneath me, spreading her legs, presenting her bald pussy to me. I took my cock in my hand and guided the head to the warm slit of her core, the wet warmth welcoming me inside.

I was just about to push into her, letting the anticipation build for one more moment before I suddenly opened my eyes.

With a groan, I looked around the room.

It quickly dawned upon me that it had all been a dream. Being with Lenny and her friends the night before, being able to hold her against me as we sat in the bar, well, that was enough to make me want her, to make me crave her like I hadn’t in a long time.

For all the days I spent missing her, I didn’t dream of her sexually. I would think about her as I got off touching myself, but I never dreamt of her overnight. That was the first time it had happened to me since before we had gotten together initially, and I looked around the room, slowly deciding that I had more than enough time to finish the fantasy that was started in my sleep.

Without clothes on, it was easy for me to reach down beneath the blanket and take hold of myself. My cock was already rock hard, filled with the same anticipation I’d had in my dream. The rest of my body responded so naturally to the thoughts of what Lenny did to me, it wasn’t a surprise to me that I was already rock hard with arousal.

I knew how to get myself off quickly. But, just like when I was with her in person, I wanted to take my time and enjoy the thoughts I was having about her while I touched myself. It didn't come close to the way it felt to be with her, but I didn't have that option at the present, and because of that, I was doing what I had to do.

Closing my eyes, I took myself back to the moment I left off in my dream.

I grabbed my cock, stroking myself with a firm, deliberate grip as I did.

I pushed myself into her pussy, sliding the head of my cock in slowly. I enjoyed the feeling of having just the head of my dick inside her, then all at once, I pushed the rest of the way.

She gasped, taking my full length as she did so well. She smiled at me as I moved in and out of her, spreading her legs and wrapping her arms around me. She dug her nails into my back, dragging them from the middle of my back down my spine, leaving little red trails as she did.

She never broke the skin, but she left enough of a mark for me to look in the mirror and see what she had done later in the day, perhaps even the next day, if she was aroused enough when she left those marks.

I pumped myself into her harder, making each thrust go as deep as I possibly could, only stopping when I was physically forced to do so. I wanted to get even deeper, I yearned for a way to make her mine even more. The way she gasped and moaned on the bed, writhing under me as she moved her hands

from my back to my ass, pulling with me for each thrust, taking me as deep inside her as she could.

The feeling was mutual, and we both craved each other more than we craved oxygen.

The closer I came to the climax, the more I wanted it. The more I wanted her. The need to give my load was stronger than ever, almost primal in the way it drove me to pump into her again and again.

As she came, she cried out, gasping and moving beneath me, arching her back in the last moment to take me as far into her as she could, her pussy walls contracting for the final time as her pleasure coursed through her veins.

The grip on my cock tightened, and I wasn't able to hold back any longer. But then, I didn't want to, either. I wanted to give her the load I had been saving for her. I wanted to give her all that was inside me.

As I came, I was completely lost in the pleasure of the moment. I was lost in the fantasy of what she did to me, of being inside her. While logically I knew this was nothing more than something that was happening in my head, emotionally I was completely enraptured with her, taken with her just as much in my mind as I had been physically each time that we were together.

Pleasure ran from the top of my head to the very tips of my toes.

I'd never enjoyed sex with anyone like I did with Lenny, and each time it was over, I felt closer to her than I did before. It didn't matter how much time we spent together. Each time we had sex, I felt we bonded more, and I loved her more.

But, as the final sensation of pleasure dissipated, I was faced with the harsh reality that it had only been a fantasy. Lenny was at her apartment with her roommate, and I was here in my penthouse, alone.

The only consolation I could take from the moment was that she wasn't out with some other guy. Even after the way she'd left without a word two years ago, she still announced I was her fiancé when that other guy came up to her two days ago.

She had skipped boyfriend and gone right to fiancé status, which meant the world to me.

But I couldn't lay in bed and daydream all day. God knew I had things to do.

I got up and showered, then headed over to the club. It was too early for them to be open, but I knew the staff would be there getting things ready for the day ahead. I wanted the doors to open at nine-thirty sharp. The perfect time for mimosas and breakfast in my opinion.

And that gave me an hour with Les before he had to get to work on the floor.

"There he is, the man of the hour!" Les cried out when I walked through the door.

“How’s it going?” I asked nonchalantly. “How was the night last night?”

“Busy as always,” he said with a broad smile. “It’s early, but I think your new schedule is working.”

“I had a feeling it would,” I told him. “Do you have the reports ready? There are a few things I wanted to go over early on today.”

“Coming right up,” Les said.

I sat at the edge of the bar, and he joined me. Together, we looked over the figures from the night before, and he happily pointed out all the ways in which things were going better than expected, and I was relieved to see that numbers were, in fact, climbing.

We were in the middle of discussing the new menu items for that day when I looked up and suddenly saw Lenny passing with the same group of friends she had been with the night before.

“Hold that thought for a minute,” I said. I hurried out the door, catching them as they walked by.

“Babe!” Lenny said with a grin. “There you are!”

“Where are you guys heading,” I asked. “Early in the day, considering the way you shut down the bar last night.”

Sara groaned, and Lenny laughed as she hugged me. I caught Pete’s face as he rolled his eyes, then he stared at her with a sort of hunger that pissed me off. I was getting tired of this little shit, that was for sure.

“We’re heading to the beach,” Lenny said. “Join us?”

“I will in a couple of hours?” I suggested. “Is that okay with you?”

“That works,” she grinned. “See you then.”

I leaned in to kiss her, noting that the rest of the group seemed excited to have me join. Everyone except for Pete, that is.

“Do you still take your coffee the same way?” I asked.

She blushed.

“I do,” she said. “You remembered.”

“I remember a lot.”

“Me too,” she told me, but there was something about her tone that made me think that she too had sexual fantasies the night before. I wished I could ask her about it, but I had to get back inside the bar to talk with Les.

“I’ll see you soon,” I told her, and with that, they walked on.

But I couldn’t stop myself from lingering where I stood and watching, amazed she was back in my life, and craving her more than ever before. I wanted her, I knew that, and I hated the thought of what we would do when this was over.

I shoved those thoughts out of my mind as I turned to head back inside. I would deal with that when the time came. I just knew one thing was certain. I couldn’t lose Lenny again. I just couldn’t.

In fact, I wouldn’t.

Chapter Ten

Lenny

The end of the weekend came, and I had to admit, the two days the whole group spent in Marathon was pleasant enough, though I had to admit there was a level of uneasiness mixed in. I couldn't quite place my finger on what that stemmed from, though I had an inkling it could have something to do with the fact things were winding down with Scott.

"Are you having Scott come with us to the dinner tonight?" Hannah asked as the two of us got ready to head over to the venue.

"You know it," I said. "I can't get enough of watching Pete fume every time we share some sort of PDA."

"Right?" Hannah agreed. "And you know, it hasn't even been that bad, really. Like, a little kiss here or a little touch there."

"I know," I said. "But I'm a bit worried."

"Why?"

"You heard Pete talking last night," I said. "How he might be going along with the rest of the group on their vacation."

"Why is that a bad thing?" Hannah asked. "I thought the whole reason why you wanted Scott to pretend to be your fiancé was for the sake of keeping Pete away from you."

“I mean, it is,” I said. “But if Pete leaves and there’s no more reason for the two of us to pretend that we’re together, then what?”

“Have you talked to him about it?” Hannah asked.

“No.” I shook my head.

“Sounds like that has to be your first step in this, then,” she said with a shrug. “I mean, if this could be solved with a simple conversation, then why not tell him your real feelings?”

“Because of what happened before, and what I’m afraid is going to happen again.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, the way I left before wasn’t right, but I did it for me. I didn’t want to let myself get distracted by a guy to the point I gave up on my dream. I’m scared if I fall in love with Scott here, that’s going to be the end of what I’m doing for myself,” I admitted. “I’m still not sure if I’m going back to school in the fall for my doctorate, and I’m scared if I let myself go in any other direction that could change my life, it’s going to put an end to that.”

“That’s fair, but again, you could talk to him about it,” Hannah said.

“And what if he tells me that this is all for the show of getting rid of Pete?” I asked. “I’m scared that the way I fucked up with him before is going to come back to bite me in the ass in the sense he’s not going to want to get back with me. I know it wasn’t right what I did to him, but then, I mean, I don’t

know. I guess I would deserve it if he didn't want to get back together with me, but I also don't know if I could stomach the feeling."

Hannah gave me a compassionate look, but it was accompanied by a grim smile. She understood where I was coming from, and I appreciated that about her.

"I guess this is just turning into a bigger mess. I mean, I get it. I could make this really simple by being upfront with everyone, but I feel like I'm in too deep at this point for that. I want to be with Scott, but I'm scared to take that plunge. I also want Pete to leave me alone, but I'm afraid if he does leave, then Scott's going to leave me. As long as Pete is around, that means Scott can go on playing my fiancé, and I don't have to make any real changes to anything we're doing right now. It's a way for me to feel safe with Scott without having to really make any of these hard choices right now."

"I get that," she said with a nod. "If it helps anything, I won't say a word about any of this, I promise."

"Thanks," I said. "I knew I could count on you. But could you tell me something honestly?"

"Girl, you know I'm always honest with you," she said.

"Do you think I'm terrible for wanting Pete to stick around for the sake of having Scott keep him away from me?" I asked.

"No, that doesn't make you terrible. You just want to keep on living your fairytale with Scott, that's all. And I don't

blame you for it. He's funny, hot, and is an all-around great guy. I can't say I wouldn't do the same thing if I were you."

"Thanks," I said. "I mean, there's not much I can do about it. Like, I'm not going to tell Pete I want him to stay so I can ignore him or anything. It's just that, I don't know, I don't want to lose Scott again, so if Pete happens to stick around longer, I'm almost okay with that."

Hannah laughed. "Fair enough. Alright, we better get going, or we'll be late. Is Scott meeting us there?"

"Yup," I said.

The two of us headed outside and walked to the venue, and I was glad the topic had changed to other things. But my heart still fluttered when I saw Scott walking over to us, and I couldn't stop myself from blushing when he said that I looked good in my outfit.

"Food!" Sara cried out when we finally walked in and found our friends at the table.

"Well, I wouldn't call us food, but now you can order," Hannah teased.

"You know what I mean," she said.

"Oh fuck, can't we do anything without that chump tagging along?" Pete asked, though he spoke low enough I was sure he meant only for me to hear it as I was the one closest to him. Since Scott didn't hear the comment, I chose not to pursue it. I didn't want there to be that kind of tension with this being the last dinner we were having.

“So, I heard you guys were keeping the party going after this,” Hannah said once we’d ordered and the food was served.

“What do you mean?” Sara asked.

“I mean, you have hotels and shit in like what, three more places? I thought you were all going off to start your real lives after this.”

“Well, we thought about it, but I guess we wanted to have a little more fun first,” Sara said. “I wish you could come!”

“I would if I wasn’t tied to this damn apartment,” she laughed.

“Same here,” I said, sneaking a glance at Scott to see what kind of reaction he’d have.

“Break the lease. It’s not like that’s the end of the world,” Sara replied with a shrug.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “Sounds risky.”

“Didn’t you already quit the club?” Pete asked me.

“I did, but I did that more because of Scott and me making our relationship public than planning on leaving,” I shrugged.

“Oh. I thought you didn’t care about that anymore,” he accused.

“Drop it already,” Sara said. “It’s not your business!”

“Who wants another round?” Scott interjected, and everyone agreed it sounded good, though Hannah pointed out finances.

“I’m afraid this weekend already drained me,” she said.

“Oh, come on, dinner’s on me,” Scott told her.

“No! You can’t do that,” she tried to argue, but Scott insisted. He ordered two more rounds of drinks for the whole group, including Pete. I couldn’t help but smile at the way this left him fuming, though I still felt torn over whether I should talk to Scott.

After dinner, Hannah and the rest of the group opted to go on to the bar, but I wasn’t really in the mood.

“Call me old, but I’m feeling more like bed,” I told them. “I’ll see you in the morning before you leave.”

“Make sure you’re there,” Sara said as she gave me a hug goodnight.

“I will,” I promised.

“I’ll walk you back to your place,” Scott told me.

My heart leapt to my throat as I considered how this could be a good time to talk to him about everything, but as we started off, I wasn’t sure where to even begin. It wasn’t until he was the one to say he wanted the rest of the group to stay that I was able to really find my tongue.

“You do?” I asked. “Why?”

“Well, I’m not sure I’m ready to stop being your fake fiancé at this point. I have an idea, although a selfish idea. I was thinking if the group stuck around, it would be a great reason for that to keep going,” he said. “I’ll get them the spa vacation right here in Marathon that they’ve dreamed of, and I have a few connections I can call to make sure they get refunds for

where they were booked at the other hotels. I know it's not the same as going around to different islands like Sara was wanting to do, but I'm sure I can convince them it'll be a good time."

My heart pounded in my chest, and I didn't want to come off as too eager. But then, another thought struck me.

"What's in it for you?" I asked. "Sounds like this is going to be pretty expensive, and you're not really getting anything out of it besides pretending to be engaged to me for a while longer."

I looked him square in the face, for the first time being as serious as I could with him. It was the closest we had come to having a conversation about what we were doing and where this was heading, and part of me wanted to blurt out we should just make it official.

But, looking into his eyes, I couldn't find the words.

It was as though the two of us were talking without saying anything, and suddenly, I gave in. I didn't want to keep overthinking this. I just wanted to go with what felt right. And with Scott right in front of me, offering to keep up our little charade for a while longer, well, it was almost more than I could ask for.

I practically dove into his arms for a kiss. It was the first I had been to instigate one since we had come up with this crazy plan, and I was even more shocked with myself knowing that this was just something shared between the two of us. There

wasn't anyone around for me to put the show on for, and I really felt enraptured with emotion in the moment.

Our lips met, and I couldn't ignore the fact I immediately felt at home with him.

I was almost relieved with the fact we were in the middle of the street, and I wasn't able to start tearing his clothes off. For all the feelings that were running through me, I had to make sure this was what we both wanted.

"This is my place," I said. "Thanks for walking me home."

"Not inviting me in?" he asked.

"Not tonight," I said with a smirk. "We'll see about later."

"You know I'll remember that," he told me with one of his devilish winks. I nearly melted at the sight of him again, but I maintained my composure.

I all but dashed through the door, my heart still racing.

I had to be careful. I knew I did. For as much as I yearned to have him, I still didn't know about going back to school, and I didn't want to hurt him again. Or worse.

I didn't want to wind up being the one to get hurt, either.

Chapter Eleven

Scott

As soon as Lenny was in her apartment, I called the best resort hotel in the area to ensure I could upgrade the vacation for everyone in the group.

“I know it’s short notice, and it’s late tonight on top of it, but I would love it if you could do this for me. Two rooms will be fine, but I want this to be an all-inclusive package. I’m talking best of the best for all five of the guests who will be staying. Room service. The works.”

“Yes sir, I can make that happen, except for the fact I’m going to have to charge you extra. I’m sure the boss wouldn’t mind doing it for free, but I can’t put my job on the line like that,” the woman speaking to me said.

“I understand,” I told her. “And I don’t expect any of this for free. I just want to make sure the guests I’m treating to this have the top-of-the-line treatment while there, and I want it all to go to the credit card on file. I’ve got the number ready for you right here and can give it to you as soon as you’re ready.”

I heard her typing away on the computer, then she told me when she was able to take the number. I told her what it was, and once more I heard her typing away before she confirmed.

“And what is the bedding situation?” the woman asked. “So, I know which rooms to put them in.”

I paused. There were five members, four guys plus Sara. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to share a room with Pete, though I also didn't see anyone wanting to have their own room, either, except for Sara.

"You know what?" I said. "Can I get three rooms? I would like two beds to a room if you don't mind."

"I can do that," she said. A few more keystrokes, and she confirmed.

"Alright," I said. "And I want it to be clear to the guests that everything is going to the card on file. Not that I want them to feel any sort of obligation to watch what they are spending, more like I want them to feel as though they merely have to say the word, and it's theirs."

"Understood. I've got the group down for the elite package, all inclusive," the woman said. "Check-in is tomorrow at ten."

"Excellent," I told her. "We will be there."

I hung up the phone just as I was getting back to my penthouse. I fought the urge to call Lenny right then and give her the news, but it was late, and I felt it would be a good surprise to give her along with the rest of the group in the morning. They would think they would be saying goodbye, but I was going to extend the trip for them at no cost.

Not to mention the fact they were going to get a better vacation this way than they would have if they went with their initial plan of traveling between islands. I was happy to do it for the group, but I was even happier to do it for Lenny.

Or myself, if I was being honest.

The fact that I was going to get to spend this much more time with Lenny and remain her fake fiancé was the best feeling in the world. At the very least, it was allowing me to delay the inevitable, and that was her leaving again. I hardly dared to think that she might change her mind, but perhaps, if things went as well between us as they had before, she would consider staying this time.

Not necessarily in Marathon, but with me.

The next day, I headed over to the hotel bright and early. I wanted to make sure I was there before the girls arrived to say goodbye to their friends. And, once I did, I made sure there was a large table reserved for us for breakfast.

“Babe? What are you doing here?” Lenny asked me when she walked through the door of the hotel and saw me in the lobby.

“I thought we’d have a nice breakfast before having to head off to work for the day,” I told her. “If you didn’t have plans right away.”

“They have a bus to catch,” Hannah said.

“Not anymore they don’t,” I said with a grin.

“What did you do?” Lenny asked.

“What’s all this?” a voice interrupted. It was Sara standing at the foot of the stairs, the rest of the gang catching up.

“Fuck. Did we really need you to come say goodbye?” Pete asked.

“I thought you were staying,” Hannah asked him.

“I decided I wanted to take off with the rest,” he said with a shrug. “So, sue me.”

“Now I’m hoping you all want to stay,” I cut in.

“What do you mean?” Sara asked.

“I hope you don’t mind me doing it, but I purchased you all rooms at the Sunkissed,” I announced. “All inclusive, top of the line. I know it wasn’t planned, and if you want to keep going with your original plan, it’s not a problem, but I was talking with Lenny last night, and we thought it would be nice for you to be able to stay longer.”

“Oh my gosh, you seriously went through with your plan?” Lenny cried. “And you paid for everything?”

“Everything,” I said. “Again, if you don’t want to take me up on the offer, you don’t have to, but I would love for you to be able to spend as much time here with Lenny and Hannah as you’d like.”

“That would be amazing!” Sara cried. “But what about the reservations with the other hotels?”

“It’s just a matter of making a few phone calls to the right people,” I explained. “I can make sure you get your money back, which means you’re going to be able to put that in the bank or do whatever you want with it. This is all inclusive.”

The cheer that ran through the group was deafening, and I could tell Lenny was a bit embarrassed with the gesture, despite the fact she was clearly thrilled with the idea. Hannah, too, seemed over the moon with happiness.

Pete was the only one who didn't seem too thrilled with the idea, and Sara was the one to call him out on it.

"You don't want to hang out at the Sunkissed?" she asked. "That's like the nicest hotel in the entire area, and I'd kill to get to stay there."

"It's just that we had plans, and now we won't get to do them," he said. "I don't know about you guys, but I think it's kind of rude that this guy is going to come in and pay for all that without so much as asking any of us if we wanted it."

"You can go ahead if you want," Sara said. "I'm sure no one is going to miss you too much."

"Gee, thanks," he said as he rolled his eyes. "But it's not going to be nearly as much fun without you guys there."

"Aw, I think I'm going to puke," Sara said. "I think this is going to be fun, and I can't thank you enough."

"Don't mention it," I said with a shrug. "But I also can't get you in until ten this morning, so if you want to grab breakfast, there's a table for us in the other room."

"How did you get that for us so quickly?" Lenny asked. "I tried to get reservations yesterday, and they said that they don't do reservations here unless it's a week in advance."

“There are times it works out in my favor to have the money I do at my disposal,” I said with a shrug. “I would like to see you all getting to spend time together, and with money able to make that happen, I was happy to put it down.”

“Thank you,” Lenny said quietly.

“Come on, I’m starving, and if we get breakfast here, then I’m having the steak and eggs,” Hannah said. “That’s going to help sop up some of the alcohol from last night.”

“Amen,” Sara said as she and Hannah linked arms and headed for the dining room.

I walked alongside Lenny, and she slipped her hand into mine. It was so familiar; it was like old times. Though we were able to be more public about what we were doing with each other now than we had been, she didn’t want to deal with what people would say if she was dating the owner of where she worked, so she hadn’t wanted it to be public knowledge before.

Even though she’d said that it was fine now, it hadn’t taken her long to tell me she changed her mind about it and didn’t want to work at the club again. Of course, I was fine with that. She knew the money I had at my disposal, and even if she was stubborn, I’d make sure she had enough to pay for her rent at the coming of the first of the month. If they were even going to renew at that point.

“Damn. I wish I had the money to be able to treat people to life like this any time I had the whim,” Sara said when the food was brought to the table. “This is awesome.”

“I think it’s overrated,” Pete said.

“I think it’s sweet,” Hannah contradicted.

“I think Scott’s sweet,” Lenny chimed in. “And I can’t thank you enough for paying for rooms for the whole group to stay in Marathon a while longer. I wasn’t ready for the fun to end, that’s for sure.”

“Same here,” I told her with a wink. The way she blushed made me smirk, and I was pretty sure Hannah saw the exchange between us. She gave Lenny a look I was sure meant something, but I didn’t comment on it. I was just happy for the fact I was going to get to extend the time I got to pretend to be with Lenny that much longer, and I’d continue to hope for the best by the time this had to come to an end.

“And you said we check in at ten?” Sara asked. “Do you know what rooms are whose?”

“I got three rooms for you guys so you don’t have to feel cramped,” I said. “We’re going to get the rest of the info when we get to the hotel. I’ll take you over myself and make sure you have the green light to get what you want when you want it.”

“That’s it, I’m staying with you,” Hannah said to Sara.

“Obviously,” Sara said. “It’ll be a staycation for you, but why the fuck not?”

“Shit, with that being the case, I might come in and stay, too,” Lenny laughed. “I don’t want to feel left out.”

“Do whatever you want,” I told her. “It’s on me.”

She grinned at me, and I swore I saw the love in her eyes. I didn't say anything about it yet, but I promised myself I was going to talk to her about what we were doing in no uncertain terms soon.

I didn't want to lose her again.

But I had to make sure she wanted to stay first.

Chapter Twelve

Lenny

I couldn't deny the day passed far too quickly for my taste.

But then, it felt like every day since reconnecting with Scott passed much too quickly.

He hadn't been able to hang out with us for long since he had to get back to the club, but he made it clear before he left that Hannah and I were both welcome to enjoy anything and everything the hotel had to offer.

"Just tell them to put it on the tab," he said. "There's a card on file so the hotel isn't going to question it. I made sure they knew you've got the green light to spend what you want."

"I say we put that to the test," Pete said when Scott had left.

"What do you mean?" Sara challenged.

"I mean, he said that we can have anything we want and to just charge it to the room. Why not see what that means exactly? I bet you anything he said it just to show off, and if we try to charge too much, they're going to cut us off."

"Why would you want to do that?" Hannah asked. I was glad she was the one to argue with him. It helped I didn't have to be the one to defend Scott, even if he was playing the part of being my boyfriend.

"Because I don't think this guy is legit," he said. "I bet you anything he's a fake."

“How is he fake?” I asked. “Like, why the fuck would he be fake? You mean to imply I’m with someone who is going to pretend to have all this money and tell me that I can be here and enjoy it with you, and it’s going to turn out to be false?”

“I think you’re onto him, and I think you’re in on the whole thing, too,” Pete told me. “I bet you he said that in front of the rest of us so we think that he is legit, but really you’re the one who is here to make sure we don’t spend too much.”

“Fuck off and get over yourself,” Sara said as she rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why you’ve chosen this hill to die on, but I really think it’s about time you drop the wounded lover thing and just move on with your life.”

“Who’s wounded?” he retorted. “Just because this guy came in and is flexing in front of us right now doesn’t mean he has any real worth. I’m telling you, there’s something about this guy that’s just not right, and I’m pretty sure I’m the only one here who can see through it.”

“Yet Lenny has been with him for over two years, and he’s been real to her?” Hannah asked. “I really do wonder about you sometimes, Pete.”

“Wonder away. What I wonder is why you’re all so eager to be duped,” he shrugged.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“I mean I’m still calling bullshit that you even knew this guy before you came to Marathon in the first place. I don’t know what you have on each other, but the fact that you had

that job, then you quit, then he's all of a sudden stuck to you like glue makes me think that there's more going on here than what you told us. I just don't buy it that you were engaged to this guy for however long you're trying to sell us, and you just didn't mention it before. I don't believe it."

"Believe what you want," Hannah told him with a shrug. "I don't remember Lenny ever saying that she had to get you to believe her for her to be happy in life."

"Fuck no I don't," I joined in. "And you know what? Feel free to order whatever you want and charge it to the room. I'm sure Scott would be more than happy to fund the vacation of your dreams for you despite the fact you have been nothing but awful to him the entire time. That's part of the difference between the two of you. He's a good guy, and you just look for ways to try to make yourself look better by trying to make him look bad."

"News flash, it's not working," Sara said. "And if you ask me, it makes you look stupid trying. God knows this guy has more money than any of us, and I don't know why you would want to take advantage of his generosity."

"Again, you're missing the point," Pete said, his tone getting ever more defensive the more the conversation went on. "I'm not trying to take advantage of him, I'm trying to get you all to wake up and see the truth here. This guy is a fake. I don't know how to make it any clearer to you, but he is. He's got a limit somewhere, and I'm going to find out where it is."

“Like I said, do you,” I replied with a shrug. “But I’m going to let him know that you personally are the one who placed the outrageous orders, so make sure you know that before you do more than you want. I’m not going to make it appear as though the entire group jumped in on being greedy just because you want to make an ass out of yourself.”

“I don’t see how it’s being greedy when he is the one who said for us to have fun,” Pete retorted. “Because now I really do think that you’re trying to monitor what we do.”

“Not at all,” I said. “I’m just telling you if you want to go above and beyond what is normal for anyone who is on a regular vacation, then you can go ahead and do it. But I’m not going to have Scott thinking that all my friends went wild.”

“Exactly,” Sara said. “I don’t want him to think that I jumped on that and charged thousands to the room. This place already had to cost an arm and a leg, so you better believe I’m going to take part in all the included things, but I’m not going to go above and beyond to try to get more money out of the guy than what he already gave. Shit. He already made sure we got the refunds from the other places, too.”

“Are you serious?” Hannah asked. “You got them?”

“I checked my account, and the money is back in already,” she confirmed. “So, I’m convinced this guy is legit. And again, it’s not any of our business what Lenny wanted to tell us while we were in school. That’s not up to us. It’s between her and Scott.”

“I don’t know. I think you all are being stupid, and you’re going to find out the hard way that this guy isn’t what he appears.” Pete said, still being an ass.

“Do you want me to kick him into the pool?” Sara asked me. “I’m about ready to dive in myself just to get away from this asshole.”

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m going for a massage,” Hannah said. “I could use one, and I’m not going to waste the day bickering with Pete about the logistics of us being here. I think Scott is just about the nicest guy on the planet, and I’m happy for Lenny.”

“Me too,” Sara said. “And if you ask the rest of the guys, I know they would say the same.”

“Where is everyone anyway?” I asked. “And why isn’t Pete over there with them?”

“Because it’s a free country and I wanted to be over here with you guys, that’s why,” Pete said.

“More like they don’t want to hang out with him,” Hannah laughed.

“Fuck off,” he said.

“You fuck off,” she argued.

“Anyway, they would be just as happy for you as we are,” Sara continued. “You don’t have to have a jackass like Pete telling you what to do.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I know at the end of the day who is legit and who isn’t, and I’m not going to let Pete ruin this. I’m happy with Scott. Pete, you just have to get over it.”

“You think you are, but when you find out the truth, trust me, you’re going to come crawling back to me.”

“And do what?” Hannah asked. “It’s kind of hard for someone to crawl back to someone when they’ve never been with that person in the first place.”

“Then you’re going to wish that you pulled your head out of your ass sooner,” Pete said with a shrug. “I don’t care how you want to frame it. My point is that I’m the only one here who can evidently see through this guy, and when you come to your senses, it’s going to be too late.”

“I’m sure if there were senses to come to, I would have done it long before now,” I told him.

“Again, I’m not going to get into it with you. I don’t know how he managed to convince you to tell us that you were together for so long, but I don’t see you keeping that to yourself during the time you were in school. I don’t buy your reasoning that it would be worse for you to tell us that you were with someone, and I don’t know why you’re insisting on it now. But you can all be blind to the truth if you want. I’m not,” Pete said.

I rolled my eyes. There were times it was like arguing with a brick wall trying to talk sense into Pete. But he was going to insist he knew the truth, and he wasn’t about to back down. That was all there was to it, and there wasn’t any talking sense

into him. Part of me wished he had left already, but I reminded myself that it was him being here that was making Scott play the part of my fake fiancé.

Until I knew where we stood, I was happy to keep playing engaged. Especially since I wasn't sure where I was going with my own life after this.

Talk of Scott died down for most of the afternoon, and I was happy for that. But, before it was time for us to head to our rooms for the night, Pete started up again.

“Hey, I have a question,” he said in front of everyone. He was staring at me, so I knew I had no way to get out of it.

“What?” I asked.

“If your boyfriend really is so rich, then why don't you have some big shiny rock on your finger? I don't see why a guy would spend the money he did to have us all here, but at the same time not put a rock on you. Seems sketchy to me,” he said.

“Do you really think I need to have a ring on my finger for me to belong to someone?” I asked. “Really Pete? Really?”

“I do,” he said. “I know if I had really asked a woman to marry me, I would be putting a ring on her finger. No question.”

“You are so stupid,” Hannah said.

“Fuck off,” Sara replied.

But, Pete merely smirked.

“You know what?” I said to Hannah. “I think I’m going to spend the night at our place. Might have Scott over, too.”

“Do it,” she said. “You don’t have to put up with this shit.”

“Seems sketch to me!” Pete called out again.

“Fuck off,” I said over my shoulder.

I marched out of the room, putting my phone to my ear as I did. It was already ringing on Scott’s end.

“Hello?”

“Can you come over tonight?” I asked.

“To the hotel?”

“No,” I said. “The apartment. Pete’s an asshole, and I want to spend the night with you.”

“I’ll wrap up work and be there in twenty minutes,” he said.

“Great,” I told him and hung up.

I already had a feeling what was going to happen, and I knew I was playing a dangerous game. But I knew I was already too far in to back out now.

I’d worry about the details tomorrow.

Chapter Thirteen

Scott

I headed straight over to Lenny's apartment. Driving didn't take long, and within fifteen minutes of when I hung up the phone, I was knocking on her front door.

She pulled it open.

"Hey," she said. "Thanks for coming on such short notice. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"Not at all," I told her, quickly assuring her I had just been finishing up a few things at work. "In fact, I was kind of hoping you would find a reason to get a hold of me. I wanted to see you, but didn't want to come off as the clingy one."

Lenny laughed. "I can't ever imagine you being clingy, I'll tell you that right now."

"Better not start then," I told her with a smirk. For a brief moment, I wanted to comment on that, asking her why she left me the way she did if she didn't think I was the clingy type. But I didn't want to ruin her calling me and asking for my company by bringing up the past. Especially when that past wasn't as pleasant as it could have been.

"So, this is the inside of my humble abode," she told me.

"I like it," I said.

"Thanks," she shrugged. "It came furnished with ninety percent of the décor, so I can't take credit. Although I do have

to say Hannah did some rearranging in here that made it feel a lot more like a home and less like a showroom.”

“It makes sense that it came furnished, considering the fact you aren’t living here permanently,” I told her. “And it’s not too bad. The décor I mean.”

“Not really my taste, but whatever,” she said with another shrug. I could tell she was in a bad mood.

“Don’t let whatever it was Pete said get to you like this,” I told her. “You know him. From what I can tell so far, the guy thrives on making everyone around him miserable. I’m sure whatever he had to say was just as stupid as he is.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t take much imagination for you to know it was something about you,” she replied. “He just kept going on and on about how you must not have the money you have and how he wanted to charge the room up and see if there was a limit to what you’d be willing to spend. Stupid stuff, really.”

“Sure, but it’s not like he would spend enough to bother me or even make a dent in the money I have. You know as well as I do, the investments I have with the clubs far exceeds what someone is going to spend in a few days at a hotel. Especially when they’re ordering room service.”

“I know, and it wasn’t necessarily that part that bothered me. I mean, it’s Pete, sure, and I know he’s pissed about the fact you and I are together, but it’s the principle of what he wanted to do, I don’t know. It’s just like he’s got some gift of being able to get under my skin.”

“Some people are just good at that,” I conceded. “And I’m serious. I don’t want you to worry about him anymore.”

“I’ll try,” she said, but there was still something she wasn’t telling me. Even after all the time we’d spent apart, I could still read it on her face.

“What?” I asked.

“What do you mean, what?” she replied.

“You’ve got something on your mind,” I told her. “I can see it on your face.”

“It’s nothing. I’m trying to let it go,” she replied with a sigh. “There’s just some things that make me want to punch him right in the middle of his stupid face.”

“And if you did, he’d deserve it,” I laughed. “Okay, tell me what it is he said that has you so worked up. It must be more than saying he was going to charge up a bunch of things to the room, or I don’t think you would be this upset about it.”

“It was something he said about us,” she told me, hesitating as she did. “It sort of went along with the way he was saying that you and I aren’t really engaged.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“In addition to being the world’s biggest asshole, he’s insisting that if we were really engaged, I would have said something before we were all here,” she said.

“But you told him why you didn’t, and if he doesn’t believe you, that’s on him. It’s not up to you to convince him that you

were or weren't with someone.”

“Then he said that if we were really together and you were really so rich, why don't I have a ring on my finger,” she said. “I tried to tell him that I didn't need to have some rock on my hand to prove to the world I belonged to you, and I'm fine without one, but he wasn't letting up.”

“What a little prick,” I said, hiding how much I wanted to punch him in the face myself. “Did anyone else jump on that one? I didn't even think of that.”

“Of course, the rest of my friends tried to tell him to fuck off and mind his own business, but when he said that he couldn't see me being yours without a ring, that's when I had had enough. I was either going to flip out on him and make a scene right there in the hotel, or I had to leave. I told Hannah I was going to give you a call and have you over to our place right in front of Pete, hoping he has that bothering him all night long.”

“But then you really did call me,” I commented. “And I'm guessing you had reason to do that outside of proving a point to Pete, right?”

“I guess,” she said with a sigh. “I don't know. I was so pissed off, I had to get it off my chest somehow, and you were the only one I wanted to talk to, so I called. I'm glad you did come over, but you don't have to stay with me if you don't want to. I'm starting to feel better now.”

“Of course, I want to stay,” I said. “If you want me to. I don't want to intrude, but I'm not going to be offended if you

don't want to hang out. I'm pretty easygoing."

I smiled, and she ran her hand over the back of her head. It was obvious to me she was torn, and I wished she wasn't. I didn't want her to feel that way. It didn't feel like a good sign if she had to debate within herself whether she wanted me to stay the night. It wasn't exactly taking the steps to us getting back together for real that I wanted.

But I also wasn't going to pressure her to do anything, either. The fact that she had ghosted me before showed me that she wasn't always the best in expressing her feelings, and I didn't want her to feel like she had to let me stay.

"I can sleep on the couch if you'd like," I offered. "So that way you don't have to be alone, but at the same time I don't want to overstep any boundaries."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" she asked. "I feel rude asking you to come over then putting you on the couch. I mean, you could be in bed with me, but, well, you know."

"It's not even a thing," I assured her. "I came over to talk to you because you needed me to talk to. Just because you have me over doesn't mean you have to do anything you don't want to. And no matter what happens between us, that doesn't change the way I feel about you."

"Thanks," Lenny said with a small smile.

Her eyes met mine for a moment, and I wasn't sure what I read in her expression. There was love, sure, but was it the kind of romantic love I wanted to see? Or was that just what I

was hoping for, and that was why I thought it was there? Was she embarrassed over not having a ring on her finger? Or would she even want to have one with how this wasn't even real?

There were a variety of questions running through my mind faster than I was able to pay any single one real attention, but I didn't have time to worry too much about it before Lenny said something and headed back toward her room.

"What was that?" I asked. "I didn't hear what you said."

"I said I was going to grab you a pillow and some blankets," she replied as she came back out of her room with her hands full of the bedding. "The couch really isn't that bad, or I would feel super guilty about having you sleep out here."

"Like I said, don't worry about it," I replied. "I'm just glad to be here when you need someone to talk to, and I want you to feel as comfortable as possible. You can lay in bed and think of all the ways Pete is going to get his karma one of these days, and leave it at that. No one in her right mind is going to want to be with him if he keeps up that attitude. You can take some comfort in that."

"I guess," she said. "I just don't know why he has to be such a shithead to me about things. I get that he's pissed that I don't want to date him, but I'm sick of the way he's like relentlessly bothering me. Like, I might as well revert back to being in middle school with the bullies I dealt with back then, you know?"

“But being an adult, you get to walk away from him and never see him again,” I told her. “And if you want, just say the word, and I’ll have the hotel remove him. You really are the one who is calling the shots here.”

She blushed, which caused me to smirk.

“I don’t think I could be that mean, even if I do hate him,” she said. “But I’m going to keep that in mind. Just knowing I have that power helps.”

“Exactly,” I told her.

“Goodnight,” she said. “And thank you.”

“Sleep well, and with any luck, Pete’s not going to have any sleep tonight at all,” I called after her.

She laughed before closing her door most of the way, and I stripped down to my boxers before sliding onto the couch.

It was crazy to think that Lenny was just in the other room, and it took all the self-control I had in me to stay on the couch. But I knew it was a privilege just to be here, and I wasn’t going to fuck that up.

It didn’t take me long to drift off to sleep myself, which was surprising since I was trying to get comfortable on the couch. It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t close to being in a bed, either.

I wasn’t sure how long I had laid there before I heard something in the hallway. I figured Lenny was creeping to the bathroom when suddenly, I felt her hand on my side. She didn’t say anything as she slid onto the couch in front of me,

and I smiled to myself, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her close to me.

It wasn't comfortable by any means, but Lenny was the only thing I wanted in the entire world that I didn't already have, and with her laying in front of me, I was more than happy to be smashed in this awkward position.

I'd learned that this could only last for a short time, and I was making the most of every second.

I didn't want to waste a single moment.

Chapter Fourteen

Lenny

I woke up in an awkward position, and there was a kink in my back when I did.

It wasn't comfortable by any means, but the fact Scott had come over to my place the night before meant the world to me, especially since I had been super awkward about where he'd be sleeping.

Not that I meant to be, but I still felt torn.

For as much as I wanted to let loose and just be with him, there was also the fear in the back of my mind of what would happen when I went back to school. The more I considered my career, the more I wanted to get a doctorate and do the best I could. I had made up my mind that I wanted to work with children and adults who have learning disabilities and a doctorate degree would better prepare me to make a difference in the lives of others.

That didn't necessarily mean that I would have to break up with Scott like I did before, but then, I wasn't sure he would even want to be with me knowing I was going to leave again.

With all the emotions running laps in my mind, I wasn't sure what to feel or think.

So, when I got the urge to get up and go lie with him out on the couch, I just went with it. I knew just ignoring the feeling wasn't going to get me anywhere. Not when it was in my mind

that he was so close. But I also knew I was playing with fire. If I went out there and laid with him, there was a good chance that one thing would lead to another.

In fact, I was rather surprised when it hadn't, and the two of us woke up tangled together without having anything else happen between us.

"Good morning," Scott said. "Sleep well?"

"I slept better with you here than I have in weeks," I admitted.

"Are you sure it was me, or was it this lovely couch you've got us laying on?" he teased.

I smiled. "Sorry. I knew this would be uncomfortable, but I did my best to set you up for comfort by telling you it wasn't that bad."

"I know your heart was in the right place, but I'm not sure the rest of your mind was," he said as he stretched a bit. "I'm feeling parts of my back I haven't felt in a long time. And I'm not sure that's a good thing."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I could say the same. If there's one thing I miss about being in school, it was the access to the gym all day, every day."

"There's plenty of gyms," he told me. "I'm not sure that's a good enough excuse."

"Oh, fuck you," I said.

"Yes please," he told me with a smirk.

I rolled on top of him, resting full length on his body as I looked down into his eyes.

“You are impossible, you know that?” I asked.

“I know,” he replied, the smirk still on his face. “Don’t hate me.”

“It’s hard not to,” I laughed. “But then, there’s such a fine line between love and hate, isn’t there?”

“Which is it?” he asked me.

I paused. I wished it was easy for me to blurt out my love for him, but I held back. There was something in my mind that warned me to only say the things I meant, and I knew if I told him I still loved him after all these years, I was going to have to really commit. Not because I didn’t love him now, but because I was still holding back, and he knew it.

So, instead of saying anything, I leaned forward, kissing him tenderly.

It was slow and deliberate. There wasn’t the same energy behind it that there had been when I kissed him in the middle of the street, and I had reason for that. When we were out in front of my place and I kissed him, I was caught up in the moment, filled with the familiar affection for him that I’d carried for as long as I could remember.

But now, there was more.

I was kissing him with passion now, letting the smoldering heat grow between us. He was already hard, which was only turning me on more. I didn’t wear a bra or panties when I

slept, so I was only wearing a thin tank top and cotton shorts. Neither of which left anything to the imagination.

He wore only his boxers, and his dick pressed against them, pressing against me through the two layers of thin fabric. I continued to kiss him, and as the heat grew, so did the intensity. He pulled my tank top off, tossing it in a ball to the other side of the room.

“What was that for?” I asked with a laugh. “You didn’t have to throw it all the way over there, did you?”

“I did,” he said. “I want you to be as naked as possible, and the only way to make sure that happens is to make sure your clothes are as far away as possible.”

“Too funny,” I said, taking his hands and putting them to my tits. I closed my eyes as I straddled him, leaning my head back as she squeezed and massaged my tits. He pinched my nipples between his fingers, sending a rush of pleasure through me.

“God, I’ve missed you,” I breathed.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” he replied. His tone was low and guttural with arousal, and even more emotions rushed through me. I hadn’t realized just how many feelings I had shoved down and tried to forget about when I left him before, and once he was kissing me, touching me like he used to, it all came back to me in one single sweep.

I shifted myself over the top of him to pull off my shorts, then I tossed them to the other side of the room.

“That’s my girl,” he said. “Get rid of all the clothes.”

“All of them.,” I repeated, pulling on his boxers. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. Take these off.”

“Why?” he asked, reaching down and pulling his cock out. “I can take out the important part right here and I don’t have to move.”

“How is that fair?” I asked with a laugh.

“Because I don’t want to move. I love the sight of you on top of me, and I don’t want it to end, even for a second.”

“Okay, I guess that’s fair,” I replied. “I would have to move for you to be able to get these off.”

“Exactly,” he smirked.

I took his cock in my hand and stroked him. He closed his eyes, and I felt the shudder run through him as I did.

“God, I don’t know what you do to me,” he said. “You make me feel things like never before, I have to say.”

“Do you like it?” I asked with my naughtiest grin. “Because I’m obsessed with your dick.”

“And it’s all yours,” I told her. “You can do whatever you want.”

“Really?” I asked. “I can even put it inside me?”

“You know I would love nothing better,” he said.

I eased myself on top of him, sitting down slowly, taking him inch by inch as he stretched open my tight pussy. I closed my eyes, gasping as I took him inside me.

“Oh my God. I have missed you. I’ve missed this. You are so fucking big, I can barely fit you inside me.”

“You’re just as tight as I remember you being,” he said with a sigh. “God, I have missed your tight little pussy.”

I rocked my hips back and forth, riding him as I used to do. Each time I swung my hips, I felt another wave of pleasure run through me. His cock massaged me on the inside just right, each sweep making his dick brush my most sensitive places. I felt connected to him more than I had with anyone else in my life, and I was sure he was the only one who was capable of making me feel this way.

“God, you feel so good. You’re incredible,” I told him as I put my hands on his chest.

“Baby, you have no idea how good you feel,” he replied, his hands on my waist as I rocked back and forth. He moved his hips under me, pumping himself into me from below. I stopped moving, holding myself halfway above him so he was able to thrust into me fast and hard.

I liked riding him, but I loved it when he was the one who took control, like now. I was already getting closer to cumming, but when he did that, he pushed me right up to the edge.

“Oh my God, you’re going to make me cum,” I breathed. “Keep going, just like that. Don’t stop, don’t stop.”

He didn’t, holding me still as he continued to thrust his hips upward. The sound of our bodies slapping together filled the

air, mixed with the moans that escaped my lips. He would grunt every now and then, telling me he was enjoying this just as much as I was.

“Cum for me, baby,” he said. “Cum for me. I want to feel your pussy closing around my cock.”

His words turned me on even more than I had been, and as he pushed into me twice more, I came. I cried out as I did, closing my eyes and turning my face upward. He moved his hands from my waist up to my tits, and the way he pinched my nipples as I came intensified the orgasm.

“Fuck yes, fuck yes,” I whimpered. “God, you’re incredible.”

He was breathing hard, and watching the way he got me off was enough to send himself over the edge, and he came, too.

He growled as he did.

“Fuck me, yes. Fuck.”

I felt his cock pulsing inside me, and I held myself down on top of him, wanting to take every last bit of his load inside me. I didn’t want to waste a single bit, putting my hands on his chest and looking down into his face as he came. I loved to see that pleasure in his expression, and I could have sat there watching forever.

“Damn,” he said once the last of his orgasm passed. “You are incredible in more ways than I can say.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth,” I said. “But you know, I’ve been wondering something.”

“Uh-oh,” he said.

I slid off him and went to get my clothes, talking as I did.

“How many?” I asked.

“How many what?”

“How many people have you had sex with since me?” I asked.

“None,” he said.

I gave him a look.

“What?” he asked.

“Come on, tell me,” I said. “It’s not going to hurt my feelings. I just want to know.”

“None,” he laughed. “I’m serious. I have a lot of things going on, and after you left, it’s not like I went out to find someone else. I just threw myself into my clubs and investments.”

“Okay, I get that,” I said with a shrug. “I dove into school, so I guess I can let that fly.”

“How about you?” he asked me. “I’m guessing Pete’s not one of them.”

“Fuck no,” I exclaimed as I pulled my shorts and tank top back on. “Only in his dreams. But seriously though, none.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked. “You said you haven’t.”

“Because you’re incredible,” he said. “I can’t imagine you being anywhere and not having your pick of the lot.”

“I dated a bit,” I admitted, “But I always broke up with them pretty fast. I never got to the point of having sex with any of them, which I guess was starting to get me the reputation of being a prude.”

He smiled, and I looked at him questioningly.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing’s funny,” he said. “I’m just, I don’t know. I’m glad you haven’t slept with anyone else, that’s all.”

“Me too, on both fronts,” I said with a smile back to him. “There’s something else.”

“What?” he asked.

“I’m just wondering why you and I didn’t take this to the bed,” I pointed out. “Might have been a bit more comfortable.”

“Oh, fuck it,” he replied.

We both looked at each other for a moment, then we burst into laughter.

It felt good to be back where we belonged.

Chapter Fifteen

Scott

I hadn't expected to have sex with Lenny when I went over to her apartment, but I had to admit, I was beyond thrilled it had happened.

That morning, when she started kissing me, I wasn't sure it was a good idea to keep moving forward with the act. It would have been difficult to stop myself in the heat of the moment, but I would have if I felt it was the right thing to do. But Lenny clearly knew what she was doing, and she didn't want to stop.

She knew when she came out to the couch that she was going to be laying with me, and later into the morning, when we slept together, she was the one who had taken charge. It was incredible, just as good as I remembered if not better.

I had hoped that when she said she had something she wanted to talk to me about she was going to bring up the status of our relationship for real. I wanted to have that talk. But, when she instead talked about how many people we'd slept with after breaking up, the only good I could get out of that was the fact she hadn't had sex with anyone else.

At least she hadn't wanted to move on.

Not yet, at least.

We hung out at her apartment for a few hours after we finally got up for the day, but even then, I felt like it was too

soon when it was time for me to head out for the day.

“Why don’t you just call in?” Lenny asked. “You’re the owner of the place. It’s not like you don’t have the power to tell them you aren’t coming into work. Who’s going to get mad at you?”

“It’s not that. I told Les I would be in to help with some of the inventory we need to go over,” I said. “And you know how I am about things like that. I don’t want to leave him hanging, and with how well the club has been doing so far, I don’t want to drop the ball now.”

“I know, but still,” she said. “I would rather hang out with you today.”

“I know, but you can do that if you want to come down to the club,” I suggested.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Even if you’re the owner and don’t mind that I quit like right after I started, I don’t want to deal with the dirty looks I’m sure I’ll get from the other wait staff.”

“You can just tell them you’re engaged to the owner, so they better not look at you too much the wrong way or you’re going to have them fired,” I teased.

“I mean, I could, but how would that help you out?” she asked. “Come in, fire the rest of the staff, then leave you hanging without anyone?”

“That’s true,” I said. “Maybe you better just go hang out with the rest of your friends for the day, and I’ll come find you

later.”

“Are you sure?” she asked me. “You do have the option to come with us. You know the club is still going to be there when you wake up in the morning, right?”

“Sure,” I said. “But what’s going to keep me from doing the same thing tomorrow?”

“Nothing, except for the fact that you have more money than you know what to do with. It’s not like you have to have this club.”

“But when I’m committed to something, I see it through,” I said. “I purchased that club with the intent of making it as great as all the Bourbon Streets I have scattered about the rest of the states. I can’t have one with bad reviews because I didn’t give it the proper attention.”

“Ugh, there are some things about you that are so responsible, they’re annoying,” she rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ever just want to do something wild?”

“Being with you is pretty wild,” I teased. “I don’t know if you noticed, but you bring out a side of me that I don’t spread to the rest of my life.”

“That’s true,” she said. “But there are times I want you to be even wilder. Let me be the one to make you even wilder than you are!”

I laughed. “You can make me as wild as you want—tonight. It’s not going to take me the rest of the day to get this done, especially if I get there this morning.”

“I’m taking that to mean you want me to get out of here,” she said.

“Well, I’m the one who has to get out of here,” I replied. “This is your place, remember?”

“You know what I mean,” she said. “You want me to let you leave so you can get to work.”

“There you go,” I told her. “Although, you know there is another option, if you want.”

“Which is what?” she asked.

“You could come stay with me for a while,” I said.

“I just told you I don’t want to have the dirty looks from the rest of the staff,” she said.

“No, I don’t mean come stay with me at work. I mean you can move in with me at my penthouse. Hannah is already staying with the rest of the group at the hotel, so why not? You don’t have to deal with Pete, and that way you and I can maintain the appearance of what we’re doing,” I explained.

She paused for a moment, and I could see she was really thinking over what I’d said. There was a part of me that wanted to press the matter and get her to agree to doing it before she had the chance to change her mind, but I was being careful with this. I still wasn’t entirely sure why she had ghosted me the first time, and because of that, I wanted to be careful with what I said to her now.

The last thing I wanted was for her to feel like she had to stay with me. I didn’t want to scare her off when I felt we were

making strides to getting back together for real this time. Even more than just dating, I wanted to be with her forever. But I had to make sure she was on the same page before I brought that up.

And with Lenny, the more freedom she had to make her own decisions and draw her own conclusions, the better.

“I think I’m going to stay here,” she said at last. “I know it would be nice to stay with you, but Hannah is going to be back here today or tomorrow, and I don’t want her to feel like I abandoned her or anything.”

“Don’t you think she would understand?” I asked.

“Sure, but at the same time, the whole reason she and I are here in the first place was to hang out for a while longer before moving on with the rest of our lives. I don’t want her to feel like I came down here, met you again, then went off and did what I wanted and left her in the dust.”

“That’s a good point,” I said with a sigh. “But you know, there is a part of me that would feel better if you came to stay with me.”

“Feel better about what?” she asked.

“About your situation with Pete,” I admitted.

“Are you jealous?” she asked with a smirk.

“No,” I said. “I’m more concerned. There’s something about that gut I really don’t like, and it goes beyond him just being an asshole to you. I don’t trust him, and I don’t want to see him trying to pull something.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she said. “I’m not going to be alone. Hannah will be here, and besides, I don’t think he’s that stupid. Sure, he’s pushy and shit, but I can’t see him doing something that could cause him legal issues. He’s got too big of an ego for that.”

“Still, I’m not convinced,” I said. “I’ve been out in the world and seen all kinds of people. I can usually size up a person’s character pretty quickly and something is off with him.”

“Don’t worry and anyway, I’ll let you know when Hannah gets here, and I’ll keep you in the loop on what I’m doing with my day. I mean it when I said I wanted to hang out with you, so if you’re going to go to work, I would love for you to come find me when you get done with what you’re doing.”

“And I will,” I promised her. “I wish I could get out of doing it, but you know how particular I can be with certain things. I’m not going to put in all the work that I have up to this point and walk out on it now that we’re coming down to the end of finishing the ownership transition and new operating policies.”

“Just make sure you delegate as much as you possibly can,” she told me with a grin. “The sooner you can get out of there, the sooner you and I can go around and make Pete jealous. You could even show up and pick up Hannah and me from the hotel and bring us back to the club to have dinner. We can make a thing out of it and how you’re going to have the kitchen cook something special for us.”

“You had me at making Pete jealous,” I told her. “I’ll text you and let you know what my timeframe looks like.”

“Sounds good,” she said. “Oh, and thank you for coming over last night. It means a lot to me that you did that for me.”

“Of course. Anytime,” I told her and kissed her goodbye.

I headed out and drove back to my place to shower and get ready to head down to the club, but my mind was on Lenny the entire time. I replayed the wild sex we had had in my mind again and again. Her body was so perfect, it was addicting.

But, as I showered, I couldn’t shake the feeling out of my mind that there was something wrong with Pete. I was drawing on my instincts I’d learned to trust when I was in the Navy. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was in particular, but I knew there was something wrong. I really would feel a lot better if I could convince Lenny to come move in with me, but I wasn’t going to guilt her into doing it.

I already threw the idea out there, and the fact she said no had to be enough for me. I did trust her judgment, but she was also young and tended to see the best in people. I worried she was overlooking certain things that could really be red flags.

Still, there wasn’t anything I could do about it right now.

I just had to watch for any more signs I could use to convince her Pete wasn’t what he seemed.

And wait for his true colors to come out.

Chapter Sixteen

Lenny

“Don’t mind if I do, thank you,” Hannah said as she took the martini from the waiter. “It’s got to be martini o’clock somewhere.”

I laughed and took a martini from the tray as well. “I don’t care what people say about this, green apple martinis are just about the best thing on the planet. I mean, you can’t beat some of the tropical drinks, but I can’t imagine my life without some green apple martinis involved.”

“Girl same. Same! But then, after the past few days, I’m not sure I’m ever going to be able to go back to real life. They’ve treated us like royalty here, and we aren’t even technically staying,” Hannah said.

“Right?” I replied with a shake of my head. “I can’t believe you and I live in that apartment just a few blocks away from here and have to literally do everything. Here, I feel like I could snap my fingers and we’d get anything we wanted just handed over to us on a silver platter.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And it’s even better when Pete’s doing whatever it is he’s doing with the others. Not that I don’t want to hang out with everyone, but you know. I would rather he was out bothering someone else than hovering around us the whole time.”

“I mean, sure,” Hannah said. “I know we’re not going to get to see the guys very much longer, but it’s nice to have some best friend time with each other while we’re here. You know as well as I do that we are on limited time as well. It might not be as limited as the time we have with the rest of the group, but still.”

“Agreed,” I said. “We have at least a couple more weeks anyway.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to do yet with Scott?” she asked me. “I mean, you have been spending quite a bit of time with him. It’s like you guys really are dating.”

“I know,” I said. “But no, we haven’t really talked about it. The more time I spend with him, the more it feels like we really are together again. But then, it’s also like all the time we have to talk to each other about things and what we’re doing I just can’t find the words to do it. And I get the strongest impression he feels the same way.”

“So, is that a good thing or not?” she asked.

“For now, it’s good,” I said. “Because we don’t have to have the uncomfortable conversation about how we’re going to move forward.”

“Sure, but also, don’t you want to know how you’re going to do things? You’ve said how you regret leaving the way you did before. You don’t want to do that again, right?”

“Of course, I don’t,” I said. “But also, I just don’t know. Having that conversation is going to make things real, and I’m

not sure I'm ready for that.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked. “It seems like you two are great together. I don't see the things that go on behind closed doors, but I'm guessing it must be pretty good if you're going over there after dinner every night.”

“No, it's great,” I said. “But you know how I am with commitment to my career. I have always wanted to be a therapist, and that has been the focus of what I've been going for all this time. The thought of getting married or something, I don't know. It just feels like I'm giving up on what I wanted to do with myself in favor of being with a guy.”

“But that's not really what's going on,” Hannah retorted. “Sure, you might not be the strong single woman, but you're still a strong independent woman. There's nothing about being with a man that takes away from who you are.”

“Sure,” I agreed. “But I'm not talking about being with just any man, you know? I'm talking about being with a billionaire. Someone who already has their life figured out. Like, he's done it all, and I'm just getting ready to start my career. I'm afraid if I were to tell him that I wanted to keep going in the direction of getting a doctorate that he would tell me that he wasn't interested in that.”

“I can't see that happening,” she said. “The way he looks at you isn't the way someone looks at someone they are going to dump if they want to go back to school. He seems like he wants what's best for you.”

“You say that, but you have also seen him being the guy who buys us everything. He’s the one who is responsible for all this. He’s the one who is getting the credit. I’m not saying that I don’t want to thank him, but what I’m saying is that I can’t compare with that. I don’t want to have to rely on him. I want to be a partner with someone.”

“I swear. You get the world’s greatest guy, and yet you can’t bring yourself to like him because of the fact he makes money? Girl, you’re on the cusp of living the dream here. I don’t think you should get hung up on who needs who and who paid for what. Go for your doctorate, do you, and let him come along for the ride. It seems straightforward to me.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “But then, I’ve never been in this position before. I was worried about what he would say the last time I was going through this, so I just left. He took me back when I got back here, but we haven’t even talked about the way I left, so I don’t even know for sure how he feels about that.”

“It sounds to me like you two just need to sit down and have that talk,” Hannah commented.

“It sounds so simple when you say it that way,” I sighed. “But if you got inside my head for a second and saw all the different angles I’m dealing with, I think you’d understand a bit more why I feel the way I do about this.”

“I’m not trying to say your feelings aren’t valid,” Hannah said. “I’m just saying that I don’t want to see you throw this away when you two are clearly so good together just because

you're afraid of what might happen. It's like one of those cutting off your nose to spite your face sort of things, you know?"

"I guess," I said. "I don't know. You think we're that good together?"

"Girl, if I could somehow get you to see how good the two of you are together, you would want to walk down the aisle tomorrow, I'm sure of it. You just have to stop overthinking this stuff," she said. "I mean, for what it's worth. I know I'm not the one with a very good track record of men myself."

"But you seem to know what you want in life. I feel torn. Like I have to choose between being with Scott and going on to get my doctorate."

"And you know you want that doctorate," she said. "Since you know that's what you want, you have to fit in the rest of your life around that. It's not that you have to fit your life around the person you're with, you have to find the person who is going to build that life with you. And with what he's got going for him, I can't see him being scared off by someone who wants to go to school to get a doctorate. I mean, it seems to me that you would be making him proud by doing that."

I shook my head. "I wish I could be as confident as you are, but I just don't know. I feel like it's jumping the gun. Do I even deserve to be with someone like him when I just up and left without a word the last time we were together? I can't say I do. But if he still wants to be with me, then wouldn't it be stupid for me to just walk away from all this again?"

“Yes, yes it would be,” Hannah told me. “You aren’t jumping into anything. The fact that you haven’t seriously dated anyone in school because of him says a lot, doesn’t it?”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug. “I guess I just feel like I have to have more answers than I do. I feel like I should know what I want and who I want to be with, and I guess I feel like if it’s the right thing to do then it should all just make sense.”

“And this doesn’t?” Hannah pressed.

“What doesn’t make sense is the fact I don’t feel like I can talk about it,” I said. “I feel like I should be able to just walk up to him and tell him how things went down in my head last time, but every time I want to talk about things with him, it’s just easier for me not to. Like, I would way rather just have fun with him right now. And part of that having fun is the fact there isn’t any expectations of anything. We’re just pretending, right?”

“But are you?” Hannah asked.

She gave me one of her looks that made me stop and think about what I was really doing. I knew what she was getting at. It felt safe to me because I could say that we were pretending every time things started to take a serious turn. But, on the same note, the way we were together clearly wasn’t a game.

“I’ll talk to him,” I said. “I’m sure the time will come up when it just feels like the right thing to do, and I’ll take that chance. I don’t think I have to bring it up in one of those official talks, but I’ll keep an eye out for the right time to have the convo.”

“No, you won’t,” Hannah said. “You’re going to just let this keep going on and on until the point you’re going to have to decide what you’re doing. You’re going to go back to school, either maintaining a relationship with Scott or not.”

I sighed. There were times when I was sure my best friend knew me better than I knew myself, and I couldn’t argue with her. I had done this before, and there was no real reason to assume I wasn’t going to do the same thing all over again. It wasn’t as though I had planned to ghost him the whole time we were together before. It just sort of happened.

And with how things were going for us now, I knew I was on track for the same thing to happen all over again if we didn’t work things out before it was too late.

“I promise I will. I’m going to find the right time, and I’m going to talk to him,” I said.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt,” Hannah said. “And I’m afraid you’re going to be so scared that the conversation you need to have will hurt that you’re not going to do it right up to the point that you do get hurt.”

“It’s like you watched me go through this the first time,” I said with a laugh.

“Lenny... Aren’t you a to-be therapist and should know these things?” she said, but I changed the subject.

“We’ll figure it out. Anyway, I’m down for another martini, are you?” I asked.

“Lenny,” she said again. But I refused to talk about this further. I wasn’t ready to give a solid answer, and I would avoid it until I had to.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I laughed and motioned for the waiter to come over. “Could we please get two more of those?”

“Coming right up,” he said.

“This is the life,” I told her with a smile. She smiled in return, and simply shook her head. I knew there was more she wanted to say, but she let the conversation go for now.

Still, I couldn’t help but add one more comment under my breath.

“This is the life, alright. Even if it is a fake one.”

Chapter Seventeen

Scott

“I thought you were going to text me,” I said when Lenny opened the door to her apartment.

“Hello to you, too,” she replied. “Sorry, I meant to. I got busy.”

“Am I interrupting anything?” I asked, glancing behind her and into the room.

“Hannah’s just going through a few things. Can’t believe how fast this month has been flying by, you know?” she asked.

There was something off about her. I could sense it from the way she was almost avoiding making eye contact with me. I already knew her well enough to make it incredibly difficult for her to hide anything from me, but I also got the impression she was still trying.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” I asked suddenly.

“A walk?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a beautiful evening, and it could be nice to just walk along the beach. Get out of the house for a bit and just breathe.”

“Sure,” Lenny said with a shrug.

I held out my hand to her, and she almost reluctantly accepted. I was increasingly certain there was something she wasn’t telling me, but I chose to play it cool. I’d figure it out

without pouncing on her for the information, though I fully intended to know what was going on before the end of the evening.

We veered off the sidewalk and onto the sandy beach, walking until we were on a narrow trail that seemed to cut through the back of the beach away from those enjoying the water, but yet close enough to the ocean to be able to enjoy the waves and the warm sea breeze ourselves.

“This month really is flying by, isn’t it?” I agreed once we were alone. “There’s only what, ten days left?”

“Right,” Lenny said with a nod. “Hannah and I were just talking about what’s next.”

“And what *is* next?” I pressed.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean are you going to stay for another month? You now have a taste for what life is like down here, why not stay?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Another month would mean I really should find a job. I mean, I’m grateful for all that you’ve done for me this month and everything, don’t get me wrong. But I’m not about to just hang out all month and not do shit with myself.”

“You never could,” I laughed. “That would make you go insane.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “I’d have to have something to do with myself.”

“You could do me,” I told her.

She gave me a mischievous look. “More than I already have?”

“I’ll never get enough of you,” I said.

She laughed. “You’re sweet.”

Her face changed from the amusement, however, back to being grim. The way she bounced back and forth with her emotions bothered me, and I couldn’t help but ask her about it.

“What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean clearly there’s something you’re not telling me,” I said. “Come on, you know I can read you like a book. What’s on your mind?”

“I guess it’s just the thought of going back to school,” she replied.

“Oh?”

“I want to get my doctorate,” she continued. “I’ve already worked so hard to get to this point in my life, what’s a few more years to have that? I mean, think about it. I would love to reach that level.”

“I say go for it.”

“Really?” she asked, looking at me anxiously.

“Of course,” I told her. “Why wouldn’t you? Like you said, you’ve already come this far. Why not keep it going and finish strong?”

She smiled, but there was still a sadness to the smile that left me curious to know what was going on in her head.

“But what does that mean?” she asked.

“What?”

“For us,” she clarified. “If I leave? I guess I should ask how you feel about how things ended between us before. I still feel guilty about ghosting you.”

“Don’t,” I said. “Because the way I see it, we never did break up, did we?”

We had reached a place on the trail with a lot of foliage around, and I led her away from the path to a clearing out of sight of others. There was grass blanketing the ground, so we sat down.

“I suppose,” she said. “But I don’t know. I just. I don’t know what to do.”

“Then don’t do anything,” I told her. “You don’t have to have all the answers to life right now, trust me on that. They say you have to figure out who you are and what you want, but that’s a lie if I ever heard one. You’re always going to have the freedom to change your mind, and you’ll forever be discovering yourself.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” I said. “Don’t ever stop growing and changing. It’s part of the beauty of life.”

“You’re amazing,” she said. “I don’t know how you do it, but it’s like you always know just what to say.”

“I’m just talking from my heart,” I told her. “I’ve read all the books there is to read about how to get your shit together, trust me. But the one conclusion I’ve drawn is that we are all figuring this shit out as we go along. You don’t have to have it all planned out.”

She was looking at me with her wide eyes, and she smiled at my words. I knew this would be a great time to ask her to be mine officially. I didn’t care if that was girlfriend or fiancé, I just wanted to make her mine once and for all.

But Lenny closed her eyes and leaned toward me, and I met her for the kiss.

The familiar taste of her filled me as my mouth moved over hers. My nostrils filled with the rich scent of her perfume, and I was keenly aware of the contrast of her warm touch against my skin with the coolness of the night.

The ocean lapping against the shore faded into the background as she gave a soft moan into my mouth. I slipped my tongue between her lips and teased her, our two tongues dancing together as our hands started caressing each other.

I pulled her tank top off, followed by my own shirt. She kept her bra on since we were technically out in public although out of sight of others, but that didn’t stop me from pulling her shorts off. I pushed her thong out of the way with my fingers before running them between the lips of her pussy.

“You’re already so wet,” I breathed.

“You turn me on,” she said. “Just being around you is a turn on.”

“That works both ways,” I told her. “If you knew what you did to me every time you walk into a room, I’d never be able to wear cotton shorts around you.”

She laughed, reaching down and massaging my hard bulge, moving my hands out of her way in the process. “Seems like you’re pretty eager to have me now.”

“I’m always eager to have you,” I growled. I pulled her closer to me, letting her unbutton the top of my shorts before pushing down the zipper. She then pulled my cock out, stroking it with her warm hand.

“God baby, you have me hard as a rock. If you’re not careful, I’m going to finish with just you holding me like that,” I said.

“I’m practically drenched needing you right now,” she told me. “I want you inside me, so bad.”

I cut off her words with my mouth, kissing her hard and fast. She moaned as I once more put my hand to her pussy, teasing her with my fingers, moving them against her and getting her to try to get off by using them. But I wasn’t going to let her cum on my hand. I didn’t want that.

I wanted her to finish with me inside her, so as she grew more desperate in the way she was grinding on me, I pulled my hand away.

“You’re such an evil tease!” she told me. “God, you’re driving me insane.”

“You said you wanted me inside you,” I replied. “And I’m not yet.”

“But you keep doing that with your fingers, and it makes me want to cum so bad,” she whimpered. “I don’t know what you do, but you do it well.”

I kissed her once again, this time using my fingers to spread the lips of her pussy before pushing my cock inside. She gasped, nipping my lower lip as she did and sending a thrill through me.

Her pussy was so tight, feeling the warmth of it tightening around my dick was heaven on earth. I held myself there, feeling her as deep as I possibly could, my body stretching hers wide open.

I was confident I felt every muscle in her, her little pussy stretching then relaxing to be able to take my full girth inside.

“Jesus, wow,” she said. “I don’t think you’ve ever been this deep inside me before.”

“I don’t know, but you feel incredible,” I breathed. “God, you’re so tight.”

“You’re so big, I can barely take all of you inside.”

I drew out most of the way, then I pushed back into her. I moved slowly, deliberately. I wanted her to feel every inch of me as I slid back into her, her body having to open wider to accommodate every part of me.

I rolled over the top of her, putting both my hands behind her and beneath her ass, lifting her and moving in her with more force now. I wanted to hear the sound of our bodies colliding as I made fierce love to her.

She let her voice tell me how good of a job I was doing with making her feel good, though she did keep the volume down a bit. Neither of us wanted to be seen in the heat of the moment. Even if we did sleep together often, nothing came close to the way I felt when I was inside her, and I didn't want anyone to stop us from enjoying each other too soon.

"Oh my God, you're going to make me cum," she said. "Keep going, just like that. Yes, yes."

"I don't know how you manage to make me get off so fast," I said. "But I'm going to cum, too. I'm going to fill you with my load."

"Yes baby, I want you to give it all to me," she cried out. "Please, Scott, please, I want it all. Fill up my pussy with it."

She cried out once more as her orgasm ran through her, her tight little pussy clenching around my cock as she did. The warm walls of her massaged me, sending shivers through the very core of my being as my cock jumped and pulsed, sending my load deep inside her, filling her with myself.

I growled as I came, holding her tightly as the waves of pleasure coursed through my veins. I moved slowly on her, filling her with every last drop I had in me. She gasped as I pushed harder into her, but I cut it off with my lips once more,

holding her as we both experienced the afterglow of what we'd just done with each other.

The connection I felt with her was deeper than anything I'd ever had with anyone else before, and I never wanted to let it go. I knew she felt bad about how things had ended before, but I wanted her to know there wasn't any reason for that to happen again.

I stayed inside her until I started to get soft, and reluctantly I pulled out.

"I always hate the feeling I get when you're not inside me anymore," Lenny said with a sigh. "I wish there was a way for you to be there all the time."

"God, I wish there was, too," I said. "Of course, I wouldn't get anything else done."

"True," Lenny laughed. "But I would be happy forever, so who cares if I never got anything done?"

"That's a fair assessment," I agreed.

We both pulled our clothes on and adjusted them back into place, then we laid side by side on the grass, looking up at the stars as they appeared in the night sky. I knew this was another good moment when we could talk about how we wanted to move forward with each other, but there was something in me that didn't let me say the words I so desperately wanted to say.

It was important that we had the conversation, but I worried with how she was talking earlier that she didn't want to commit to being with me if she was going to go back to

school. I didn't want to hear her say the words that we weren't going to work out, or that this was only pretend for now.

If we avoided having the conversation, we could keep up this little charade that much longer, and right now, I just wanted to soak up the happiness of what we had.

Even if I knew it was delaying the inevitable.

And I could very well get my heart broken all over again.

Chapter Eighteen

Lenny

“**W**hat the fuck, I was starting to wonder if you got murdered out there!” Hannah cried when I finally got back to the apartment. “Have you ever heard of this cool thing called taking your phone with you?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to be gone that long. Really. But we were just going to go for a walk, and I figured I’d talk to him, like for real, but then, I don’t know.”

“Scott?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Did you talk to him?”

“We talked a lot, but not about anything we should have been talking about,” I said with a sigh. “I’m fucked, girl. I really am.”

“No, you’ll get there. I know it’s tough to have those uncomfortable conversations, but you’ll figure it out,” she said. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. It’s just that it’s nearly midnight, and I had no idea where you went or anything.”

“I know. Like I said, I thought I was going to be gone just for a short minute, then I’d tell you about it when I got back. But then you know how I get when I’m with Scott. It’s like the whole world stops. I don’t care about anything but the time we get to spend together. I want to spend more time with him, but then after the fact I feel guilty about what I did.”

“What you did?” she asked. “What did you do?”

“You know, with leaving him before. And now I can’t make up my damn mind about how I want to move forward,” I sighed. “I feel like I’m going to chicken out and do the same thing all over again. He’s just going to get hurt, and I’m going to move away and feel stupid and be hurt, too.”

“That’s why you two really need to talk,” Hannah said with a sigh. “I’m surprised he hasn’t been the one to bring it up. It almost feels like he’s being irresponsible.”

“I wouldn’t blame him for it,” I quickly came to Scott’s defense. “I was the one who up and left before. He probably doesn’t know what to do with me at this point. I don’t know. I just feel so many things all at once.”

“I think you’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself for something that really isn’t all on you,” Hannah commented. “But it’s also got nothing to do with me outside of the fact I don’t want to see my best friend getting hurt here. And I do see how good the two of you are together, and I want that to keep going.”

“You’re the best,” I said with a smile. “You really are.”

“Anyway, tomorrow’s the last full day with the gang at the hotel. Are you going to hang out with the rest of us?”

“Obviously,” I said with a smile. “I don’t really want to deal with Pete, but with it being the last day, I feel like I can suck up being around him for the sake of getting to see the rest of the gang.”

“Right,” Hannah said with a nod. “I mean, we do have half a day after tomorrow, but it’s going to be nice having one more full day to hang out by the pool and do jack shit besides drink martinis and gripe about the world’s problems.”

I laughed. “That sounds like heaven on earth right now.”

“Now that I know you’re not murdered out there somewhere, I’m going to bed,” she said with a yawn. “If you decide you want to leave again, you better tell me where you’re going and take your damn phone with you.”

“Pinky promise,” I told her. “I didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

“Just don’t do it again,” she said.

And with that, Hannah walked out of the room, leaving me with my thoughts. It felt good knowing she was a good enough friend to stay up and wait for me like that, but there was a part of me that wished I could just spill out all my real feelings about Scott to her. It scared me to think that I might really want to give up on going back to school because I had fallen for him, and I could only imagine what Hannah would have to say about it.

The one side of me said that I already had a master’s degree, and there was no reason for me to go on and get a doctorate. Then there was another side of me that said I’d come so close at this point, why would I give up now?

I hated that so many things in my world were so black and white, cut and dry. I wanted to see a compromise somewhere,

but right now, I felt overwhelmed and lost.

It was much the same feeling I'd had two years ago when I was twenty-one. I felt I had to choose between the older man I had fallen in love with and going out to pursue my dream of being a therapist. And for the most part, I felt that I had accomplished my goal. But now, being in the same boat all over again, I didn't know what to do with myself.

I was ignoring the issue as much as possible right now, but I knew I was just putting a bandage over a problem that required a lot more than just a bandage. This had to be hashed out and solved, not just ignored to the point I did the same thing I did before.

But with Scott now back at his place, and Hannah in bed, the only thing I could do was try to get some sleep myself. I could bring it up to her again tomorrow and hope I could come up with more solutions than the obvious, difficult solution that was staring me in the face, but that would have to wait until I got the chance to see her and talk to her again.

On the other hand, being at the beach and spa one more full day might be a time when I didn't want to talk about any of the drama going on in my head. For all I knew, I might just want to hang out and enjoy a carefree day. God knew I had so few left.

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“Damn, this is the life!” Sara cried out.

She sat with Hannah and me with a drink in hand, her sunglasses pushed down on her nose. “Call me crazy, but I’m thinking about moving here and doing this full time.”

“I think you better get yourself someone rich or win the lottery first,” Hannah laughed.

“Or you could lie to your friends about some guy you met here and have him pay for your life,” Pete said. “Lenny did.”

“Fuck you,” Hannah said, and I flipped him off to add emphasis to her words.

“For the love of God, Pete, this is the last day we get to do this,” Hannah told him. “I’d think you’d be grateful for what Scott has done for you to be able to spend all this time here and lay off the whole thing by now.”

“I’m sorry you can’t see the light, but whatever,” Pete said. “I’m not saying I’m not happy to have taken advantage of the guy, but I’m not grateful.”

“You’re a pig,” I said.

“Sure,” he shrugged. “Call me what you want. You know what? I’m grateful about something, and that’s the fact we don’t have to deal with your creepy fiancé after today.”

“He’s not creepy,” I said. “You are.”

Pete laughed. “If you say so. But I’m not the one who has paid for all your friends to be right where he wants them to be so he can have a girl all to himself whenever he wanted.”

“That’s because you can’t get a girl to save your life,” I retorted. “Maybe if you weren’t so damn creepy, you might actually get a girlfriend and you’d know what it was like to want to spend time with someone away from a group.”

“Especially when that group contains a guy who won’t lay off,” Hannah chimed in. “Take the fucking hint, Pete. It might do you some good in life to pull your head out of your ass and actually pay attention to what the rest of the world is telling you.”

“All I hear is excuses. You two are taken with the money this guy has, and that’s really the bottom line here. I don’t know why it is he has that much, but I don’t trust him. I don’t.”

“I already told you. He is a successful bar owner in multiple states and has money from the investments he’s done with the inheritance he’s received. Not to mention the pay he gets after his time in the Navy. Not that it’s any of your business,” I retorted. “I don’t know why I even feel the need to defend him to you!”

“Because you know I’m the one who can see through him,” Pete said with a smirk. “And you feel like you have to convince me of the same lies he’s told you. But that’s okay. I’m not going to hold it against you when the time comes.”

“The time comes?” I asked.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Hannah asked.

“You’ll find out,” Pete said. I exchanged a look with Hannah and Sara, but Pete just laughed before stalking away. He was heading toward the rest of our friends, and Hannah shook her head.

“Hopefully he decides to bother them for a long while,” she said. “God knows I’m not going to miss him when you guys leave tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’m pissed he’s coming with us,” Sara said. “I mean, there’s a part of me that hopes he changes his mind, but for your sake, Lenny, I hope he doesn’t.”

“Right,” I said. “Is it just me, or is he getting weirder?”

“Definitely weirder,” Hannah said, and Sara agreed.

The conversation took a different direction, but I couldn’t shake what Pete had said. What did he mean about a time coming? What time was that? Then to say we would find out just sent chills running through me.

He made me uncomfortable before, but now he was starting to scare me.

I didn’t feel safe going anywhere alone in Marathon. It made me feel like he was waiting for his chance to catch me alone, and I didn’t want to find out what might happen if he did.

The only thing I found comfort in was the fact he was leaving soon. Then I could have some of my independence back.

God knew how much I hated depending on others around me for anything.

But as long as Pete was here, I had no other choice.

I didn't dare find out what he intended to do.

Chapter Nineteen

Scott

“I’m sorry, but when we have an issue like this, it’s best for you to come in and sign in person,” the woman on the other end of the line said. “I know it’s a pain, and I really am sorry about this, but it’s for security reasons.”

“Are you freaking kidding me right now? I was the one who signed all that paperwork in the first place,” I told her.

“I’m sorry, but it’s our policy once someone has called in regards to the payment method you have on file, you must sign for it personally, or we’re going to be forced to end the transaction.”

“Isn’t the relevant party going to be checking out of the hotel tomorrow afternoon anyway?” I asked. “Why is it a big deal for them to do that now, and I can just sign it tomorrow?”

“Because if this is a case of fraud, then it’s of the utmost importance we get them out of here as soon as possible. We don’t want any more charges to accumulate.”

“But I’m the one who said that it’s fine for them to charge what they want when they want it,” I argued. “So, it isn’t going to be that big of a deal for them to have one more night with the card, right?”

“Normally, sir, it wouldn’t be an issue. But with the amount of money we are talking, the suites that are charged to the card, along with the room service, it’s important that you come

in and sign. I do apologize for the inconvenience, but that is our policy,” she said. “I’m only doing my job.”

I sighed, swearing under my breath once more. I wasn’t happy with the news, and even if this woman was just doing her job here, it frustrated me about the timing. If it was that big of a deal for them to get my signature, they should have called me before I was busy toward the end of my afternoon.

Or, if she heard me confirming this through the phone, it shouldn’t be that big of a deal for them to wait until tomorrow. I had the money to cover any of the expenses that were being charged. It was just a matter of signing the papers. Not to mention how annoying it was that they were doing this in regards to an inquiry from the card company, and without any hard evidence.

“Look, I’ll be able to make it there in a couple hours, but right now I’m in the middle of taking care of something at my own place of business. I understand your concern, but I hope you can give me a couple more hours to at least finish up here before I come there to sign that damn paperwork again.”

“How late do you think it will be?” she asked.

“I can be there by six,” I snapped.

“That works,” the woman said. “Just so long as you get it before the end of the day. Our day ends at nine.”

“Sounds good,” I told her.

I hung up the phone and swore under my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Les asked.

“Some shit with my bank,” I said. “They decided with the amount of money that’s being charged to my card at the Sunkissed up the road that there must be fraud going on. She called me to ask if I’m aware of the charges being made, which I confirmed, but then the woman from the hotel just called me and said I need to come back over and resign some of the paperwork. It’s really a huge pain in the ass.”

“Fuck, sounds like it,” Les said. “Why are you paying for shit at the hotel anyway?”

“My girlfriend has some friends in town, and I figured it would be nice to give them an upgrade from where they were staying,” I explained. “So, I went ahead and put them up in the hotel with all expenses included. I’m not worried about the cost of what they spend, but you know how banks are.”

“It can come in handy if you’re really dealing with fraud, but if it’s something you want to be done, then it’s a pain in the ass,” Les said with a shake of his head. “There’s times I’m not sure whether to strangle the person who’s telling me they’re freezing the card, or to thank them for their due diligence.”

“Agreed,” I said. “I’m not that pissed about having to make the stop since it’s on the way to where I’m going anyway. I’m more pissed off at the fact that I have to do it at all. I know they record those phone calls, so they should be fine with my word alone. But you know how it can get talking to people at service desks.”

“God, and those who work at hotels are the worst. I mean, I guess there’s something to be said for the service the

Sunkissed provides, but when you have to deal with the fine print it can be a nightmare. I know because I stayed there when I first moved to Marathon,” Les said. “They were great until it came to the paperwork. That was a different story.”

“Fuckers,” I said with a shake of my head. “Anyway, let’s get this shit done so I can get down there and sign the paperwork before they make this a bigger headache than it already is.”

Les nodded, and we got back to work on the stack of papers in front of us.

It didn’t take us as long as I thought it would to finish with the work I had to get done at the club, but I took my time getting over to the hotel just the same. It was more to prove a point than anything, even if it was the card company I should be frustrated with, not the woman behind the hotel counter.

I headed inside with my ID and the card ready, plastering on a condescending smile when I reached the counter.

“I was told you need me to sign some paperwork for the rooms I put on my card,” I said, letting the frustration show in my tone. “I was called this afternoon.”

“Oh yes, that was me,” the woman said. She had the same stuffy look on her face that her voice conveyed over the phone, and I could see plainly why I wasn’t able to get her to budge with me earlier. She was definitely one of those women who had been doing this long enough that she wouldn’t care if it was the President of the United States on the other end of the

phone. If something had to be done in person, she would have him come in and sign the damn paperwork in person.

“I appreciate you taking the time to do this,” she said as I signed the dotted lines she pointed out to me. “I know it’s a pain to take the time out of your day.”

“I’m still not sure why the policy is what it is if the people in question are checking out the very next day, but if I have to sign this, I’m here,” I said.

She gave me the same kind of condescending smile I had on my own face, and I was glad we didn’t have to talk much to get through what she wanted me to do. There were a number of things I wanted to say to her before I had finished with the paperwork, and I figured the best thing to do at this point was to just let it go. I had signed the papers, and I didn’t want there to be an issue with Lenny’s friends while they were here.

I could deal with a lot of bullshit that came from other business owners, but with Lenny’s friends here, I wanted them to have the time of their lives, and I didn’t want there to be reason to feel like they were going to have to check out early or that there was anything wrong. The best thing I could do was sign it with a smile and move on.

Once that was finished, I handed her back the papers and let her make a copy of my ID.

“Thank you again for taking the time to do this, and I hope we are meeting your expectations here at the Sunkissed.”

“I’m not even the one staying here,” I said. “But I’m sure my guests who are enjoyed themselves.”

I didn’t wait for her to respond. The last time I’d texted with Lenny, she said she was at the hotel, so I figured there was a chance she was still upstairs in Sara’s room. I knew she wanted to spend as much time with her friends here as she could today since they were leaving soon, so I decided to check with the rooms and see if she was up there before going over to her place if she wasn’t.

I cut through the pool area, ignoring the signs saying I had to wear sandals to be on the pool deck. I was just passing through, and I wasn’t in the mood to deal with anyone who wanted to tell me that I had to change my shoes before I could walk through that area.

I was nearly to the door on the other side when I suddenly heard Lenny’s name.

It was a male’s voice, so I stopped. Lenny wasn’t exactly a common name, nickname, or otherwise, and the way the man had said it was almost unnatural. As though the person wasn’t used to saying it.

I peeped through the bushes growing along the fence line and realized it was Pete. He only recently started calling her by her nickname, which explained why it wasn’t smooth coming out of his mouth. But it was what he was talking about that really caught my attention.

I didn’t know who he was talking to, but they were obviously talking about Lenny, and I wasn’t happy with the

conversation I'd heard.

“No, man, I haven't nailed her yet. I don't know why she's so fucking high and mighty, but she is. If she wasn't so hot, I wouldn't put up with it, but I'll get her one way or another. What? No. She's fucking some Neanderthal who's got money. I don't know how they met or whatever, but they're trying to pass off to everyone that they're engaged, but I don't buy it. It's pissing off everyone else that I know she's lying, but whatever. I don't give a fuck about any of these people. I'm just going to fuck Lenny. Yeah, I'll keep you posted,” he said.

His voice faded as he walked in the other direction, and with the fence between us, I couldn't follow. But the little I did hear from the conversation made my blood freeze in my veins.

I knew there was something off about Pete from the beginning, but that conversation sent off the warning bells in my head. I didn't get the sense he was willing to put up with being told no for much longer, and it made me shake with rage. The guy was a piece of shit, there was no doubt about that.

But to think of him forcing himself onto Lenny was enough to make me go homicidal.

I tried to shake it off as nothing more than locker room talk, but I refused to forget what he'd said. I'd keep a close eye on him for the rest of the time he was here, that was for damn sure.

If there was any way I possibly could, I'd get Lenny to spend the night with me at my place. I didn't want to scare her

by telling her the truth about why, but I also didn't want to risk her being anywhere he could get his hands on her.

The only way I could think to do that was to have her come stay with me that night and even until after we watched the plane take off tomorrow afternoon. I didn't want to tell her what to do, and I didn't want her to get the wrong idea, as though I was doing this because of our relationship.

It was all for her. Just to make sure she was safe.

Chapter Twenty

Lenny

“It’s not as good as the club, but it’s the last night we can be here, so I’d rather hang out here,” Hannah said.

“Agreed,” I nodded. “Do you guys care?”

“As long as there’s good drinks to be had, I don’t care if we are in the back of a garage,” Sara said. “Just get me a martini and give it to me now!”

We all laughed, and Pete chimed in. “I would rather chew dog crap than step foot back in that club, I can tell you that right now.”

“Of course, you would. You can’t stand the fact that Lenny’s fiancé owns it, though with the way you’ve been treating him all week, I’d be worried if I were you that someone would spit in your food or something there,” Hannah said. “Not that you don’t absolutely deserve it.”

“Fuck off,” he said. “Again, you’re all going to see the truth about that guy soon, and when you do, you’re all going to owe me an apology.”

“Speaking of eating dog crap, I’d rather do that than ever apologize to you about anything,” Sara said. “I don’t even care if I was in the wrong. With your arrogance, you don’t deserve an apology for shit.”

“You say that,” he said, letting his words linger. “But you know, there are plenty of times intelligence comes off as

arrogance, so I'm sure you guys are just misreading the situation. Oh wait, I know you are."

"Why don't you just fuck off?" I asked. "This is the last night we all get to have fun together, and I don't want to have to deal with your dumbass the entire time."

"I'm part of this group whether you like it or not, Lenny, and your fiancé is the one who paid for me to be here, too. If you wanted me kicked out, you shouldn't have said that I was part of the group."

"I don't think I ever said you were part of the group," I argued. "I think you just invited yourself and just won't leave. Like a disease."

"If I were a disease, the person who contracted me would be lucky," he shot back.

"Contracted?" Hannah snorted. "So, if you were a disease, you'd be an STD?"

"How natural, whenever I'm around women they start thinking about sex," Pete said. "It's just one of those things that goes hand in hand."

"If you weren't paying attention, she said you were an STD," Sara said.

"Sex is sex," Pete said with a shrug. "Meaning she's thinking about my dick."

"I'd rather puke," Hannah said. "Please, if you say another word about your dick I'm probably going to."

“I know it makes me sick to my stomach,” I laughed. “Not that I’ve ever seen it.”

“Thankfully,” Hannah chimed in.

“Fuck you both,” Pete said.

“No thanks,” I replied.

“Nope,” Hannah said. “In your dreams.”

We laughed again, and Pete shook his head. I didn’t hear what he said, but I was almost certain he said something about it being a matter of time. But then, I knew I was freaked out by him after the way he’d been acting the past couple days, and I didn’t want to put words in his mouth.

“You three just get a few drinks in you, and when you’re in a better mood, I’ll be back,” Pete said as he walked away.

“That’s going to take all night,” Hannah called after him. “Don’t hurry by any means.”

“With any luck, he’ll fall into the pool,” Sara said.

“And drown,” I added.

“What the fuck is his problem, anyway?” Hannah asked. “I mean, he’s always been an asshole, but it seems like he’s been extra weird the past couple days.”

“Thank you!” I said. “I thought so, too, but I hate his guts, so I wasn’t sure if I was being paranoid or if there was some merit to it.”

“No, he’s definitely being a bigger asshole than normal,” Sara confirmed. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep him

down here with you? I don't want to sit with him on the flight tomorrow!"

"At least you can ditch him at the airport," I laughed. "We did get you out of having to spend the rest of your vacation being around him without us."

"That's true," she said. "And I'm going to forever be grateful to Scott for that."

"Speak of the devil," Hannah said. "There he is."

"I was wondering if you were coming tonight," I told Scott when he walked up to the bar to get a drink. "I wasn't sure after the brief conversation we had earlier."

"I know, I'm sorry it was so rushed," he told me. "I was pissed with how the afternoon had gone, and it wasn't your fault you weren't here when I showed up. I'm just glad I was able to get shit done and come back with enough time to hang out with you."

He gave me a kiss, then ordered a drink.

"What was going on with the card?" I asked, but he just shook his head.

"Just technical difficulties. There are times I'm glad for the security that goes along with the cards I use, but there's other times when they are so convinced there's something wrong, they don't even believe it's me when I tell them to do shit."

"I hate that," Hannah said. "I gave up on ever having a credit card because of that shit."

“Is it something we did wrong?” Sara asked, but Scott shook his head.

“No, it was just a matter of this being a hotel and the rooms all being on a single card. The bank thought it had been stolen or something and they were pissed that I wasn’t able to drop everything and come sign paperwork for them at the drop of a hat.”

“I’m glad you got it fixed now,” I said. “And I’m really glad you’re here. Like, really.”

“Oh? Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” I said quickly. “I just missed you, that’s all.”

“Pete’s being weird again,” Hannah said. I winced. I didn’t want to start more shit between the two of them with it being the last night we were all going to be able to hang out together, but I also knew Hannah was just watching out for me. She knew Scott was the one person Pete hated most, but if there was someone in the group who would be able to stand up to him, it was Scott.

“But is that any different than usual?” Sara asked. “We were just hoping he’d fall into the pool.”

“I hope for more than that,” Scott said. “There’s some people who really make you happy when they leave.”

“Amen to that!” Hannah said.

We all laughed at the joke, and I took a spot as close to Scott as I could get. I knew I was practically sitting on him, and I played it off as just being overly affectionate. I didn’t

want him to know I was really unsettled with the way Pete was acting, and the only way I felt safe with us being at the hotel was pretty much sitting on top of him.

I knew I could tell him I wanted to leave, but I didn't want to cut short the time we had to spend with Sara. She was going home after this, and God only knew when we would get the chance to see her face to face again. There was a bittersweetness to the end of the vacation, that was for sure, and I didn't like thinking about the fact she was going on to start her real life.

And I really wasn't going to let Pete ruin this night for me. At least Scott was here, so there wasn't that much reason to stress about what Pete was doing. Even if he was acting weirder than normal.

The night wore on, and I did my best to forget about Pete. I knew he was around the bar and pool area since we saw him every now and then, but he was glaring at Scott every time he passed by. I didn't like the way he was looking at Scott, but I felt safer with him focusing on someone else for once.

"Ugh, he's giving me the creeps," Sara said.

"Who?" Hannah asked.

"Who do you think?" Sara replied. "The idiot over there who thinks he's got life by the tail."

"What's he even doing?" she asked as she looked over to see Pete. He was talking with some of the other people sitting

around the bar, but I didn't know any of them. While he talked to them, however, he kept looking over in our direction.

“What a loser,” Hannah said. “It's like he's the weird kid who no one wants to be part of the group, but he hangs around anyway just in case something cool happens. The kid who takes credit when the rest of the kids do something cool, you know?”

Sara, Scott, and I laughed at the analogy, but once it subsided, I had to agree with Sara.

“Still, there is a creepiness about him that just has me thrown off tonight. It's like I'm expecting him to pull out a knife or something and make a huge scene.”

“That's just his face,” Hannah said as she rolled his eyes.

I laughed. “I know, but you know what I mean.”

“At least there's a lot of people here,” Sara said. “Safety in numbers.”

“Unless he's that big of a psychopath,” I said with a shake of my head. “I don't know. He's just been so weird lately, it's like he's going movie villain status or something.”

“Agreed,” Hannah said. “Fucking creep.”

“What do you think?” I asked Scott. “We all agree he's being weirder today than he's been. But I don't know if that's just my growing annoyance with him, or if he's really being extra weird.”

“Pete?” Scott asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

Scott shrugged. “I honestly pay as little attention to the guy as possible. I have better things to think about than what that loser is doing.”

“Exactly,” I said, hiding the fact his comment hurt my feelings. It wasn’t like I wanted to think about Pete, but it was difficult for me to ignore him considering he pretty much stalked me.

At the same time, I couldn’t help but wonder if I was the one being paranoid here. The others said he was being weird, but maybe I was taking it too far in my mind. It was Pete, after all. He was known for being an asshole. He could be putting on a bigger show because they were leaving tomorrow.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling he was planning something. I didn’t know what, but I couldn’t stop checking over my shoulder when I was walking home with Hannah later that night even though Scott was with us. I should have taken Scott up on his offer to stay at his place, but I didn’t want to leave Hannah alone.

I never saw Pete, but still I felt his presence.

Watching.

Chapter Twenty-One

Scott

“If you don’t mind my asking, what’s got you so pissed off today?” Les asked. “I can try to fix it, but if I don’t know what’s wrong, I don’t know what you want us to do.”

“It’s not you or anything you need to fix,” I told him. “I’m more pissed off over what this jackass was saying about my girlfriend yesterday.”

“To you?” he asked.

“No, God no,” I told him with a quick shake of my head. “If he had the stupidity to say it to me, I would have smashed his face in right then. I can’t stand the little prick as it is, and I wish I had an excuse to beat the shit out of him.”

“What did he say?”

“He was on the phone with someone I can only assume was a buddy of his. Locker room talk if you know what I mean, but it bothered me what he said. Not just that he was talking about my girlfriend like she was a piece of meat, but like he only thought of her as a conquest.”

“Oh, yes, I can see why that would piss you off,” Les agreed. “I’ve done some pretty shitty things in my time, but I’ve always tried to have a healthy respect for women at least.”

“He was saying how he hadn’t fucked her yet, and she was just with me for the sake of it, though he was going to find a way to get to her before his time was up. That’s not verbatim,

but still,” I shook my head as the anger ran through me once again. “I don’t give a shit what the little prick calls me. That doesn’t have any bearing on anything I’m doing. But when it comes to her, well, he better watch his pretty boy little mouth or he’s going to find my fist in it.”

“Why don’t you just beat him up and have it done with?” Les asked. “If he’s got you this pissed, I can imagine it would be worth your time to do it.”

“Because he’s still her friend. I mean, not her personal friend, but he’s in with the rest of the group, and I know it’s one of those things that I’m not allowed to do. For as much as she hates him and the way he treats her, I know he’s still off limits in the sense if I were to touch him, it would get twisted around so I would be the bad guy here.”

“Of course,” Les said as he rolled his eyes. “One of the things I don’t understand about women. They don’t want someone to treat them like that, but when you try to make sure they don’t, the girl freaks out as if you’re the one in the wrong. I just can’t understand why they stick up for the men who absolutely don’t deserve it.”

“Exactly,” I replied with a shake of my head. “It’s more than annoying. I want more than anything to get this guy out of the picture, but until he’s gone, there’s nothing I can do about this.”

“When does he leave?” Les asked.

“It’s not set in stone. I hear he’s leaving today, but that has been something that feels up in the air. Originally, he wasn’t

going to leave at all, then he wanted to go with the rest of the group who were going to continue with their vacation elsewhere. But when I offered to let them stay on my dime, he stayed along with the rest of the group, who are now the ones leaving this afternoon.”

“Sounds complicated,” Les commented.

“It wouldn’t be if this guy would just leave her alone, but it makes me worry about what he might try to do in the meantime. I would hate to think he would be stupid enough to try something, but with how he talked about her I can’t really be certain what he’ll do,” I admitted. “It’s not like he’s been blatant about it toward her, so I haven’t really said anything about it.”

“You haven’t?” Les asked in surprise. “I would have gone to her and told her the entire thing as soon as I heard the conversation.”

“I thought about it, but I also don’t want to start more drama between them,” I said. “With this being the last summer she’ll have with her friends before they go their separate ways, I didn’t want to start a big fight between them. For as much as the women in the group seem to hate this Pete guy, clearly, he’s not hated by the group entirely, or he wouldn’t be able to hang out with them at all.”

“This is true, but maybe if they heard the truth, they would come to the conclusion themselves that it would be best to kick him to the curb,” Les said.

“Or they might think I’m just being insecure and jealous. That’s how Pete would try to frame it anyway,” I said. “I don’t think Lenny would agree with him, but that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t cause a lot of trouble with the whole group.”

“But you aren’t the one who is causing the problems,” Les argued. “All you would be doing is telling her what he said about her. It’s not you being the jerk saying these things, you’re just telling her what this guy is saying about her.”

“I know that, and so do you, but it would be a matter of seeing if I could get them to believe me when I tell them that this is what’s going on. If he frames this as me being the insecure boyfriend and he’s the victim, then there’s a chance that it’s just going to cause problems, she’s not going to believe me, and shit will hit the fan in a very hard way. I know it sounds crazy that she wouldn’t believe me, but then, it would be all her friends against my word.”

“I’m sorry you have to deal with that,” Les said with a shake of his head. “It sounds frustrating to me, and I’m just listening to what you’re already dealing with. I can’t imagine what it would be like if I was the one who had to go through it myself. But then, what are you going to do?”

“My goal here is to protect her from him,” I said. “I worry about her whenever we’re not together and knowing that this guy is in town and appearing to be bolder with each passing day bothers me. It would be one thing if I could trust he wasn’t going to do something to her, but I don’t know this guy outside

of the little I've dealt with him in the past couple weeks. I can't say for sure what he'd do if he was desperate."

"I'd say if you're not able to bring up what he said to your girlfriend, I would take another route and convince her to move in with you or something. I would want to make sure she was where I could keep an eye on her at all hours."

"That's more along the lines of what I was thinking, but there's another issue I'm running into on that front."

"What do you mean?"

"The fact that I don't have any reason to ask her to move in with me," I sighed. "Trust me, I want to. And I want to for more reasons than just keeping her safe from this sadistic asshole, too. But I can't just walk up to her and tell her I want her to move in with me after all that we've been dealing with."

"Are things not going well?"

"It's not that. It's the fact that she doesn't know for sure what she wants. I know she's struggling with making an absolute decision of what she wants to do with her life, and I'm trying to show her enough support for her to know that it's okay. She doesn't have to know without a doubt what she wants to do with her life at this point. But she's young, and she feels she has to make some concrete decisions, and I don't think moving in with me is at the top of the list right now."

"Shit," Les said with sympathy in his voice. "I wish I had the answers for you right now, but it sounds like you've been

thorough on thinking this through. I don't know what else to tell you."

"I know," I said. "All the points you've brought up are good ideas, and they are things that I have thought about doing, but I have thought about them to the point I'm not sure where to go from here. Not without offending someone I care about, or without potentially putting my relationship on the line. It's more than frustrating. I feel like I'm failing her at this point, but I also feel like I'm overreacting."

"I don't know about that," Les said. "He said what he said, and you just so happen to have been the one to hear it. It's not your fault that you were there when he said those things and no one else was. I mean, if I were you, it would really feel like the right thing to do to just tell her and let her deal with it the way she does."

"I know, I know," I said. "I feel like we're just going around in circles at this point. I just want to have a cut and dry answer and know I can take care of this guy without stressing about how she's going to react to the whole thing. It pisses me off that I have to deal with this at all, let me tell you. But it is what it is, and I guess it's my thing to deal with if I'm not going to come clean to her about it."

"The only other thing I think you can do is to set up some help to keep an eye on her when you're not around," Les said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean if this guy chooses to stay in the Keys, then I would suggest that you have some of the bouncers from around the

island know what she's dealing with. Tell them about this guy and the shit he's been saying, and make sure everyone knows to keep an eye out for him, especially when your girlfriend is around."

I thought for a moment. "You know, that is a really good idea. I'll have to figure out if this guy is going to stay, or if he's going to leave with the rest of the group this afternoon. Trust me, my fingers will be crossed that it's the latter."

"And regardless, I'm going to make sure all the bartenders here know that he's not welcome at the club," Les said.

I laughed. "If you even have to. I don't know if that idiot is going to come here again knowing that I own the place. I'm sure he doesn't want to give me a single cent of his money even if I did fund his entire vacation for the past week."

"True, but there's guys who will do some sketchy shit for the sake of getting close to someone they want," Les replied.

"I know," I said. "Make sure everyone here is on the same page, and I'll think about how I want to move ahead with the others on the island. In the meantime, let's keep our fingers crossed that this guy just leaves with the rest of the group, and we aren't going to have to worry about it again beyond this afternoon."

"Fingers crossed," Les said. "But really, think about telling her the truth about this, too. I think you'll be happier if you did."

"I'll think about it," I said.

But I already knew I wasn't going to bring it up to Lenny. I didn't want to plant ideas in her head if there was no reason for it. She already hated Pete, so I didn't need to worry about her doing anything to go out of her way to hang out with him.

I just hoped he would pack up his shit and get out of the Keys for good.

Then I could finally rest easy and focus on what I was doing with Lenny. That's what I wanted to think about anyway.

Lenny and me. And our future together.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lenny

I walked around the back of the hotel, looking for Sara.

She was sitting in one of the lounge chairs overlooking the beach, and she smiled when she saw me. An umbrella shaded her from the sun, but she was putting on more sunscreen anyway.

“You know you’re not going to burst into flames if you happen to get some sunshine on your skin, don’t you?” I asked with a laugh.

“Sure, but I don’t want to get cancer or something. How ironic would that be?” she asked. “I finally get through school and college and even grad school, then I finally get out and start my real career, then find out I have cancer. I would be pissed.”

“I don’t think you get skin cancer from lying in the sun for a few hours,” I told her, but she just gave me a look.

“I’m not going to risk it. Besides, the sun is aging. I don’t want to deal with looking old either,” she said.

I laughed. “You realize that alcohol is also aging, right? I bet you anything you’re aging yourself more with what you drink than if you’re just going to enjoy some Vitamin D.”

“Okay, Dr. Lenny,” Sara said as she rolled her eyes. “Don’t send me a bill after this.”

I laughed. "I'm not that kind of doctor. Well, I'm not any kind of doctor yet, but I'm not going to be that kind of doctor when I do get my doctorate anyway."

"Still," she laughed. "Since you're all smart and shit."

"I'm not always smart. I'm dealing with some shit right now I wish wasn't so fucking hard."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

"Do you mind if I sit with you for a bit?" I asked.

"Duh," she said. "Why would I?"

"I don't know, it's your last morning here, I wasn't sure if you wanted to have some time alone to just enjoy it."

"Don't be silly," she said with a wave of her hand. "Hanging out with you is more enjoyable than just sitting here alone. Anyway, what's on your mind? What's up?"

"It's about Scott and Pete and everything," I said. "You know how we were talking the other day about how weird he's being?"

"Yeah," she said. "Isn't he always?"

"Yeah, but how he's being extra weird," I said. "How he's like, I don't know, showing off or something?"

"Yeah," she said. "Fucking prick."

"I don't want to sound all paranoid or anything, but like, he's really starting to scare me. Like, legitimately."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

“I mean I’m starting to really get the feeling that he’s following me, or that he’s watching me. I don’t know. I don’t want to be that girl who thinks that the guy she doesn’t like is after her when he’s really not done much outside of making his stupid comments about Scott, but I still just get the feeling that he’s watching me.”

“I mean, out of fairness to you, he’s fucking creepy with how he stares every time he’s around,” Sara said. “So, I don’t blame you for being weirded out by him.”

“I know, but do I really have to be as freaked out by him as I am? Like the whole way back to my place last night I kept looking over my shoulder like I thought he was just going to show up out of nowhere.”

“That’s freaky,” Sara said. “Did you see him anywhere?”

“No, but I just kept telling myself I could still feel him out there, like he was hiding somewhere just out of sight, so I wasn’t able to see him watching me. I don’t know why he would be stalking me like that though. It’s not like he’s got a chance with me even if we were alone. You know, unless he were to do something terrible.”

“I don’t think he’s that kind of guy,” Sara said. “I mean, he’s fucking creepy, don’t get me wrong, but do I think he would attack you? Not really. He’s a prick, but he’s also a pussy. When push comes to shove, he’s the kind of guy who’s going to make some smartass comment and walk off, you know?”

“That’s what I tell myself, but I also can’t ignore the fact I’m having those alarm bells going off in my head,” I

admitted.

“And?”

“And the fact that they are there should be enough to tell me something, right? I mean, they always tell us that you should go with your gut instinct, and it makes me wonder if even though I have known this guy for a couple years, if maybe I’m not being smart about the way I’m feeling around him,” I said. “I don’t want to be one of those girls who looks back over the alleged relationship between the two of us and see all the red flags I had ignored, you know?”

“Are you sure you don’t just watch too much true crime?” Sara giggled. “I just want to be fair to everyone involved. I know he’s a freak, and he’s a creep, but does that mean he’s the kind of guy who would cross a line like that? No.”

“Agreed, which is why I can’t be sure if I’m just being paranoid or if there’s some real merit to the things I’m saying here, you know? It’s not like I’m going to sit him down and talk to him about this, either. In fact, the idea of seeing him at all makes me sick.”

“I don’t blame you, and you know, there’s nothing wrong with not wanting to be around him,” Sara told me. “What does Hannah have to say about this?”

“That I should call the cops or something,” I said. “I don’t want to go that far if there’s no reason for it. If this is all just shit going on in my own head, then I’m going to feel really stupid by getting the police involved if there’s no reason.”

“Right,” Sara said. “But you did say that you’ve got more issues going on in that beautiful head of yours than just what’s going on with Pete. So, what’s going on with Scott that you don’t know about?”

“Um, where do I start?” I sighed. “I just wish I had some clear-cut answers about what to do with him.”

“I would be marrying him so fast; you wouldn’t even know there was a wedding,” Sara told me, and I laughed.

“Right, but then what about the rest of my career?” I asked.

“He’s been so good about you going to school and everything already, why would it change now?”

I hesitated only for a second. Sara still thought that I had been with Scott the entire time I was going through grad school. She didn’t know about the fact I’d ghosted him and we’d reconnected. Hannah hadn’t breathed a word about that to anyone, which I was grateful for, but at the same time, it made it difficult for me to be honest with Sara now about what I really was afraid of happening.

“It’s just a matter of going into the next phase I guess,” I said at last. “I mean, when I was in school, it was easy for me to be thinking about what I’d have with Scott in between, but now that I’m going to be moving into the next level and after that comes my actual career, it’s making me think hard about a lot of things. I want to be sure about what I’m doing with my life. I know I can’t have all the answers yet, but I want to have a good idea I’m going in the right direction.”

“Girl, you’re preaching to the choir,” Sara said with a yawn and a stretch. “I’m going home to several job interviews, and I’m telling you right now I don’t know if I’m making a mistake or not. I hear that’s just part of the stage of life we’re in, but I don’t know. Or, if it is, why can’t there be more obvious signs that we’re at least started off in the right direction?”

“Exactly!” I cried, then sighed. “Anyway, I know you don’t have any real answers to give me, and I don’t expect you to. I just wanted to vent for a minute I guess.”

“I get that,” Sara said with a nod. “And you don’t have to apologize to me about it. I know how you feel in many ways. It’s just a matter of going with what feels right at the time I guess, hoping for the best later on.”

“A shot in the dark yet again,” I said.

She laughed. “Yup. Anyway, I’ve got to go make sure I’ve got my shit packed up for this afternoon. You staying here?”

“I’m going to soak up the sun a bit,” I said. “It might help with clearing my head.”

“Just don’t get lost in your own mind,” she told me. “You’ll be okay. You know it.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Sounds good,” she replied as she walked away.

I sighed. There was more I wanted to say, but I chickened out. I left out the fact that I had been feeling nauseous for the past week, and I was late for my period, too. I knew the smart

thing to do right now was to take a test, but I was still clinging to the idea I was being paranoid about the entire situation and I was fine. I didn't want to get caught up in the idea I could be pregnant on top of everything else I was dealing with.

I was already going crazy not sure of what choice to make. I didn't know how Scott would respond to the idea of me being pregnant, and I didn't want to even consider how I would bring up that conversation to have with him, either.

"Hey," a voice said.

I turned with a smile, unsure of who was speaking to me at first. But my smile vanished when I realized the person who had come up behind the chairs was Pete.

"What do you want?" I asked. "I don't remember saying you were invited to hang out with me right now."

"It's a free country," he said with a smirk. "And we are both in a public place, so I don't think I have to have your permission."

"What do you want?" I asked again.

"I want you to spill it," he said, sitting down on the chair Sara had been sitting in moments before. "I've played along this whole time, and I'm over it. You need to come clean about everything, and I want you to do it now."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," he replied. "I'm done with your little charade."

I had had enough. I wasn't going to sit here and let him pester me like that, so I got up to leave. I knew Sara wouldn't mind if I came up to the room while she gathered the rest of her things, and I would at the very least get rid of Pete as I did.

But he grabbed my arm the moment I stood up.

"What the fuck, Pete?" I snapped. "Let me go!"

"Sit the fuck down and talk to me," he snapped. At the same time, he yanked my arm, pulling me back down into the seat in front of him. I had never been touched like that by anyone before, and my heart pounded.

I didn't know what to do or what to think, and my mind went blank.

All I knew for sure was this was very real.

And I was scared out of my mind.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Scott

“Okay, now that we’re through the inventory, I want you to get started with the new suppliers,” I told Les. “Once we can get it worked out who we’re going to go with on a consistent basis, we can start reaching out to figure out a rotation that will work for everyone.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Les said with a nod. “I’ll shoot you over some text messages and let you know what’s going on with the suppliers. There are a few places I want to call about various items and see how much I can consolidate before I come to you with the numbers.”

“Don’t stress about it too much,” I told him. “There’s a fine line between sparing no expense and spending too much for the sake of spending. I don’t want to overspend just because we can. I’d rather get a good deal where possible.”

“Makes sense,” he said. “But like I mentioned, there’s a few places I want to call before I come to any decisions.”

“Let me know,” I said. “I’m taking off. If you need anything in the meantime, feel free to give me a call. I’m not doing much today, I’ll be around.”

“Hopefully you’re going out to do something about what we discussed earlier,” Les said. “I understand your stance on a few things, but you have to admit that it’s going to drive you insane if you don’t do shit about it. I can’t imagine you’re a

guy who's going to let some kid scare you off because he might cause drama."

"I won't," I told him. "But more than that, I need to figure out what we even are."

"What do you mean?" Les asked.

"I need to talk to her about where she sees us going. Like I told you, I want her to move in with me, and it has more to do with our relationship than it does with her safety. But before I ask her to move in with me, I have to find out how she feels about the relationship moving forward."

"Are you sure you want to talk about that with this guy still around?" Les asked.

I shook my head. "No, I honestly don't want to talk about it at all. But it's starting to eat away at me not knowing what our relationship really is. I have to have answers about this. You hit the nail on the head when you said that I'm not going to put up with this kid pushing me around. But there's more to it than that. Not only am I not going to put up with him pushing me around, but I'm also not going to let myself get strung along with something that's not going to pan out. It might not be the easiest conversation to have, but I have to have answers."

"What are you going to do if she tells you she doesn't want to move forward with a relationship?" Les asked.

"Obviously I'm going to keep up with the charade we've agreed on to get her through the next few days," I said. "I'm not going to leave her to deal with this guy no matter what she

wants to do moving forward. But I have to get in the right frame of mind myself when I talk to her. It's hard to know just where she's at when she's not committing one way or the other."

"Relationships are complicated," Les said with a laugh. "There's a reason why I'm single and happily so."

"I'm sure you had your day," I told him.

"Of course, but that was back when I had the energy to deal with the shit that's going on in your head right now. I can tell you I would much rather deal with wondering how the day is set to go at work than to wonder what is going on in the mind of a female. It's far easier to wonder if my boss—you—will be in a good mood than to wonder if a girl is pissed off at me for some reason."

I laughed at this. "You do have a point on that front. Women love to get mad for no reason and leave you to figure it out on your own. But Lenny is smart. She knows what she wants in life, she just has to say it out loud. Or, if she doesn't, she knows enough to know how to figure it out. I won't push her to have it all figured out right now, but I do need to know where we're going from here."

"I would want to know that too," Les said. "I don't see me needing to have you come back today, so I wish you good luck, and I hope to hear some good news next time you and I do speak."

"Thanks," I told him. "The only thing I want to really hear out of you again today is whether you think we can have all of

our supplies coming from a single place, or if we're going to have to do some shopping.”

He grinned “Let me work my magic in my way, and you go work your magic in yours.”

I laughed. I rarely made friends with the people I worked with, but Les was a clear exception to that rule. I wasn't sure what it was about the man that was so charming, but I appreciated the way he had worked at the club for that long, and his outlook on life. He clearly had been through a lot in his time, and because of that, he was able to relate to a lot of things I had been through.

It was nice to have a friend I felt had my back, and someone I could talk to who was able to relate. He didn't have the same military experience that I did, but I was okay with that. I had my own connections on that front that allowed me the support I needed there, so I could focus on my current lifestyle with someone like Les to bounce my ideas off.

But, with his sendoff in the back of my mind, I knew it was time for me to go find Lenny. I didn't really want to talk to her about the direction of our relationship, but I knew it was for the best. We had put it off for as long as possible, both of us enjoying the fact that we could be alone in our fantasy for a while.

It wasn't meant to be forever, however. We had to have that talk.

It might have been better for us to have had it before we reached this point, but I was willing to be the one to take the

blame for that. I had gone along with so much of this refusing to be the one to bring up the hard conversation, and I knew from the way Lenny had left me before that she wasn't going to be the one to do it.

It didn't make this conversation any easier, or the feeling that she was going to tell me she wanted to break up any less terrifying. But it had to be done, and if I was able to make it through the shit I had gone through when I was in the Navy, I could make it through this conversation.

I headed straight to the apartment after I left the club. I'd considered starting with the hotel, but it was hard to say where Lenny would be considering the way she felt about Pete. It was the last day her friends would be there, but that didn't mean she would be going to the hotel on her own.

I'd texted Lenny half an hour before I'd finished with what I was doing with Les, but she hadn't yet answered. I asked her if she was at her place or the hotel, but I figured since she hadn't replied, she must be at her place in the shower or something.

It was only ten in the morning, which wasn't unreasonable for her to sleep until.

So, I headed over to her place, knocking tentatively on the door to hopefully get Lenny's attention but not bother Hannah if she was home and still in bed.

When the door opened, however, I was surprised to see it was Hannah who answered.

"Oh hey," I said. "I'm sorry, I was hoping to catch Lenny."

“She’s not here,” Hannah told me. “She left early this morning actually. She said she was going to head over to the hotel and hang out on the beach with the hotel amenities while she still had access.”

I chuckled. “Sounds like something she would do. Sorry to bother you, I’m going to go find her.”

“No worries,” Hannah told me with a wave of her hand.

She closed the door, and I wondered why Lenny hadn’t yet answered the text I’d sent. I appreciated the fact Lenny wasn’t the kind of girl who was glued to her device all the time, but I was worried when she hadn’t responded, and it had been nearly an hour.

If she was over at the hotel, there was a chance she could see Pete. Not that I thought she was in as much danger during the day as she was when it was dark out, but I still worried about what might happen if she were to cross paths with the guy alone.

I headed for the hotel with my heart pounding. I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt nervous like this, and there was a part of me that was almost embarrassed with how I felt.

There was a part of me that felt almost as though I was back in high school getting ready to ask a girl to prom. I wanted to believe I was the guy who was always so calm and collected, but with how much I felt for Lenny and worried she didn’t want to continue with our relationship, I was genuinely nervous she was going to tell me this was the end.

Once at the hotel, I headed up to the room where Sara had been staying.

She was inside, putting the last of her things in a bag.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. “You looking for Lenny?”

“Always,” I told her.

“She’s down on the beach,” Sara said. “I was down there with her a short while ago, but I wanted to make sure I had the rest of my shit out of here before we had to check out.”

“That’s fine, take your time,” I told her. “I’ll go find Lenny.”

Sara turned back to what she was doing, and I headed downstairs once more. I was eager to find Lenny, and part of me was kicking myself for not checking the beach area first. Hannah had said that was where she’d gone to spend time before checking out, but I figured she could be up with Sara getting things out of the rooms, too.

I walked out of the hotel and around the back, heading up the path to where the seating was for the beach. It was then I froze in my tracks.

I heard two voices I recognized, and one voice belonged to the one person I hated more than anyone else. He sounded angry, and I could only imagine how things were going between him and Lenny.

I didn’t hesitate. I had to get over there and make sure she was okay.

But there was a horrible feeling in the pit in my stomach. I dreaded what I'd find.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lenny

I felt sick to my stomach and my hands were sweaty as I sat across from Pete.

He had a smirk on his face that made me want to slap him, but I was cradling the arm he'd grabbed in my free hand. I was certain he'd grabbed me hard enough it was going to leave a mark, and I wanted to find a way to bring that up to him, hoping to scare him into leaving me alone entirely.

"I never said I wanted to hang out with you," I told him. "You might have the freedom to sit here if you want, but you don't have the freedom to keep me here if I don't want. That's like kidnapping you know."

"Kidnapping? Are you kidding me?" Pete asked. "You're really going to sit here and tell me that I kidnapped you when we are sitting in the middle of this heavily populated hotel's beach area?"

"Just because there's a lot of people in the hotel doesn't mean you can make me do something I don't want to do," I shot back, hoping to gain the upper hand in the conversation. I knew that with how arrogant Pete was, it was going to take some real convincing to scare him into letting me go, and I wasn't quite sure how to approach that.

"You could tell the cops I kidnapped you if you wanted, but I bet you anything they are going to laugh in your face. How

the fuck are you going to consider yourself kidnapped when you're in the middle of a busy place? The very first thing they are going to ask you is if you called for help.”

“I will if you don't let me go,” I snapped.

“I'm not holding you,” he laughed. “And if you do that, I'm going to tell them that you have it out for me and are just trying to convince the world I'm a bad guy when I haven't done shit to you. It's not a crime to be attracted to someone, you know.”

“But it is a crime to make someone sit and talk to you when they don't want to,” I said.

“What crime?” he asked.

“You have to be kidding me,” I said.

“No, you're the one who's been shitting everyone,” he replied. “And now you're just trying to convince me to let you walk away because you don't want to own up to the fact you're a liar, and you're mad I'm the only one who has been able to see through you.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I said. “You can say I'm lying all you want, but just because you don't agree with the person I'm dating, it doesn't make me a liar.”

“Sure, you're going to maintain that you're dating this guy, but yet you never said a word about him for two years? You never came back here when you had the entire summer off between semesters? If he's so rich, why didn't you come back

here to spend the time with him and have him pay for your semester when you got back to school?”

“It’s not any of your business how things work between my boyfriend and me,” I snapped. “I don’t have to explain shit to you, and I’m not going to let you sit here and try to force me into telling you about shit that doesn’t matter to you.”

“Or you can just own up to the fact you’re lying to everyone. You know, it’s really hurtful not only to me but to the rest of us that you would choose to use this last time we have together to lie to us and try to impress us with some guy you picked up God only knows where.”

“I don’t think anyone is hurt by this but you, and you’re only hurt because you can’t take no for an answer,” I said. “The rest of the group is fine with me dating Scott, and they are just fine with the fact I didn’t say a word about him while in school. In fact, I’m pretty sure Sara is the one who told you several times that she understands why I didn’t say shit about him when I was in school, and she’s not at all bothered by it.”

Pete laughed, and I almost bolted from my seat. I watched him carefully, looking for any chance I could get away from him and make it to the door of the hotel. I knew he would twist this situation if I tried screaming for help, and I didn’t want him to turn this into something that was going to make me look crazy.

If there was one thing Pete was good at, it was manipulation. I’d watched him do it to the teachers when we were in school, and I had no doubt he would do the same thing

to anyone who would come over to try to help me if I did scream.

I fully believed if I was going to get out of this, I was going to have to play it smart and do it on the sly.

“Fuck Sara,” he said. “And Hannah, too, for that matter. Those two are so stupid and so eager to have you be their friend that they’re going to go with anything that comes out of your mouth. Shit, you could say you were abducted by aliens and they would go along with it.”

“I’m not sure if you’re jealous or if you just don’t know what loyal friends are,” I told him. “But they’re not desperate for my friendship, they just know what it means to be friends. And for your information, that doesn’t mean they are lying for me, either. It just means they know I’m not going to lie to them about shit so they’re not going to push for something stupid like you are now.”

“Or it means they know you’re such a liar and want to be your friend anyway, so they’re too chicken shit to say anything about this.”

“Fuck you, Pete,” I snapped. “I don’t know if you hear half the shit that comes out of your mouth, or if you just go along with your own delusions. Whatever it is, you need to pull your head out of your ass and get over yourself. I’m not dating you, I don’t want to date you, and it doesn’t matter if I decide to date a carrot, I don’t choose you, and that’s the end of that.”

Pete laughed once again, and I fought the urge to attack him. There was something about the way he looked at me that

made me feel even more unsettled than usual, and I knew I had to bide my time with this.

I hoped if I talked long enough that Sara would come back, and he would leave me alone. Or, even better, maybe Hannah would show up. If there was anyone who would tell him how she really felt, it was Hannah. She didn't give a fuck what he thought about her, and she would tell him straight what she wanted.

I wished I was that bold, but with the way he scared me, I wasn't sure how to approach this without pissing him off to the point where he might do something. I still wasn't convinced like Sara was that he was all talk. I felt there was something about him that would cause him to snap and actually do something physical to me if I pissed him off badly enough.

He gave me a sick smirk when I told him I wasn't going to date him, and I noticed the veins in his neck bulged. He clenched his jaw and his eyes snapped, and I felt he was fighting to maintain control over himself.

Though I was still in denial over the reason I had been nauseous for the past week, there was something in me telling me I had to be careful. I was terrified he might do something to hurt me, but there was someone else I had to think about now above myself, and I had to make sure I was okay for their sake, too.

Even without complete confirmation of my condition, I still had the instinct to take care of myself. I had to be careful, and

I had to be smart.

“Okay, look,” he said as he ran his hands down the front of his thighs. “I have put up with your little game long enough. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you I know you’re a liar before you come clean and tell me the truth, but I’m running out of patience with you. If you aren’t going to tell me how much you gave this guy to get him to play the part of your boyfriend, then fine, you win on that, but you’re not going to walk away without admitting you’re lying to me. To everyone.”

“Or what?” I demanded. “I don’t know why you’re so worried about this anyway. It’s not like you care about me or anything I’m doing; you just want to date me! You don’t know shit about me, Pete, and you never will. I don’t have to tell you shit about my life, and I’m done with you bullying me.”

“I hope you realize how stupid you’re being right now,” he said. “I’m doing my best to give you an out right now.”

“If you want to give me an out, you’ll let me go,” I said. “I need to help Sara, and you’re making it impossible for me to do that by keeping me here.”

With that, I rose to go, this time determined to keep walking.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he told me. “Sit back down!”

“No!” I snapped. “If you touch me, I’m going to scream and have someone call the cops. You can’t put your hands on me,

and you can't keep me here. I don't know what you think you're doing, but you're the bully here, not me!"

"You fucking bitch!" Pete shouted as he rose to come after me.

I shoved him, trying to get him to trip against the chair he'd been sitting on.

Pete took a step back as I pushed him, but he didn't lose his balance as I'd hoped. Instead, he reached out and grabbed me by my wrists, holding me by both my arms as I struggled against him.

"Let me go, you're hurting me!" I shouted. "Let me go right now, or I'm going to scream!"

But he twisted me in his grip, causing me to trip over the chair I'd been sitting on myself. I cried out as I fell forward, and he put his foot out to cause me to land on my knees.

The sand was a soft enough landing, but with the way it gripped at my feet, I couldn't move quickly enough to get out of the way before Pete was on top of me. He straddled my body with his legs, pinning me down with his weight.

I was slapping him as I struggled, doing what I could to break free of him. I had never been more terrified in my entire life, and while I tried to scream, his weight had crushed all the air out of me. My voice was barely audible, not nearly loud enough for anyone to hear my cries for help.

It was all happening so fast; I wasn't able to think straight as Pete came down on me.

I wasn't sure what he planned on doing, but my heart sank when he pulled his fist back, preparing to punch me right in the face. I had never been hit like that before, and I didn't know how to stop it. I didn't know how to brace myself, or what to do.

All I knew was that he was attacking me, and no one was around to help. And I didn't have the strength to stop him either.

I was completely helpless.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Scott

I had gone through a lot of training when I was in the military.

Though I hadn't dealt with combat when I was deployed, I had been prepared for anything that could have happened. From the moment I was sent to basic training all the way through my military career, I had been prepared to go hand to hand with someone if the situation arose.

For the most part, I knew I wasn't going to have to deal with that when I was in the military. I was not only in the Navy, but I also worked in a submarine most of the time. There wasn't any reason for me to ever think I was going to wind up in a fist fight. Or really any other kind of physical altercation for that matter.

But that didn't mean I wasn't ready.

Not only did I pay careful attention when I was in training, I also kept myself in top shape. It wasn't just for my health and vanity that I spent as much time in the gym as I did. I wanted to be capable of acting if the need ever came up, and while I didn't think it would ever happen, especially when I got out of the service, I still worked hard to maintain my physique.

So, when I saw Pete attack Lenny the way that he did, I wasn't sure what came over me.

It was as though all of my personal feelings and sense turned off, and the training that I had sustained when I was in the military took over. I already knew how to fist fight, but when I had gone through the proper training, I knew how to do all kinds of different moves.

My entire life had come down to being able to disarm a situation and diffuse a threat. I didn't stop to take in a situation. I acted in the moment and I did what had to be done to deal with the threat. I got rid of the person who was causing the issue, then I calmed down and figured out what was going on.

I heard a shout, and I realized it had come from me when I came leaping out from the walkway to the beach. I hadn't even realized I was holding that back when I was running to the two who were having the conversation, but all the rage and hatred I had bottled up toward Pete came rushing to the surface when I jumped toward him.

It was a mix between a tackle and a slam.

I'd snuck up on the two of them as they were talking, paying careful attention to the conversation as it had unfolded. More than once I heard Pete accusing Lenny of being a liar, but Lenny was holding her ground. She wasn't giving into any of his demands, and when she finally told him to fuck off and leave her alone, I was ready to step out and tell him that he had his answer from her once and for all.

I'd planned to tell him that that was his final warning, and if I ever saw him near her again, I would see to it that he left her

alone. But what I hadn't expected was the way he reacted to her telling him to leave her alone.

I knew he was capable of assault. After what I had heard him talk about the other day, I knew if he had the chance, he was going to act on it. I had been more worried about him doing something to her sexually than I had been him coming down on her in a violent rage. I figured he would be too scared to try to make a move on her when they were out in public, but clearly, he had no handle on his temper, and when he had the chance to grab her like that, he gave full vent to the feelings that were running through him, and he was going to unleash on her harder than he may have even planned.

That was the way it went when it came to crimes of passion. I had heard of it going down when I was in the military, and I had heard of it happening to others when they got themselves into tight situations. But I hadn't ever witnessed anything close to that before, and when I saw the way Pete had taken her down, I snapped.

"What the fuck?" Pete shouted when I grabbed him, sending him to the ground above Lenny's head. He was heavier than I had planned, and when I slammed into him as hard as I had, I figured he was going to go a lot farther. But he only landed on the ground a few feet above her, giving her only a few inches to get out of the way before my fists came slamming down on his body.

I wasn't just aiming for his face. I wanted to make sure he didn't have the ability to come after Lenny or anyone else ever

again.

“What the fuck?” Pete shouted again. “Get the fuck off me, you psycho!”

“You think it’s okay to grab a woman when she tells you to leave her alone?” I demanded. “You think it’s okay to shove her to the ground when she tells you she isn’t interested in you?”

“Get off me! You’re insane! Help! Someone help!” Pete shouted.

“Oh, now you’re the one who is going to call for help like a little girl?” I taunted. “You talk tough to your buddies when you’re on the phone. You tell them you’re going to assault a defenseless woman who has made it clear to you she doesn’t want shit to do with you, and you’re going to act on that when you think there isn’t anyone else around, but when it comes down to it, you’re going to kick and scream for someone to help you, is that right?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about! You get off me before I call the cops and have you arrested for assault! I’m going to call the cops on you!”

“When I’m done with you, you’ll be lucky if you can even eat solid food!” I shouted back at him as my fists continued to pummel him. “You’ll be lucky if you have any teeth left in that stupid face of yours! See how well you can try to get women when you don’t have a single tooth left in your mouth!”

“Stop! Stop! You’re going to kill him! Stop!”

I could hear Lenny screaming at us from behind, but I wasn't listening to her. I knew she wasn't going to be happy with any level of violence, but I wasn't going to hold back. Not when this was my chance to unleash on the guy who had been harassing her this entire time. I knew she would likely be upset at the time, but when the cops came and he was thrown in jail, she would be feeling a lot better.

It was only adrenaline that was making her behave this way, and I was going to prove to her now that I would make sure no one would ever lay a hand on her when she didn't want it to happen. I wasn't the kind of guy to incite violence without reason, but when it came down to someone who was going to take advantage of her like that, I was going to keep hitting him for as long as I could.

He punched back, hitting me in the face and trying to get me off him. But I had hit him hard enough when I had jumped on him that I had managed to get the upper hand in the fight. I had landed on him when he was scrambling around in the sand, doing much the same thing to him that he had done to Lenny.

"It's not so much fun when you're the one who is on the ground, is it?" I taunted. "You can feel like a big man when you're throwing your weight around a woman, but when you're faced with someone your own size, you crumble! I've never met such a coward in all my life!"

"You fucker, you sucker punched me, and if you think this is a fair fight, you're insane! I'm telling you right now that

you're going to regret ever touching me!" Pete shouted.

"Not as much as you're going to regret the life you'll live when you go to prison for assaulting a woman!" I shouted back.

"Get off him! You two knock this off right now!" Lenny shouted. "This isn't helping! You are going to get in so much trouble!"

"Call the cops!" Pete shouted. "Someone call the cops and get this psycho off me! He broke my nose, I swear!"

"And I'm going to break all the teeth out of that pretty boy face of yours, too," I snapped at him. "If there was a way I could break that tongue out, I would do that, too. I'll have you know I heard every word you said to your buddy the other day."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Pete said.

"You don't? You don't remember telling him that you hadn't nailed Lenny yet, but you were going to get her one way or another? You don't remember the way you said you would do what you had to in order to get what you wanted? I do! I remember the whole damn thing!"

I was hitting him as I spoke, and he was doing his best to get me off of him, but I was too jacked up on adrenaline and anger for him to have much of a chance of getting me to move. I was so pissed off with him and what I had heard him say, I moved my hands from punching him to his throat. I was ready

to strangle the life out of him, to watch him pass out in my grasp when I heard Lenny screaming once again.

I couldn't hear what she was saying, but her voice mixed with others, and as two men grabbed me and started yanking me off Pete, I knew the fight was over. It didn't matter how much I wanted to keep punching him now, the fight was over.

"Call the cops!" Pete shouted. "Call the cops and put this man in jail!"

"Yes, someone needs to call the cops and make sure this man is taken off the street," I said. "He's assaulting your guests, and more than that, he's attacking a defenseless woman out here."

"Both of you need to shut the fuck up and let me think for a second," the lifeguard said.

It was then that I realized Lenny had gone and asked the lifeguards for help. I didn't blame her for that. I had lost control over myself in the heat of the moment, and now that I was starting to calm down, I was glad that I hadn't acted on all the impulses that had run through my mind during the fight.

But, now that I was thinking more clearly, my only worry was Lenny.

I whipped around, looking for her.

And there she was, standing over by one of the lifeguards and glaring.

Not at Pete, but at me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lenny

I was staring through tears the entire way back to my apartment.

There were so many thoughts and feelings rushing through me, I could hardly think straight. Not only was I trying to process what had just happened with Pete, even more than that I was trying to process what had happened with Scott.

My phone rang, and I looked to see an unknown number calling.

I didn't want to answer, but considering what had just happened, I figured it could be helpful.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Lenny?"

"Yes? Who is this?"

"My name is Richard Grady, I'm the hotel manager of the Sunkissed, and I heard there was an accident this morning," he said. "I would like to talk to you further if you have a moment?"

"Okay," I said. "How did you get my number?"

"A gentleman here at the hotel gave it to me and said I could reach you since you left before I had the chance to come down," he explained. "First of all, I would like to apologize

for the incident that occurred with the other guest. Would you mind telling me what happened from your perspective?”

I sighed. “This guy has been trying to get my attention for a while, and I’ve been turning him down. I guess he just reached the point where he didn’t want to take no for an answer and was getting too aggressive about it. My fiancé stepped in and took matters into his own hands for lack of a better way to put it.”

“Okay, okay,” Richard said. “That matches up more with what the aggressor said. And you were the one to retrieve the lifeguards I take it?”

“Once they were out there, yes,” I said. “I was trying to find someone who could help us, but there wasn’t anyone around until they showed up. By then, the fight was already well underway, and the only thing I could think to do was go and get them.”

“Okay,” Richard said again. “And are you hurt? Is there anything at all I can offer you? Some form of compensation for the whole ordeal?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want anything. I just want to go back to my place.”

“Are you sure?” Richard asked me. “I’m very sorry that this happened, and I want to assure you this is in no way acceptable or tolerated behavior. We are looking into the situation further, and once we have more of the details corroborated with evidence, I will be placing charges against those who are at fault.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about it. I’m pretty sure the guy who has been after me all this time is leaving town this afternoon.”

“Even still,” Richard said. “I take things like this very seriously, and I don’t want you to feel that you aren’t being cared for now. Please, if there is anything I can do to assist you further, let me know.”

“I will,” I said. “Thank you.”

I hung up the phone just as I reached the front door of my apartment. I was glad to see the rental car we shared was still in the driveway. Hannah hadn’t left yet, which ultimately was the only thing I wanted right now. I didn’t care what the manager of the hotel could offer me. I had no reason to hang out at that place without my friends.

But I wanted to talk to Hannah. She was a levelheaded person who would likely have some good advice for how I should handle this situation.

I walked into the apartment, and Hannah came rushing out of her room.

“I’m sorry! I’m on my way over,” she said. “I’m sure Sara is wondering if I forgot about her, what’s the matter?”

She froze when she saw me, and without a word, I rushed over to her, putting my arms out for a hug.

She pulled me close as I sobbed.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “Are you okay? What happened?”

I could barely speak, the sobs wracking my entire body and making it impossible for me to form any coherent words.

“It’s okay, let it out, let it out,” she told me as she held me. I still wasn’t able to get anything out, so she walked me over to the couch and we sat down together. I wasn’t even sure myself why I was crying so hard about this. I was upset, but I wasn’t so upset that I wasn’t able to get control over myself. Yet the tears kept coming and I couldn’t regain my composure.

Then again, with the other suspicion I had going on, I figured I could be more emotional than usual. It would make sense with the change in hormones. The same reason why I was feeling as nauseous as I had been.

Finally, I was able to control myself enough to take in a breath and focus.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Hannah asked me. “What has you this worked up?”

I poured out the entire story for her, just like I did for Richard when he called me on my way back to the apartment.

“Fuck!” Hannah said. “He didn’t!”

“He did,” I sobbed. I knew she was talking about Pete, and it was obvious she was furious about what had happened.

“I’ll kill him,” she growled.

“Scott nearly did,” I said angrily.

“Good!” Hannah cried.

“No, it’s not,” I snapped. “I have never been more terrified in my entire life.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah looked at me like I wasn’t making any sense. “You aren’t happy he stood up for you? You said Pete was about to hit you in the face! Who knows what else he would have done if Scott hadn’t turned up.”

“I know, and I’m grateful to Scott for that, but like, you didn’t see the crazed look in his eyes. It was a totally different Scott than the Scott I know and have fallen in love with. It was like he was a monster who was just hellbent on killing Pete, and like, I think he would have if the lifeguards hadn’t shown up the way they did.”

“Didn’t you tell him to stop?” she asked. “You said you were yelling the whole time.”

“Of course, I did. I told him if he didn’t stop, he was going to kill Pete. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to see someone get beaten to death right in front of me, even if he did just attack me. I was so scared. I didn’t know what to do. I went to get the lifeguards, and they were the ones who came and pulled Scott off Pete,” I said.

I twisted the edge of my tank top as I spoke, hesitating. “And there’s something else.”

“What?” Hannah asked.

“I think I’m pregnant,” I stammered.

“What!”

“I’ve been nauseous and I’m late, and I don’t know, I’m super emotional about this. I don’t know if I’m just shaken after what Pete did, then seeing how Scott freaked out, but I’ve never been unable to get control over myself like that before.”

“Shit Lenny, what are you going to do?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, when I first thought that I could be, I wondered how Scott would take the news, but I also figured it wasn’t something he would freak out about. I mean, I’ve already gotten the strongest impression from him that he would like to make things not only official, but really as serious as being engaged.”

“So, you haven’t talked to him about it yet?” Hannah asked.

“No, I haven’t even taken a test yet,” I admitted. “It’s just a feeling I have. But now I have no idea what to do.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“I mean, how can I be with someone who freaks out like that? I mean, it scared me so much to see him like that, I just, I don’t know. I’m scared,” I said.

“I bet you are,” Hannah said. “After what you went through today, anyone would be scared shitless. But that doesn’t have anything to do with you being pregnant, does it?”

“I mean, not really I guess,” I admitted. “I just don’t feel like I can trust him.”

“Why?” she asked. “Are you sure you’re not being upset about the wrong thing here?”

“The wrong thing?” I asked with raised eyebrows.

“You’re upset with the fact he beat up Pete after Pete attacked you. I would be thankful to Scott for what he did and pissed off at Pete. He’s the one you really should be upset about right now.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I am,” I assured her. “But there was something Scott said when he was beating Pete that really shook me to the core.”

“What was that?” she asked.

“He said that he heard Pete telling his buddy on the phone that he was going to assault me. And yet, he never said a word about that to me. It still makes my blood run cold to think about. How could he know that someone said outright they were going to assault me, and not say a thing about it?” I asked.

Hannah didn’t reply. I could see on her face she didn’t know what to say. After all, that was a fucked-up thing to do, and Scott was guilty.

“The way I see it, if he was watching me to the point he could come out of nowhere and stop the assault as it was happening, then why the fuck didn’t he tell me about it in the first place? If I knew he’d actually said that, I never would have gone out alone. I would have gone straight to the police and talked to them about the entire thing and probably have put a restraining order on him,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “This is so fucked up. I mean, I totally agree with you. Why didn’t Scott tell you? That would piss me off if I were you, too. But then, what would you have told the police? That your fiancé told you that he heard someone say they were going to assault you? I don’t know if that’s enough proof at that point for you to be able to get a restraining order.”

“Maybe not, but I sure as hell wouldn’t have left here alone if I knew that he had said that. I would have stayed with someone at all times to make sure he didn’t have the chance to catch me alone like that. Even if Scott was there, why the fuck didn’t he keep it from happening in the first place?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah shook her head. “It’s fucked. I mean, that’s the only way I can put it. It’s just fucked up how he didn’t say a word about it to anyone if he knew it was a possibility. And it’s surprising that he didn’t, either.”

“It just makes me angry. I don’t know if he thought he would just keep an eye on things and make sure it didn’t happen or what his thought process was. But the fact that I could have been hurt even worse haunts me. Scott might have been in the right place at the right time today, but suppose he had been at work or something? What if he hadn’t come to the beach when he did? What if Pete had done more to me than he did, and it all came down to the fact Scott didn’t feel like he ought to tell me that he knew Pete was going to assault me at some point? It makes me not want to confirm whether I’m pregnant. I don’t want to even have to deal with that at this point.”

“Just breathe,” Hannah told me. “You don’t have to make any decisions right now, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t want to be around Scott. All I can think about is the fact he hid that from me, and it makes me wonder what else he’s hiding. I highly doubt that was the only thing he knew he chose not to tell me. Think about it. That’s kind of a big deal, right?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I would be careful if I were you. Don’t jump to conclusions but do think this through. You don’t have to have the answer right now, do you? Just take some time to process what happened and figure it out.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “I just know I don’t want to talk to Scott.”

“Then don’t,” Hannah told me. “You have the right to decide who you want to talk to or not.”

“Right,” I said.

She gave me another hug, and I got up to go to my room.

“I think I’m going to take a nap,” I said.

“Good,” she replied. “Get some sleep, and things will blow over.”

“I hope so,” I told her. I headed to my room and closed the door behind me, ignoring the text messages and missed calls from Scott on my phone. I knew he had to talk to the cops after the fight, and I didn’t care to hear how it went.

I didn’t care to hear anything he had to say to me at this point. I was hurt, I was pissed, and I was still scared.

I didn't know what the hell to do.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Scott

“**B**ack so soon? I thought you said you weren’t coming back in today,” Les said as I walked through the door.

I completely ignored him, walking through the bar and heading to my office without looking at anyone. I wasn’t in the mood to talk, and I didn’t care to stop and tell Les what happened, either.

“Okay then,” Les said. “Guess I’ll just be talking to myself over here. No big deal.”

I knew he was saying that in hopes of getting me to acknowledge him on my way through the bar area, but I didn’t take the bait, and I heard some of the customers making comments to him about minding his own business and doing his job anyway.

He had other staff working with him behind the bar, so even though they were busy, I didn’t feel obligated to stop and talk to him. Not that I would have anyway. Not with all that was on my mind.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had been so pissed off, but even more than that, I felt like absolute shit for the way Lenny had looked at me. I hated that I hurt her, and I wished I could take it back. Not that I would take back beating the shit out of Pete, but taking back how I had hurt Lenny over it.

I closed myself in my office with a sigh. I wished I could lock the door, and made a mental note to install a lock at some point. Today, however, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Having the door closed should be enough to send a message to anyone who was walking through the hall. At least, that's what I assumed.

I had only been in my office for half an hour before there was a knock at the door.

"I'm busy," I called out. "Not in the mood to talk."

The door opened slightly, and I was pissed to see Les peering into the office.

"I told you I'm not in the fucking mood," I snapped. "I don't care what the fuck is going on out there, you can handle it to the best of your own ability, and we'll go from there."

"It's not that," he said. "There are a couple of officers who are here to see you."

"Cops?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Fuck," I said. "Tell them I'll be out in two minutes."

He gave me a short nod and disappeared, and I sighed. I had a feeling I would wind up talking to cops about what had happened, but I wasn't in the mood to do it anymore now than I had been when I left the hotel.

I hoped just talking to the staff at the hotel would be enough to deal with the situation, but evidently the owner had called the cops or something. Or maybe Pete himself had. I didn't think that was as likely with the way he had been at fault for the assault in the first place, but then, Pete was known for his manipulation.

There was a chance he called and gave his version of what happened first in hopes he would be able to twist the situation to make himself the victim. I didn't know that for sure, but it wouldn't have surprised me.

After checking myself in the little mirror I had hanging on the wall next to the door, I headed out to meet the cops.

Sure enough, the two of them were standing at the edge of the bar, and I gave them my most charming smile when I walked over toward them.

"Officers," I said. "You wanted to speak with me?"

"We just had a few questions about the incident that took place at the Sunkissed this morning," one of the officers said. "We were called by the hotel manager to report the incident, but considering there was an assault that took place, we would like to talk to each of the parties involved."

"Of course," I said. "I'm happy to tell you anything. I don't have shit to hide."

"Shall we take it over this way, so we don't have an audience?" the officer asked.

"I would certainly prefer it," I agreed.

The three of us walked over to one of the tables that were in the closed-off section of the dining room, which I was happy to do. I knew having the cops show up to talk to me was bound to start a variety of rumors not only in the club but across Marathon. I didn't want that, either.

There were enough tourists who came through this place that it wasn't a big deal for people to be talking about me. It would pass. Not to mention it was publicity, and I knew any publicity was good for business. At least, for the most part.

The discussion with the cops was short and direct, which allowed me to get back to my office within half an hour. I was relieved to hear that it had been a result of the manager calling the cops and reporting the incident rather than Pete himself, though it was little comfort.

"Well, from the way this sounds, I don't think any charges will come of it," the cop said as he finished the interview.

"You don't think the other man should be charged after he put his hands on the woman?" I asked in surprise.

"Unless she wants to press charges against him, there's not much we can do. It's a he-said she-said right now, and you can imagine that it's difficult for us to know who is telling the truth in situations like that. We will be talking with both other parties, so rest assured if there's reason for us to bring charges, we will," he said.

"Thank you," I told him. "If I wish to sue him over it, can I?"

“I don’t know how far you’ll get in court, but you can,” the cop said. “You’re going to have to go to the courthouse and discuss this with a lawyer.”

“Thank you,” I said again.

And that was the end of the discussion.

Back in my office, I was once again wishing for a lock on the door, certain it wasn’t going to take long before someone decided to bother me once again. I figured Les would have gotten the message with what I’d said to him earlier, but sure enough, I hadn’t even been back in my office for long before there was another knock on the door.

“I’m not in the mood,” I called out. “I don’t care how you want to handle whatever it is. I’ll deal with it later.”

“I want to handle you,” Les said as he opened the door. “There’s something going on here, and I want you to tell me what it is.”

“I’m sure you do, but I’m not going to,” I replied. “I want to be left alone.”

“I know you do, but that’s not happening,” he told me. “I know you well enough to know you’re the kind of guy who gets into shit and shuts down, and I’m not going to let you do that. I know enough about veterans to know you can’t isolate and shut the rest of us out because you’re upset. The more you open up and connect with others, the better.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works,” I said. “I want to be alone.”

“Well, we can be alone together then,” Les said. He walked into the office and sat down in the chair that was across from my desk, and he folded his hands in front of him as he looked at me.

“So, what’s going on with the cops? What did they want?”

“They were talking to me about an incident that took place at the hotel this morning,” I said.

“And you were going to the hotel to see how your girlfriend was doing after you weren’t sure whether you ought to tell her about a phone call you overheard,” he said. “I don’t know what you think of my intelligence, but I think you know I’m going to piece enough of this shit together to know that you must have had something go down.”

I sighed. “Something went down alright, and now Lenny hates my guts.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“A fight,” I said.

“Keep going,” he replied.

I gave him a look, but it became obvious he wasn’t going to let me be if I didn’t tell him the truth about what happened. With a sigh, I finally spilled the whole story to him. I told him everything, including the way Lenny had looked at me after the fight, and how she’d been pissed that I hadn’t told her the truth.

“She said she couldn’t believe that I knew about it and hadn’t said a word, then she left,” I sighed. “I tried to call her,

I tried to text her, but she's ignoring me. I don't know, I fucked up here, Les. I fucked up a lot, and I don't know how to fix it."

"If she's just upset about the fact you didn't tell her, I'd assume that's going to pass," Les said, but I shook my head.

"I don't think that's all she's upset about," I admitted. "She was shouting and screaming when I was punching Pete. I don't know if she really was scared that I was going to kill the kid, or if she was pissed off to see that side of me. I don't know what she thought I'd do, but I just acted."

"Of course, you did. I don't know of any man who is going to see what you saw and not freak out the way you did. Pete's lucky you didn't kill him right there," Les said.

"Sure," I agreed. "But can I be honest with you for a second?"

"I wish you would be," Les told me. "I feel like the only way for me to really offer good advice here is for you to be honest."

"It scares me," I said.

"What does?" Les asked.

"The way I freaked out," I said. "It was like I just reverted back into being how I was when I got out of the military, and I don't like the person I was. I don't want to go back to that, and the fact that response is in there, just under the surface, I don't know. It scares me."

Les nodded.

“It’s alright,” he said. “I don’t think that’s you. It’s your training, and you did what you know how to do, that’s all. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Except I need to make sure this is done and over with,” I said. “I need to deal with Pete, and I need to do it in a way that will keep me from killing him.”

“We need to make sure he gets out of here,” Les said. “And you know what? I’m going with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said.

“No, I do,” he argued. “I need to make sure you don’t freak out again, and you need to have the support of someone being there so he doesn’t go to the cops and make this harder for you than it already is.”

“I don’t know how this is going to do shit with Lenny, but if he’s gone, then I don’t have to worry he’s going to come after her again,” I said.

“And right now, that’s the important thing. We’ll get rid of the problem, then you can worry about how things happen with Lenny. Deal?” Les asked.

“Alright,” I said after a pause. “Deal.”

“But,” Les replied, “you have to let me be the one to call the shots on this. I have an idea.”

I wasn’t sure it was the best idea to have him be the one to handle this, but I knew it was the only way he’d agree to let me go confront Pete.

“Fine,” I said at last. “Fuck it. Let’s do it.”

And with that, Les smiled.

“Excellent. I’m off at three, and we’ll take care of business.”

He got up and walked out of the office, leaving me alone with my thoughts once more. I sighed, closing my eyes and thinking. I had no idea what Les had in mind, but I trusted him. He was a good friend, there was no doubt about that.

He’d help me get through this.

And hopefully keep me out of jail in the process.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lenny

I stayed in bed the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, only getting out of bed to head to the bathroom a couple of times.

I thought long and hard about what Hannah had said to me, but I still felt shitty about the entire situation. I didn't know what to do about any of it.

I'd already been dealing with a lot of confusion over what to do with school and Scott, and when I started worrying about being pregnant, that only added to the confusion. Now, seeing a whole different side of Scott I didn't even know existed, I wasn't sure what to do about any of this.

There was a part of me that wanted to talk to Scott and tell him I was sorry for walking off the way I had. There was another part of me that wanted to throw myself into his arms and thank him for doing what he did for me.

Hannah was right about the fact he'd saved me from Pete. It wasn't necessarily wrong for him to have reacted the way he did. Just because I thought it was too much, that didn't mean it really had been. After all, I didn't even want to think about what would have happened if Scott hadn't shown up when he did.

I was still angry with Scott for not telling me the truth about what he heard Pete say. But then, there were a lot more

questions that went into my mind when I thought about what I heard from him, too.

Did he really hear Pete say that?

Was he just saying that to Pete to add to the moment? Pete hadn't argued with him when he said that he heard him on the phone, so that made it seem to me like it was true.

On the other hand, things were going down so fast, and I had been screaming the entire time, so I wasn't sure how much I had really heard and how much I misheard in the heat of the moment. It made me sick to think that he would have gone so far as to kill Pete right there in front of me, yet, Hannah seemed to think it was a normal reaction for a man to have when someone else was trying to hurt his girlfriend.

I tossed and turned for a while.

The nausea wore off as the day went on, as usual, but I wasn't able to shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen. In the back of my mind, I knew that something bad had happened, and that was what I should be thinking about. But I still had a feeling of more impending doom, and I didn't know what to do about that.

Scott, for his own part, kept blowing up my phone. He tried to call me at times, he left voicemails, and he would leave text messages. But I wasn't in the mood to talk to him. Not right away, anyway. I just wanted to sleep, as though that would help things go away.

But, at nearly two in the afternoon, I heard a knock at the front door. I'd spent the past four and a half hours in bed, but I didn't feel any better about the situation than I had when I went to bed in the first place.

"I'll get it," Hannah called out to me. "Don't bother."

"Okay," I replied. "Thanks."

I heard a male's voice and Hannah telling him I wasn't in the mood to talk.

"I just want to make sure she's okay," Scott was saying.

"I don't think she wants to talk to you right now," Hannah said. "She's pretty upset over what happened at the hotel, and I don't think she's in the mood to talk to anyone."

"Sure, but I was there, and I would like to clear up some of the things that happened," Scott argued. "I'm sure she's upset, but I would like to help her."

"I don't think so, not right now," Hannah said. "Why don't you come back later? Or she'll call you when she's ready."

I smiled to myself as I got up and headed for the door of my bedroom. It meant the world to me that Hannah was protective enough to send Scott away and stand guard over the doorway to keep anyone from bothering me, but I did feel I owed it to Scott to at least talk to him for a few minutes.

"Hey," I said, cutting into their argument when I stepped out into the living room. "It's okay, Hannah, he can come in for a minute."

“Are you sure?” she asked. “You don’t want to give it some time first?”

“I think I owe him some sort of explanation or something,” I said. “It’s not going to take very long.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong,” she argued with me.

“I know, but I still feel like I would feel better if I took the time to talk for a few minutes or at least heard what he had to say long enough for him to leave me alone,” I explained. “Okay, Scott?”

“Sure,” he said with a small smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep it brief.”

“Okay, but if I hear you getting upset, I’m going to come back out here and make you leave,” Hannah said as she started talking to me, then finished her statement talking to Scott. “I’m not going to let her get all worked up again.”

“I was pretty upset when I got home this morning,” I told him once Hannah had gone to her room. “I wasn’t able to talk I was sobbing so hard.”

“I’m sorry,” he told me. “I didn’t mean for shit to go down as hard as it did. It’s just when I saw him doing that to you, it was more than I could handle. I hoped that it wasn’t going to escalate the way it did, and he was just going to walk away when you told him to fuck off, but then, I don’t know. I snapped.”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug. “I guess it’s to be expected when you see something like that, but it scared me. I mean,

you were like a different person, and more than that, you were so crazy, I was scared you were going to kill him.”

“I wanted to, but I wouldn’t have gone that far,” he told me.

“How do you know? It was like you weren’t even hearing me,” I said.

“Because I know how much it takes to kill someone, and I wasn’t going to let myself get to that point. I wanted to scare him. I wanted him to know there was no way in hell it was okay for him to do that to you or anyone else. But I wouldn’t have killed him,” he assured me. “I had enough control over myself to be able to put a stop to it before it reached that level of escalation.”

I sighed. I felt a little better knowing that, but there was still something else that bothered me.

“Did you really hear him say he was going to hurt me?” I asked. “You told him you did, and I don’t know, I guess I just need to know if that’s true.”

“I did,” he sighed. “He said it when he was on the phone with someone the other day.”

“And you didn’t think it would be a good idea to tell me?” I asked.

“I didn’t want to worry you about that,” he said. “I knew you already had issues with him, and I didn’t want to cause more issues. I had no idea how you would respond or how the rest of the group would take it, and I knew if someone were to

call him out on it, he would have denied it. I just, I don't know, my goal was to keep you from worrying.”

“But you not wanting me to worry put me at greater risk, right?” I pressed. “If I had known that he had said that, then I would have been able to make the choice to stay with someone at all times, or I would have been able to get a restraining order. Something. Anything.”

“I know. Now that it's all said and done and I have had the time to really think about it, I'm seeing a lot of things I should have done differently,” Scott said. “But I only had good intentions when I chose to keep it to myself, and I want you to know that. I also want you to know that no matter how angry I was earlier, I was still in control over myself. I wasn't going to lose myself completely in that situation.”

I nodded. “That's a relief.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I'm not ready for that.”

“I understand,” Scott said. “Anyway. I'll let you rest up, you look tired.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I'll talk to you later.”

I walked him to the door and closed and locked it behind him. I heard Hannah close her door softly, and I knew she wasn't going to come back out after my conversation with Scott. She knew me well enough to know I needed space, and she respected that.

I headed into the bathroom and sighed, looking at the counter as I filled my glass with water.

The positive pregnancy test still sat right where I had left it earlier. I hadn't brought it up, and I still wasn't sure what the right course of action should be. All I knew was that it was there, telling me the confirmation of what I had already suspected.

Reminding me that nothing would ever be the same again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Scott

“Here we are,” Les said, looking at the café.
“Are you sure he’s here?” I asked, looking at the place, feeling skeptical.

“I’m sure,” he said. “I spoke with a few of the guys who were at the bar earlier. Told them I wanted them to track this guy down and tell him that he was to be here at three o’clock on the dot to talk. I didn’t let on with a lot of the details but trust me when I tell you that these guys know how to get someone to show up when I want them.”

I gave him a look with raised eyebrows. “Are you sure they did what you asked?”

“I’m sure,” he said. “I had them come back and grab a couple of free drinks to confirm after they assured me he would be there. They’re going to check in with me tomorrow and make sure he was here. If he doesn’t show, then you can bet your ass he’s going to be in a whole new world of hurt tomorrow.”

“I’m not so sure he’d be able to take a new world of hurt,” I said with a small grin. “I’m not bragging, but I did a number on his pretty face when I was pummeling him earlier.”

“I can only imagine,” Les said. “I don’t know about you, but I find it despicable when someone like him does what he did to Lenny. I didn’t get to know her very well since she was

only at the club for a couple of shifts, but I can't imagine how I would have acted if I knew someone was trying to hit her like that."

"I'm telling you, my training kicked in, and that was the end of that. I assured Lenny I wouldn't have gone all the way to killing him, but what I didn't tell her was that I would have easily put him in the hospital and not have thought twice."

"Shit, I would have put him in the hospital," Les said. "And that is if someone had been able to pull me off him in time."

"God, there's a big part of me that wishes those lifeguards hadn't been able to get there in time. But what's done is done now, and here we are," I sighed.

"Well, we might as well get this over with," Les said. "It's five after, so if he's not here, you better believe I'm going to tell my guys he skipped out."

"I almost wish he would, but I want to get this over with myself. I want him to get out of here, and I know this is the only way to do it," I said. "I bet you anything he's going to try to pull more shit out of this if I don't nip it in the bud right now."

"Exactly," Les said. "Those cops might have said they were going to go with a he-said she-said, but I'm sure Petey-boy is going to do what he can to milk this for all it's worth."

We both got out of Les's car and headed into the café.

It was easy to find Pete.

He was sitting in the corner of the café with a baseball cap on, the brim pulled down low. He was wearing a hoodie as well, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, but the hood up, hiding most of his face. It was clear he was trying to conceal his features as much as possible, and I couldn't help but smile to myself as I noticed.

Both his eyes were swollen, and it was clear to me he was going to have two black eyes. I was sure he had loose teeth in his mouth, but I chose not to bring it up. He looked from Les to me and immediately started to get up.

"I don't know what you think this is, but I'm not going to talk to this fucker. No way," he said.

"I see you met with my boys," Les replied. "Sit the fuck down. You two are going to talk about this, and it's going to be solved before the end of today, or you're going to wish that it had been."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I've already talked to the cops, and they told me that I've got a real case for charges here. I'm taking you out for assault, old man, and there isn't shit you can do about it."

"That's what you think," I said.

"If you two are here to threaten me, I'm only going to add that to the charges," he said. "Trust me, it's only going to get worse for you from here."

"You say that, but I think you're the one who needs to stop and think about how you want to proceed. You might feel like

you have the upper hand here, but I'm here to tell you your life is going to go down the drain if you try to keep this up," Les said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean the proof we have here," he announced, setting his phone on the table.

"What's that?" Pete asked.

"It's his phone," Les said, giving me a slight nod.

It was a lie, of course, but Pete didn't know that. Since I wasn't sure what Les was doing, I didn't argue with him. I already agreed to let him be the one to do most of the talking, and I trusted he had some sort of plan that would bring this together in my mind before we were finished.

"What do I care about that for?" Pete asked.

"You should," Les said. "Because it's got the entire conversation between you and Lenny recorded on it, right up to the point where you attacked her and knocked her to the ground. I don't know about you, but that in itself is assault, and sure, you might have your face all different shades of the rainbow right now, but do you really want this to go to the cops?"

"Are you threatening me?" Pete demanded.

"No," Les said. "I'm just saying if you don't want to be plastered all over the internet as well as thrown into jail for your attempted rape of an innocent young woman, you better

drop those fucking assault charges and get the fuck out of town.”

“If you think I’m going to be scared by your bluff, you’ve got another thing coming,” Pete said. “If there had been footage of this, why didn’t you say shit about it when you were talking to the cops?” he asked me.

But, before I had the chance to reply, Les jumped back in.

“This is between you and me. I had him come with me for the sake of having a witness. I mean, I do have his phone with me so he should be here, but beyond that, this is just for him to hear what I had to say to you. It’s not at all permissible what you did to his fiancé.”

“Lenny’s not his fiancé,” Pete tried, but Les held up his hand.

“You better shut the fuck up while you still have the chance,” he warned. “I get you think you are all macho man here, but you aren’t shit. All you have is two black eyes. I have been in Marathon for decades, and Scott has an excellent reputation here. With this footage to show that you were the one who instigated the entire situation along with the testimony of the people involved, you only have a beaten-up face to back your statement.”

“It’s a crime,” Pete tried, but Les wasn’t listening.

“It’s not a crime to defend yourself or your loved ones from an attack. So, you can go forward with your little assault story, or you can drop the charges and get out of Marathon, and we

can forget about this entire incident. I don't know about you, but if I was to be faced with the options of having my life ruined versus just leaving and starting over somewhere else, I know which one I would take."

Pete didn't seem to know how to respond.

"I want to see what's on that phone," he said at last. "I want to see this footage you say you have."

"No," Les said.

"I don't believe you filmed shit," he told me.

"Then don't," I said with a shrug. "No one said you had to believe me. I just wanted to give you a fair shot here. I know you are hot-headed; I know you think you're the shit, and I know you're pissed off that Lenny isn't interested in you. If you want to gamble about how much of the conversation I got on the phone before the fight, go for it, but you are gambling with your life here. You could be facing years behind bars if you get convicted of an attempted rape, and trust me, that is the very thing I'm going to throw out there as soon as I file."

"It's a gamble," Les said. "And you are the one who gets to decide whether you want to move forward or not. I'm not scared of you, and neither is Scott."

"I don't have to be afraid of shit when I have the video proof on my side along with witnesses. I had a feeling you were going to try to twist this into being your own little tale of being the victim, so you better believe I covered my ass. But again, I'm not going to argue about this with you. I wanted to

give you the chance to get out of here without pressing charges and I'd do the same, or to give you fair warning that if you want to play that little game then go for it, but you better know I'm going to come back at you with just as much if not more legal force than you could possibly imagine."

Pete shook his head. "You have no idea how fucked up this is. I could go to the cops and tell them that you threatened to show a defaming video of me if I pressed charges. See how much that helps your case."

"Sure, you could do that, but when they see what this allegedly defaming video is, trust me, they're not going to take your side anymore," Les laughed. "It's up to you."

He hesitated, clearly weighing his options.

"Fine," he said. "Get rid of the damn video, and I'll drop the charges."

"Drop the charges first," Les said. "I'll wait."

"Now?"

"Right now," he said. "Grab your phone and do it."

"Fuck you," Pete replied.

"I'm waiting."

Les sat back in his chair, and he and I both stared at Pete. I was almost certain Pete was going to change his mind and challenge us to prove that I had the video when he finally reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

“Put it on speaker,” Les said. “So I know you called the proper person.”

Pete gave us both a look that could kill, but did as Les directed.

He was muttering under his breath and shaking his head as he made the call, then he glared at Les as he told the officer on the other end of the line that he wanted to drop the charges.

“I think it was just a situation that’s better left well enough alone at this point,” he said. “After giving it some thought, I just want to let the entire thing go.”

He wrapped up the conversation before hanging up.

“There, happy?” he asked.

“I’ll be a lot happier when you get the fuck out of here,” Les replied. “I know your shit is packed since you were checked out of that hotel this morning. Where are you going?”

“Home,” he said.

“Where’s that?” Les asked.

“San Francisco,” Pete said.

“I’ll get you a ticket,” Les informed him. “And don’t you worry, my boys you met earlier will make sure you get to the airport in time to get on that plane. Trust me, you’re not going to want to miss that flight.”

“Fuck you,” Pete said.

But it was clear from the look on his face that he knew he had no choice in this. Les had the upper hand, and now that the

charges had been officially dropped, there wasn't anything more for me to worry about on that front, either. Pete was leaving Marathon before the end of the night, and Lenny would be safe.

“Oh, and by the way, your attempt to place fraud charges on my credit card at the hotel didn't work either,” I told Pete. “I guess you were hoping the charges wouldn't be accepted at check-out in order to embarrass me in front of Lenny's friends or to prove some misguided idea of yours, but that fell through too. I do too much business with banks to be denied legitimate charges that I authorize.”

He looked even more pissed and just shook his head. I couldn't wait to hear that he was on that plane leaving Marathon and never to return.

Though my heart still ached with the issue that was still between Lenny and me, I had to admit, I felt a thousand times better knowing this asshole would be gone once and for all in a matter of hours.

For as many ways this day had been fucked up, that was a massive plus.

And I couldn't wait for Lenny to find out.

Chapter Thirty—One Week Later

Lenny

“I can’t believe this month is over,” Hannah said as the two of us packed and cleaned up the apartment.

“I can’t believe how dirty we can make a place in just two months,” I laughed. “God, I didn’t know we were even home enough for it to get this dirty. Look at the kitchen, and we didn’t even cook!”

“The only thing that makes sense to me is that since we live on the beach, it has to just like, I don’t know, blow in through the windows or something. I don’t know,” Hannah said. “But I agree. I don’t see how we could get it this dirty in just a month.”

“This is always the shitty part about moving out of a place,” I sighed. “I mean, I hate how we can scrub and scrub, but you know they’re still going to bring in more cleaners and do some professional cleaning, then tell us that it was our fault and we have to pay for it.”

“Whatever,” Hannah said. “It was worth it. I don’t know about you, but I thought these two months were fun.”

“For the most part, yes,” I said. “But then there are the few big things that went down that I’m not sure were considered highlights of the trip.”

“Duh,” she said. “But you don’t have to base the entire stay off those things. Not to mention how nice it was to be able to

hang out with Sara for as long as we did before she left.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “I would have been bummed if we hadn’t been able to spend the time with her.”

“And you got to take one entire month off of work, too, which was nice. I know it got weird with Scott there at the end, but still. It’s nice that you got the benefits you did from the situation while you did, you know?”

“I don’t know if it was all benefits,” I sighed.

“Don’t worry, things are going to work out,” Hannah assured me. “Have you decided what you’re going to do yet?”

“No,” I said. I opened my mouth to say something more, then sighed and shook my head. “I don’t know what to do at this point, and while I would love to have some sign that just shoves itself in my face and tells me what to do, I don’t think that’s going to happen. There’s going to be pros and cons to either direction I take, and I just don’t know.”

“I mean, it’s not like you have to have all the answers today,” Hannah said.

“No, but there is a time limit on things now. I don’t have a ton of time to figure shit out if I don’t want to be the shitty mother who comes back and is like oh, by the way, you have a kid who’s one year old.”

“I mean, that’s fair. But if I had dealt with the shit you did, I can’t say I’d blame you for doing something like that. It’s not like he’s going to freak out about anything if you do,” she said.

“The only thing I know for sure right now is that I want to go back to school,” I told her. “If I can figure out how to pay for the rest of it, that is. It’s going to be expensive having a baby, and, well, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to swing school and all the shit that goes along with the kid.”

“Which could be why you need to talk to Scott about it. At the very least, you can expect him to help you with the money part,” Hannah said.

“Sure, but I don’t feel right just being like give me money, you know? I feel like if I were to tell him where I’m at right now, it is only right to let him have all the participation in this he wants. Otherwise, I’m going to feel really shitty about withholding the baby from him,” I said.

“Why do you have to be such a good person all the time?” Hannah asked with a groan.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I feel like I’m pretty awful, actually.”

“I don’t think so, you just got yourself caught up in a shitty situation. That’s all,” she said. “It could happen to anyone. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“I know, but still. It could happen to anyone, but it did happen to me. I wanted to have a stress-free summer, not one that brought more drama into my life,” I sighed.

“One thing at a time,” Hannah said.

My phone rang, and I looked down to see it was the dean of Duke University’s medical department.

“What’s the dean want?” I asked.

“He’s calling?” Hannah didn’t bother hiding how surprised she was.

“Yeah, look,” I said as I showed her my phone. “I don’t think they would be asking me for money at this point, right?”

“It wouldn’t be the dean calling you anyway,” Hannah said. “Not about finances.”

“Hello?” I answered the phone.

“Hello, Helene?” the dean asked.

“Speaking, Dean Marten?” I asked. “How are you?”

“I’m doing okay, but I’m worried about you. How are you doing?”

I was confused. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone who knew what was going on asked me how I was doing or said they were worried about me, but for someone who hadn’t had any contact with me since before I left the campus, I didn’t understand why he would be asking what was going on.

“I’m okay,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“I heard you had an incident with a crazy guest at the hotel you were staying at in Florida,” he said. “I’m sorry if I’m intruding on your affairs, but how scary!”

“Yeah, it was,” I said, sure the confusion was showing through my tone. “I’m sorry, but do you mind telling me how you found out? I didn’t realize it was the sort of thing that would have made the news or something.”

“No, to my knowledge, it isn’t on the news. I just got an email from the hotel owner, and he said that he was very concerned about the situation and he wanted to compensate you for what had happened. So, he went ahead and paid for your tuition for the rest of your doctorate degree.”

“Um, what?” I gasped. “Did I hear you right?”

“I hope so,” he said with a laugh. “The hotel owner contacted me and told me he is paying for the rest of your schooling to compensate you for what happened at the hotel. I know that has to be some good news in all this, and I thought you were already aware. But if not, then I guess that’s a surprise. Anyway, when I heard that he was doing that out of the goodness of his heart to compensate you for what happened, I was worried about the situation.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Thank you so much for calling me and checking in. It really does mean a lot to me that you would care enough to call me and ask about my well-being.”

“Of course,” he said. “You are an incredible student, and we are eager to see where you go with your career after your doctorate.”

“Thank you,” I said again. “Oh, would you do me a favor?”

“Sure,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Can you tell me the name of the hotel owner?” I asked. “I would love to send him a note to thank him for his kindness.”

“Sure, give me a second,” he said. “I have it right here. It’s Scott Brouchard.”

“Scott Brouchard?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he said. “And I’m looking forward to seeing you in another six weeks.”

“Yes, of course, see you then,” I said. “Thank you.”

I hung up the phone and looked at Hannah. She was staring at me with an inquisitive look on her face.

“What was that about?” she asked.

“I guess the alleged owner of the hotel felt so bad about what happened that he paid for my tuition for the rest of my schooling,” I said.

“What! He did?” she cried. “How did he know what school you went to? Or that you were even in school?”

“You heard me say Scott’s name,” I told her. “I have a feeling someone wanted to do this for me, didn’t want me to know that they were going to, and chose to do it in the most discreet way possible.”

“No...,” Hannah said. “You think Scott posed as the owner of the hotel and paid for the rest of your tuition?”

“I’m not thinking that’s what he did. I know that’s what he did. Dean Marten just gave me the name of the guy who had done it, and it’s Scott. I know he’s not the owner of the Sunkissed. But it did make sense that he would do something for me, and maybe he thought that the dean wasn’t going to call me and ask about how I was doing.”

“Probably not,” Hannah agreed. “I mean, that shows you what kind of guy he is. He doesn’t even know about the baby, and he just solved your entire problem.”

“I know,” I said, unable to wrap my mind around the fact a lot of stress had just been lifted out of my life. “I don’t know what to say. I just can’t believe this.”

“I’m happy for you,” Hannah told me. “Now you don’t have to worry about a damn thing. Just go to school, get your doctorate, and move on with your life like you’ve always wanted. The baby is an added twist, but you can do it.”

“There is one thing I have to do,” I told her. “Do you mind if I take a walk? There’s something I have to go do.”

Hannah smiled at me. “Sure, take your time. We have this place cleaned up enough I’m happy with it. Whatever they take from us to finish with the cleaning, they take. I’m over it.”

“Thanks,” I said as I gave her a hug. “Don’t wait up for me. I don’t know if I’m coming home tonight.”

“Good luck,” Hannah said.

I grabbed my bag and then dashed to the bathroom, grabbing what I needed and shoving it into my bag before sliding into my sandals. I knew what I had to do, and the sooner I could, the better. Now that I knew what Scott had done for me, I knew what I wanted to do for him.

And I was happier than I had ever been.

Chapter Thirty-One

Scott

There was a knock at my door, and I paused for a moment, bracing myself for who I might find.

After the past few days, I didn't know what to expect.

There was a chance it could be Les, there was a chance it could be the cops or a sheriff. There was a chance it could just be someone delivering one of the things I'd ordered for the club but wanted to be taken directly to my penthouse.

I tried to have a completely open mind as I walked over and opened the door, forcing a fake smile as I did.

But, when I saw it was Lenny, I could have been knocked over with a feather.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Sorry, I didn't text first. I figured with how much you've been texting me, you were probably around and willing to talk if I came over."

"I'd love to talk," I said. "I figured you'd be coming around when you were ready."

"Well, I'm ready," she said. "I've got a lot of questions."

"I'm an open book," I assured her. "Why don't you come in and sit down? It's far more comfortable than hanging out in the hallway."

"Thanks," Lenny said, coming into the penthouse.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked, trying to be polite. “I don’t want this to be awkward, but it’s awkward.”

“It is,” she said. “Water sounds good, thank you.”

“Coming right up,” I said. I grabbed a glass and dropped a few ice cubes inside before filling it with water and filling myself with a second glass. I headed out to the living area and handed her one of the glasses before sitting down on the couch next to her.

“So, I don’t know how to start, really,” she said.

“Start at the beginning,” I told her. “I’m all ears for whatever you have to say. In fact, I think it’s time that you and I have some of the difficult talks we have been avoiding up until now. I know you don’t want to, and I don’t really, either, but I think we’ve gone through enough of this guessing game. I want answers, and I know you do, too.”

“I do,” she admitted. “And I’m sorry I’ve been avoiding the conversation. I know I should have been more open to having it, but I never have been one who can have an adult talk like this and not feel like my entire world is going to crash down around me. I don’t know why I’ve always had that feeling, but I guess it is what it is, you know?”

“It comes with what you’ve dealt with in the past,” I said with a shrug. “If you haven’t had the chance to have a healthy relationship or conversations about one, then you’re bound to want to avoid them.”

“After what I did to you last time, I just, I’m surprised you are even willing to talk to me about this as though I never ghosted you,” she told me. “I know that had to hurt.”

“It did, but I’m an adult, and I’m able to move past things that hurt,” I told her. “That’s the thing about being in love. We are bound to hurt each other at times. It’s part of any relationship.”

“I hate that part,” she said.

“I know you do, but it’s not a real relationship if you don’t open yourself up to the vulnerability of being hurt, or if you’re not real enough with the other person that you might hurt them,” I explained. “And that’s okay.”

“Still,” she said. “Thanks for being so great about that. But honestly, that’s not what I came to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” I asked. “I figured with it coming down to the end of the month, you were going to be coming by at some point for us to talk. But if that’s not it, then what can I do for you?”

“It’s about the end of the month, don’t get me wrong,” she said. “But it’s about a phone call I got this morning.”

“More shit about that asshole?” I asked. “If there’s anything you want me to do about that further, trust me, I have your back.”

“What did happen with him?” she asked. “It wasn’t about Pete, but I want to know what went down.”

“He’s gone,” I assured her. “I took care of that once and for all.”

“I heard it was possible you were going to get some charges after the fight.”

“It was possible, but it didn’t happen,” I said. “I told him, along with Les, that if he wanted to press charges, then the whole world was going to hear more about the kind of guy he was. He ultimately thought better of pressing the charges and left.”

“Left?”

“Back to California,” I told her. “Les and I made sure of it. Right up to the point of him getting on the airplane. He’s also been thoroughly warned to stay the fuck away from you and out of Marathon altogether. Trust me, when it came down to it, he really considered his options and went with what was the best choice for him in the long run. And when you lay it all out on the line, it really was in his best interest to get out of here.”

“Thank God,” she said as she clapped her hands together. “That makes me feel like a million pounds has been lifted off my chest, seriously.”

“You never have to worry about that piece of shit again, and if you do ever have any contact from him, you let me know. I don’t care if it’s even an email or postcard. I made it clear to him that he’s not to reach out to you ever again, and that’s final.”

“Thank you, really. I don’t know how to tell you how much that means to me,” Lenny sighed. “I didn’t even know how much he was bothering me before it got to the point it did, and I can say now I’m going to listen to my gut far more in the

future than I have before. I'm not going to let myself be so stupid or naïve again."

"Lessons were learned," I told her. "Don't beat yourself up about it. How are you supposed to know if you haven't ever been in that situation before?"

"Thanks," Lenny said. "I appreciate your understanding here. I really do."

"Anytime," I said.

"But again, I'm procrastinating. I did come over with a specific thing to talk to you about, and it only kind of has something to do with Pete. Mostly, it's got to do with school."

"Oh?" I asked.

"How did you—or why did you—pretend to be the owner of the Sunkissed?" she asked me.

My eyes widened, which I knew showed her how surprised I was.

"Oh, you didn't think they were going to call me and let me know that my tuition has been paid for the rest of the time I'm in school?" she asked with a laugh. "I was pretty popular with the staff, and when they heard that there had been an incident at the hotel and you wanted to compensate me by paying for the tuition, the dean called to make sure I was okay."

"Damn," I said with a shrug. "I figured they were going to take it as factual and weren't going to reach out to you. I really didn't think they were going to get in touch or tell you that I was the one who had done it."

“He said that it was the owner of the Sunkissed at first,” she explained. “But I asked for more specifics. I knew with how it was handled with the manager and the cops and everything, it wasn’t likely the owner was going to reach out to me at all, and more than that, how would he have known where I went to school anyway? That didn’t add up, so I figured I better narrow down the field.”

“You’re smart,” I laughed. “I guess if I wanted it to be a total mystery, I should have gone with another persona.”

“Not that there were many options for who the school would believe. Then again, maybe if you called and said you were my rich uncle or something, they would have gone with that. I don’t know. Either way that doesn’t change the fact that you paid for the rest of my school, and I don’t know what to say about it. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact I don’t have to worry about coming up with that money, and it’s weird.”

“I knew you wouldn’t have taken it if I just offered,” I said with a shrug. “You never wanted to have that free ride, which was one of the many things I have always admired about you. So, with how things had gone down, and me knowing there wasn’t anything I could do about it to make it any better, it was the one thing I could think to do to relieve some of your stress.”

“You didn’t have to do anything. When you didn’t tell me about the conversation you overheard it hurt my feelings, but it wasn’t the kind of thing that would require you to spend

thousands of dollars to make me forgive you. I now understood why you didn't tell me, and while I think that was stupid, I get it."

"Still," I said with a shrug. "I know that I should have told you, and with everyone who has told me since then that telling you would have been the right thing to do, I should have had more sense then. I guess paying for the rest of your schooling was just a way for me to feel better about myself. There wasn't anything else I could do, so I did the one thing I knew I had the power to accomplish to give you some peace of mind. And since I had gone with being the concerned hotel owner, I figured it was a good way to get it done without you knowing."

Lenny finished the glass of water and set it on the coffee table in front of her. "Okay, so now that we have that out in the open, I do want you to know how grateful I am for you doing that for me. Really."

"You're welcome," I told her with a grin. "I'm glad I was able to help you out at least on that front, even if it isn't much."

"It's a lot more than you know. But I also have to ask what I owe you for it," she said.

"Owe me?" I asked in surprise. "You don't owe me shit, Lenny, and you never have. The only thing you need to give me from your life is what you want to give. I don't expect you to give me shit, and I'll never ask you for a thing."

I finished my own glass of water as I spoke to her, then I set it with hers on the coffee table. I wanted to say so much more. I wanted to tell her that I had only done what I did for her out of love, and that carried across the duration of our relationship with each other. I never expected her to do shit for me, not even once. I just wanted to give to her, and I loved every minute of her time and herself she gave me in return. It had nothing to do with what I gave her.

“You mean it?” Lenny asked.

“Of course, I do,” I told her. “I want you to be happy, Lenny, no matter what that means. Even to the point of us not being together. Of course, that’s not what I want, but like I already told you, I’m a big boy. If it’s not what you want, then I understand. Just be happy.”

She watched me carefully as I spoke, making eye contact practically the entire time. Her lower lip quivered, and I could see the emotion in her face. She tried to say something, then closed her mouth once more and cleared her throat, obviously doing what she could to maintain her composure as best she could.

I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder, and she put her hand over mine.

For a moment, neither of us said anything, then she looked back toward me, her eyes meeting mine once again.

At last, she made a move.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lenny

I had to admit, I didn't have any idea what to expect when I went over to Scott's place.

I was so grateful for what he had done with school that I knew I would be telling him about the pregnancy. But I didn't know what that would mean for us as a couple, or how he would take it moving forward.

I wanted to be open and honest about everything, and for the first time I wanted to have that difficult conversation we had both been so reluctant to have. I didn't know where to begin, that was for sure, but I hoped by going over there and talking with Scott, he would be the one to take the initiative with the conversation.

So far, he had done just that.

But, so far, the conversation hadn't taken the direction I thought it would.

While I had gone to the penthouse with hope we would figure something out and stay together, there was the fear in me that we wouldn't. Fear that he wouldn't want to be with me in a long-distance relationship, and that he had only paid for the rest of my tuition out of obligation or as a way to apologize for what he'd fucked up.

Then, hearing the way he felt about things, and how he just wanted me to be happy with what I wanted to give him, I

knew that I wanted to give him everything. I didn't want to hold back anymore. I didn't want to be in this limbo I had been in for so long.

Scott was right.

I just wanted answers.

After hearing what he said to me, however, there was only one thing I absolutely wanted. And that was to show him how I felt about him. I wanted to show just how much of me I wanted to give. And I was going to prove that with my very being.

I practically lunged at him, my mouth aiming for his as I closed my eyes and tilted my head to the side. While Scott was clearly surprised with how sudden my movement was, he also seemed to be ready for it. He caught me in his arms, his head tilting in the opposite direction as he also closed his eyes and crashed his lips into mine.

I moaned, our mouths searching hungrily for each other. Our lips brushed over each other's with such a delicate sweep goosebumps rose along my arms and legs. I had an ache in my core that was begging for satisfaction, and I knew there was only one way for me to satisfy the need.

And it could only be satisfied with one person, and that was Scott himself.

Our hands ran over each other's bodies with a new kind of hunger, as though this was the first time in our lives we had been able to make love to each other. But this wasn't the same

kind of lust driven sex that we had had in the past. It wasn't the same urge that made me want him that I had dealt with when I was sleeping with him the first time we were together.

It wasn't driven by the same need to have someone familiar as it had been when he and I got back together, either. There was a new feeling surging through me, and it was something I could only describe as a passionate kind of love. I had never felt this way about anyone in my life before, and I knew that had to be a good sign.

He slipped his tongue between my lips and teased the top of my mouth. Shivers of pleasure ran through every part of my body, and my fingers tingled with the sensation.

His cock was hard in his shorts, pressing against the thin fabric and begging to be freed. At the same time, I knew I was practically dripping wet with need. My pussy was begging to have him inside, and my entire body responded to his touch.

I moaned as he kissed me, his lips moving from mine to my jaw, then to my ear. He nibbled the lobe, sending another shiver through my body. He then kissed down the side of my neck, and I moaned as I kissed him in return. I delved into the crook of his neck, also working my way up to his ears and his jawline. I knew his jaw so well; I knew just how to make him shiver and shudder with pleasure as I kissed him.

Once I made it back to his lips, I took his lower lip in my teeth before pulling back, sucking on him and letting it fall back into place as I made eye contact with him and smiled.

He let out a growl that was almost primal in nature as he wrapped me into his arms and pulled me into him once more, kissing me harder than before.

Now, our hands were tearing at each other's clothing, pulling his tank top off and dropping it on the floor before he did the same to mine. His hands were on my tits, then he moved on behind my back and unclasped my bra.

It never failed to impress me with how he was able to do that with one hand, and as my tits were freed, he put his mouth to my nipples, teasing them with the same kind of nips of his teeth as I had his lower lip. I closed my eyes, my erect nipples standing tall, begging him to pinch one and bite the other, then to switch what he was doing with each one.

He put his hands on my hips as he continued to kiss me, sucking and biting at each tit again and again. I was sure I would have marks by the time we'd finished, but I was okay with that. I loved bearing the marks of our lovemaking, and I knew I would love it more than ever now.

This wasn't just having sex. This wasn't just fucking.

This was making love. This was my way of showing him that I meant to stay with him. Sure, I was going away to finish school, but that didn't change the fact I was carrying his child, and I wanted to be with him. I was committing to him entirely, fully, and without any question.

There wouldn't be any more guessing. We hadn't exactly had that talk that we needed to have, but we had enough of it

for me to know that this was the last time we would have to discuss what we were with each other and to each other.

We broke away from each other long enough for me to push at his shorts, begging him to take his dick out and give it to me. He was rock hard, I could feel, and as I grasped him in my hand and stroked him, he closed his eyes and shuddered under my touch. I gripped him, stroking him and running my fingers around the rim of his mushroom head.

“God, I want you inside me so bad,” I breathed. “I want you to fill me up.”

“You have no idea how much I want to be inside you; I need you,” he said to me, his voice still low and gravelly, primal with desire. He made me feel like the sexiest woman alive with the way he looked at me, and the way he touched me only added to the confidence I felt.

He pushed my shorts down, taking my panties along with them. Scott didn't waste any time with making sure I was just as naked as he was, and I loved every second of it. I wanted him, I wanted him to have me. I wanted to give myself to him and show him with my body and mind that I was truly his.

I straddled him in my nakedness, my hands on each of his shoulders. I kissed him tenderly as I did, and he moved his hand to between my legs, teasing my clit with his fingers before running them the length between the lips of my pussy.

“My God, you are so fucking wet,” he said.

“It’s because of how bad I need you,” I told him. “I’m dying to have you in me right now. I can’t say it enough, really.”

“Then sit down,” he breathed. “And take me inside you.”

He steadied his cock, directing it to the wet slit between my legs, and I eased myself down on top of him, taking his full length inside me. I moaned and gasped as I took him, letting him stretch me wide open as he sank into me. He filled me to my very core, and when he was inside me, I felt no one had ever been able to know me like he did. No one was able to get so deep, to touch me in just that way.

No one else could make me shudder and gasp as he filled me, making me take as much of him as I possibly could.

“My God, you’re the tightest I have ever had. Every single time I’m inside you, you feel like a virgin,” he told me.

I flushed with pleasure at his compliment, and it made me want to tell him all the more that I was pregnant with his child. But I was far too caught up in the moment to be distracted with anything but his dick.

I rocked my hips back and forth on him, sliding over the top of him as his massive cock slid in and out of my wet pussy. I always imagined we were meant to be together like this, made entirely for each other. There wasn’t another soul out there who could become one with me the way Scott did when we made love, and connect to me the way he did when we were apart.

He was everything to me, and I no longer doubted I was the same to him. I moved against him, pressing my entire body to his as I rode his cock. He put his hands on my waist, holding me as I moved up and down. He shuddered, grunting and growling with pleasure as I added to the melody of our lovemaking with my own moans.

He moved his hands up my back, then dragged his nails downward, leaving trails the entire way. It sent a new wave of pain and pleasure mixed through me, and it was just what I was craving to climax.

I cried out as the orgasm ran through me, causing me to shudder with the pleasure that ran through me. My toes curled with the intensity of the sensations running through me, the tips of my fingers tingling once more as the pleasure coursed through my veins.

The way my pussy clenched around his cock as I came was enough to make him climax, too. He moaned, holding my hips tightly as he pumped his load into me. I felt his cock pulsing deep inside my core, filling me with his entire load. The warmth that spread through me brought a smile to my face as the remnants of pleasure finished running through me.

We were both out of breath but satisfied.

I couldn't help but notice how much at peace I felt. It wasn't that there was anything different about the act we'd done, but there was something that just felt right about us now.

As the connection soared between us, I knew I was going to tell him about the pregnancy before I left. I just had to figure

out the way I wanted to do it. I had the test in my bag, but I still had to find the right moment.

But with how perfect this afternoon had been so far, I didn't have any doubts the right moment would present itself. I just had to wait and watch for it to happen.

And for once in my life, be ready to jump on it as soon as it did.

Now that Scott and I were officially together, I wasn't nearly as nervous about telling him.

In fact, I was downright excited.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Scott

“‘**Y**ou’ve not lived in luxury until you’ve had someone wash your hair for you,” Lenny told me.

“I’ll take your word for it,” I told her. “I hate it when anyone even touches my hair, let alone having it washed. But then, it’s a lot shorter than yours, so I’m sure that could make a difference.”

“Maybe a bit,” she told me.

The two of us were sitting in the bathtub together, her sitting between my legs and facing the wall opposite where the two of us sat. It was a huge tub, and it was nice to be sitting together with her. She loved the jets in the tub, especially considering she didn’t get to have such a nice tub in the dorms she lived in on campus, or in the apartment she shared with Hannah.

“You have no idea how lucky you are to have such a nice bathtub at your disposal like all the time. I would feel like a queen if I was able to just have this anytime I wanted a bath.”

“Well, you know if you and I are going to stay together, you do have this at your disposal in the sense you have free reign to use it anytime you want. But that’s only when you’re here. You’re about to take off for school once again, so there’s that.”

“Right, but it does give me something to look forward to when I’m at school, right?” she laughed.

“Of course, I could always come up there with you while you’re in school. It’s going to take several more years for you to get your doctorate, so I could invest in a club in North Carolina for that time. I could get a house and everything, too. You don’t have to live on campus or in any kind of apartment if you don’t want to,” I offered.

Lenny laughed. “I don’t know if I would feel right about that.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you’ve already paid for the rest of my tuition for as long as it takes me to get through the program. I don’t know if I can in good conscience take you up on something that’s going to mean you’re paying hundreds if not thousands more dollars for me for the time it takes me to get through school, too.”

“That’s silly and you know it,” I told her. “You know I have the money, and it’s not like I’m going to miss it. Not to mention if I were to come with you to North Carolina and invest in another club, it’s not like it’s anything out of pocket, either. It might be up front, but it both gives me something to do, and it gives me more income in the process.”

“That’s true,” she said. “But still. I don’t know if I can ask you to move to North Carolina for me. It’s quite a way from here, and pretty different, for that matter.”

“I’ve lived in New Orleans, which is a lot different from Marathon, so it’s not like it’s going to be a culture shock. I’ve been all over the place, so I’ve tried a variety of lifestyles in

my time,” I said with a shrug. “Then again, it’s not that far from New Orleans, I could always set up there and we could visit.”

“Except I’m going to be stuck at school,” she said with a sigh. “I mean, not that it’s a terrible thing. I’m the one who wants to go back and get the doctorate. But still.”

“That’s okay,” I told her. “I can come up and see you every weekend. Or more, or less. Or, like I also said, I can get a club there and a place, and we can just live together. There are a lot of ways we can manage this, and you are the one who gets to call the shots. I’m not going to whine about it as long as you and I are together.”

“But I don’t want you to have to leave for me,” she said. “I know you love it here, and why wouldn’t you? It’s like a vacation every single day.”

“But I have clubs all over the place, and if I can get into more states, why not? It seems like an opportunity for growth to me, and that’s important.”

“Sure,” she said. “But if you want to move up there with me, I want it to be the sort of thing you choose because you want to do it. I don’t want to feel like you made the choice to do it because it was where I happened to go to school. To me, that says that you aren’t able to make your own decisions when you are in a relationship.”

“Not at all,” I said. “It’s the opposite, actually. If you and I are dating, then I have the choice to come be with you while you are in school, or I have the choice to not. At the same

time, I can do both. You know the finances I have allow me the freedom to travel however I'd like and when I'd like, so I could spend time with you, here, New Orleans, or really however I want."

"That's true I suppose," she said with some hesitation. "I guess we should really make a few of these decisions now then, huh?"

"A few of them?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "Like, for example, I don't want to leave this with thinking one thing or the other based on what we did today. I want to talk about it directly and know without a doubt where we stand with each other."

"Okay then," I said with a smile. I kissed the back of her head. "Then let's start with the most basic. Do you want to stop pretending to be engaged and be engaged for real?"

"You mean that?" she asked.

"I do," I said. "I've been trying to find a way to ask you about it for almost as long as we have been pretending. I know you hate that you ghosted me when you left last time, but I don't hold that against you. And I don't want you to keep thinking that it's holding me back from being with you now. I would marry you tomorrow if I felt you were ready, but since you're not, I would love for us to be engaged for real."

"I would love that," she said. "Which I guess means it would make sense for you to move around the area of where I'll be. And shit, if you're going to do that, we might as well

live in the same house. Even if you do travel and come back to do your thing here, then I'll just stay at our place up in North Carolina, right?"

"That's right," I said. "And when you're on break or you have time to yourself, we can come back down here. I know how much you love it down here, and I would love for you to be able to come back the next time you're on vacation."

"Same," she laughed. "And you know, that does make me wonder if you can think of a way for me to stay down here for the next six weeks."

"The next six weeks?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "You know it's going to be that long before school starts again, and with Hannah leaving on the first, I'm not going to have a roommate, which means I don't want to stay in that apartment anymore. We were spending the time we had today cleaning it, and it's going to be inspected in the next couple of days. With that being what it is, I would love to know I have a place to stay here, or I'm going to have to figure out something else."

"What was your original plan?" I asked.

"I was going to go with Hannah if I chose to go back to school. Stay with her for a while before I had to head back to the university. I don't know if she's going to go back to school for sure yet or not. She changes her mind about it every few days. Either way, though, I'd like to know which way to go about it with you."

“I’ll tell you straight,” I said. “I would love for you to move in here with me for the next six weeks. I can look into what housing is available near campus, and we can look into moving into a place up there together when you’re ready to head back to school. For now, though, I think we’re doing great right here. Not to mention it’s going to be the first time for both of us living together, and that’s going to be a good test run.”

“I think we’ll be fine,” she said. “And I really think that it’s a good thing for us to be getting together officially. Like, a really good thing for everyone involved.”

“I agree,” I said with a grin. I hugged her tightly to me, but she turned her face to look up at me as I held her.

“It’s important to me that our child’s parents are together,” she said, and my heart skipped a beat. I wasn’t sure if she was serious, so I looked down with my eyebrows raised.

“Our child?” I asked. “Are you serious about that? You mean you’re pregnant?”

I knew the shock showed through in my tone and must have through my expression as well, since she pulled away from me in the tub.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Are *you* okay?” she shot back. “You look like you’re going to either pass out or throw up.”

“No, not at all, I’m just shocked, that’s what it is. I’m thrilled, I just wasn’t sure if you meant it when you said that

you want our baby's parents to be together. Of course, that's what I want, too, and if you are pregnant right now, that means you've made me the happiest man in the entire world."

"I am," she said with a grin.

"Then you know what? I think that you and I should add something else to the list of things we're doing," I told her.

"What list?"

"The list of getting a place, getting engaged for real, and now we're going to have a baby? I think we should add getting married to the list," I told her.

She blushed a color red I hadn't before seen, and I grinned even wider than before.

"Well, I never thought I would propose to someone while naked in the bathtub, but then, I didn't think I would be lucky enough to have you in the bathtub with me ever again," I told her. "What do you say?"

"I don't think I can say yes hard enough," she replied. "But not yet. I don't want to get married yet. Like you said, I'm not ready."

"And that's perfectly okay," I promised. "Just so we know it's in the future, something that will happen when the time is right, then I'm happy."

"It's going to happen," she said, kissing me.

"And I'm the happiest man in the world."

Lenny settled back against me, perfectly relaxed as the jets of water streamed around us. The warmth of the water was so comforting and inviting, I had never felt more at peace in my entire life. But, more so than just where we were sitting was the fact, I held Lenny in my arms.

Together, we were now officially a couple, and I was eager to start the next chapter of our lives together. No more guessing, no more wondering, just the two of us against the world.

And now with a little baby on the way.

Proof of the love we shared.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lenny

“I can’t believe six weeks have passed already,” I said. “Are we sure it’s been a full six weeks? Is the calendar off or something?”

“It’s spot on, and it’s been six weeks,” Scott told me with a laugh. “I know it went a lot faster than the rest of the month before that, but you know, it’s okay.”

“Sure, easy for you to say,” I said. “You are the one who gets to be here in Marathon. I’m going back to school, back to the books, back to the tests. You know. All the things that go along with going back to college.”

“I do know,” he said with a laugh. “And I’m not just going to be lying around on the beach, you know that. I have work to do, and even more work when I get up to North Carolina with you,”

“I know,” she said. “I’m looking forward to that, even if it’s going to take a lot of work for both of us when you do get there.”

“It’s not going to be as much on you as it is on me,” he reminded me. “You’re going to be taking it easy with the baby.”

“Sure, but I’m still going to come with you to look at the places that you’re interested in buying, and beyond that, you

better believe I'm going to be with you to pick out the colors and the designs and all of that, too."

"Only if it's not going to interfere with your school," Scott told me. "I know you want to be hands-on with the club, but you're going to be up there for school, and I want that to be your focus. That and the baby, that is. I'm sure it's going to take a lot out of you when you have to start with the schedule once again, and you might not want to be out and about with me."

"After having to go a few months without you there, I know without a doubt I'm going to want to spend every second I can with you," I informed him. "I mean, I'm actually emotional enough right now I could cry at the thought of you and me not getting on the plane together."

"Oh, baby, don't cry," he said. "I know you want me to go with you, and I would if I could swing it right now, but with the few things I still need to get done with the club here, I want to make sure I can leave it to Les to handle the rest by the time I do come up there. It's not going to be very long."

"Bull," I said. "It might have flown by when I was down here with you, but school always takes forever."

"It's not too late for you to change your mind," he told me. "I'm not going to make you go to school if you don't want to, but that's the only way you're going to get your doctorate. And really, I think when you get there, you're going to be a lot happier about the fact you chose to finish your degree. Otherwise, I'm afraid you're going to spend your time

wondering what you would have done if you went with the urge not to go back.”

“That’s fair,” I admitted. “But it’s not going to make it any easier for me to say goodbye to you.”

“And it’s not going to be easy for me to say goodbye to you, either,” he promised. “But it’s going to be okay. You said Hannah was going to meet you up there, and you two are going to move your things into the new place.”

“Yes, and she’s going to stay with me for the first month while she finds her own place in North Carolina. I know that’s all going to be nice and great. But I don’t know. I guess I feel like I wasted a lot of time when I ghosted you. It’s like there’s two years for me to catch up on that I could have had with you that I didn’t,” I sighed.

“I think you beat yourself up too much,” he said. “You and I are together now, so why are you so worried about whether you and I were together then? You were in school, and who knows if you would have gone through with finishing your degree at all if you and I stayed together? I think it was for the best.”

“Still,” I wiped a tear from my eye when we pulled up in front of the airport. “It still feels like it’s going to be an eternity before you and I get to see each other again. I don’t know how I thought you were going to be able to stay down here the entire time I was in school and it would be fine. I’m not going to be fine unless you are up there with me.”

“And I’ll be up there in just a few months, I promise.” Scott said. “You might actually enjoy the time you get up there without me.”

“I don’t see how,” I said. “The thought of not getting to see you for a week makes me want to break down in tears. I don’t know how it’s going to be months apart.”

“You’re going to get the chance to be able to decorate the place to your heart’s content. Not to mention the fact Hannah is going to be there to help you. You know you two are going to love having the time to yourselves again.”

“I know, but it’s still not going to be as great as having you there,” I whined. “Not to mention I don’t know how you’re going to want everything.”

“I want everything how you want it,” he told me. “It’s not hard to figure out where the master is, then we’ve got the guest bedroom and the room you’re going to turn into the nursery. Which, you’re also going to get the chance to decide if you want to wait to find out if it’s a boy or girl, or if you’re going to find out and decorate based on what it is.”

“I don’t know,” I said with a small smile. “There’s a part of me that wants to know so we can start picking out the names, then there’s the part of me that wants to just pick out a name that we both like that could go either way, and then we can name them whatever that is when the time comes.”

“But a name isn’t going to do shit for the way you decorate the room,” he said. “If you want to do something nice for a boy or for a girl.”

“Or to keep things entirely neutral,” I said with a shrug. “Kind of like it could go either way no matter what.”

“I’m not sure if you want to do it that way because it’s brilliant, or because you’re scared of commitment,” he teased. “But either way, I’m sure it’s going to be great. You could even do half and half; then however it turns out, you can take over the rest of the room with the other.”

“That would be stupid if I try to pick paint based on what I want for a boy or girl, then it turned out I had to paint the other half of the bedroom the other color,” I said, laughing.

“Except you’re not going to have to do any of the painting yourself,” he reminded me. “You’re going to have Hannah there, and Hannah knows people. She’s going to be able to point you in the right direction when it comes to who’s going to do the painting, which means all you have to do is pick out the colors you want.”

“That sounds a lot like what I want to do with the new club,” I said.

“And you’re going to,” Scott promised. “But first we need to make sure that the house is ready for you and the baby.”

“And you for when you get up there,” I told him. “The fact that you’re going to move all the way up to North Carolina for me is insane, and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable with it at all. If I could make it a palace for you from the beginning, then it will be fine.”

“Baby, I told you that I want to do this for you. I’m not going to stay here while you’re up there. Not with a baby on the way and everything. I want to be with you, and if that means that you’re going to be in North Carolina for school, then that means I’m going up to North Carolina with you for school. It’s not a big deal.”

“I guess I just never have been the kind of person to have someone rearrange their entire life for me before,” I sighed. “It feels selfish to ask you to do this for me, and it makes me go insane wondering what you’re going to be doing with yourself while I’m gone. I don’t know, I guess it’s just a lot of shit going through my mind right now.”

During our conversation, we had gotten through checking in my bags, and it was near the time when I would be heading toward the back of the airport to wait to board the plane. I knew it was time to say goodbye to Scott, and that was bothering me, too. I hated goodbyes, and I hated that I was going to have to wait months for him to come up to see me.

“Just remember when I get up there, I’m going to be up there to stay,” he told me. “Then you’re not going to have to worry about another goodbye, or how long it’s going to take before you and I are able to be together again. It’s just a short while, and in the grand scheme of things, that short little while is nothing.”

“I guess you’re right,” I admitted. “But when we’re in the short term, it feels like it’s going to be forever.”

“I know how you feel. I’m not at all happy with my sexy little fiancé going up there and having to deal with school without me there. You already had one guy all over you. What am I going to do if you get another?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I could deal with another Pete and not go insane. I would just have to kill him.”

“Don’t do that,” Scott said with a laugh. “I’ll tell you what. We’re going to get you into school, and when you’re done with this first year, I’ll get you a ring, okay?”

“A real one?” I asked.

Scott laughed again. “Of course, a real one. That will give you something else to look forward to that’s going to take longer than the time of when you get to see me again, so that’s going to make it seem shorter before we’re together.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “But I do love the idea of a ring.”

“Good,” Scott said as he kissed me and held me tight. “I do too. Lenny, don’t forget I love you.”

I hated walking away from him as I walked through the terminal checkpoints. But, with the promise he made me in the back of my mind, I knew it would be okay.

I had been separated from him for longer than a few months before, and now we were together stronger than ever. I would be plenty busy in the next few months as I got settled back into school, and it would be great having Hannah there to help me

out with the new place as well as with the early pregnancy appointments.

Then, Scott would be there before I knew it, and life would go on to be even better than it was now.

There wouldn't be any need for me to worry about us being apart again, and we would be able to make our engagement public with a ring.

While I was sad about leaving Scott now, I looked forward to the ring at least. I couldn't wait to show the world the physical reminder of our promise to each other.

And the promise of our love.

Epilogue—Eighteen Months
Later

Scott

“Oh my gosh, what a difference a day makes, huh?” Lenny asked as she looked around. We had just stepped outside of the airport, and Lenny was amazed with how much Marathon had changed in just a year and a half.

She had little Isabelle on her hip, and our daughter was looking around with wide eyes, taking in the sight of everyone walking around and talking to each other. It was still one of the biggest tourist destinations I had ever lived in, and it showed day after day with all the people coming through.

“What do you think, little one?” Lenny asked Isabelle. “Pretty nice down here, isn’t it?”

Our daughter wiggled in her mother’s arms, and I wrapped them both up, holding Lenny tight for a moment as we stood and took in the view.

“I love it down here,” Lenny said. “I want to make this home. Like, *really* home. This is where we got a second chance together and will always be my favorite place.”

“I think you’re going to love your surprise then,” I said.

“What surprise?” she asked. “I thought coming here was the surprise.”

“Coming here was the first part of the surprise, but not the entire thing,” I told her with a wink. “And I’m pretty sure you’re going to love it.”

She looked curious as she carried Isabelle and followed me to the car. There was a rental waiting for us, but it was only for the day. I had our cars back at the new house, and I was eager to show Lenny what I had purchased for her. For us, really.

“Where are we going?” Lenny asked. “I thought we were heading back to your penthouse.”

“I sold it,” I said.

“You what?” she gasped. “I thought you said you were going to hang onto it and rent it out during the time you weren’t here, then we were going to stay there when we were here.”

“I did say that,” I admitted. “But then, you know what? We had a daughter and I realized I don’t want to have my daughter living in a penthouse. I mean, there wasn’t anything wrong with it, but that was when it was just you and me. But now that we have a little family, I want to make sure she has a nice little place to call her own.”

“But she does, back up in North Carolina.”

“I know,” I said. “But you said it yourself. You want this place to be home.”

“I do,” Lenny agreed. “But you know I still have almost two more years to go before I’m done with school.”

“I know,” I said. “But you know what? I was thinking the other day that there’s no reason why we can’t have a place of our own down here. What’s the difference if we have a place that we stay in a few months out of the year that’s a house than

if we have the penthouse? Why not have a place that we live in when you're not actively in school, then when you are, we can be up in North Carolina?"

"Do you mean it?" she asked with wide eyes.

"Not only do I mean it, I went ahead and purchased the house. I knew you would love the idea, and I feel like I have a good idea of the kinds of things you like. Not to mention the fact I talked with Hannah about a few things before I made any final decisions, so I think it really came together as I wanted."

"I'm excited to see it," Lenny said. "But I'm still in shock. I didn't know you were going to go through with buying a place. I mean, I'm amazed. But I'm scared that I'm not going to like it, then what?"

"If you don't like it, we'll find a place you do like," I said with a shrug "I know you don't like spending my money, but I'm telling you that we have the money if we need it. There is no reason for you to feel like you can't have what you want, especially now that we have Isabelle. I want her to have it all, but I want you to help me pick out what that is."

"Oh my God," Lenny said when we pulled into the driveway of the new house. "Is this really our place?"

"It is," I said. "I chose a place with a nice view of the water, but not too close. No one is going to be able to build in front of us here, but we also have walkability to the beach. I mean shit, we're practically on the beach."

“I love it,” she breathed. “I love that there’s even a yard.”

“There is, and it’s fenced, and there’s so much space inside, you’re not going to feel cramped at all.”

“It almost makes me think I can get a dog,” she said.

“A dog?” I asked with an inquisitive look.

“Well, there’s the white fence around the back yard, and I always thought when I had a family and a house and a degree, the fence would be up, then I would get a dog.”

“I mean, if you want a dog, I’m not going to tell you that you can’t have one,” I said with a shrug. “A dog would be a nice addition to the family.”

“But what would we do with it when we were up in North Carolina?” she asked. “It’s more of a wish than reality, I think.”

“I don’t think so,” I told her. “Why not bring him with us?”

“What? Seriously?” she asked.

“It’s not that far of a drive. And for how long we’re going to be up there and stay up there, it’s not like it’s a waste of time for us to make the drive when we do go back. It would be a little longer commute time, but it’s not like it’s that much harder to do that than to just fly.”

“You do have a point,” she said. “And that way, Isabelle would have a little friend to grow up with. It would be perfect.”

“I think we should go check out the shelters in the next few days,” I suggested. “You can figure out what it is you want, and we can go from there.”

“Sure,” she smiled. “I love that.”

“I love you,” I told her.

“I love you and I’m never going to get tired of you saying that,” she told me with a grin. “I just can’t get over how long it took for us to be comfortable enough with what we were doing and with each other to be able to say that.”

“I know. But better late than never, right?” I asked with a grin.

“I guess I’ll give you that,” she said. “Only because of the fact I’m the one who made it take two years longer than it had to.”

“Again, with not letting that go,” I said with a shake of my head. “You’re going to need to forget about that sometime.”

“No, I don’t,” she teased.

“I’m not going to remember it anymore,” I said.

“How is that possible?” she asked.

“Every time you bring it up, I’m going to ask you what you mean,” I said. “You’re going to get so tired of telling the story that you’re going to give it up.”

“I won’t get tired of it if you keep telling me you love me,” she said.

“I do love you,” I told her. “I love you more than anything.”

“And I love you,” she told me back.

We walked to the door of the new house, and Lenny smiled as she looked it over. I could tell she was still in awe of the fact this was ours, and she giggled when I scooped her up into my arms.

“You have to warn me when you do that!” she cried, holding Isabelle close to her as I carried both of them across the threshold. “I wasn’t expecting it, and I don’t want to drop the baby.”

“You’re not going to drop the baby,” I told her. “I have a good enough grip on the both of you, there was no way you could.”

“If you say so,” she said with a shake of her head. “God, I love it.”

“Take your time looking over everything, I think you’re really going to like it more and more the further in you get.”

She walked from room to room, and I was right. She loved every part of the house, from the size of the rooms to the décor on the walls to the views out of each of the windows. I knew just what she wanted, right down to the way I had found a place that had the master close to the nursery.

By the time we were done with the tour, Isabelle was ready for her nap, so Lenny walked her into the nursery and rocked her until she fell asleep. I knew she would leave her in the crib in her room, so I took the chance to get ready for Lenny to come find me around in the master bedroom.

I could hear Lenny in the next room as she put the baby down for her nap, and I grabbed the little box out from the back of my pants. I wasn't sure when the moment would be just right, so I waited for her to get the baby down and come to find me. Now, I couldn't imagine a better time than when it was just the two of us, alone for the first time in our new house.

I dropped down to one knee, holding the little box out in front of me just as she walked into the bedroom.

Immediately, Lenny's hand went to her mouth, and she gasped as she looked at the little box that I was presenting to her.

"What?" I asked with a grin. "I promised you I would get you a ring after your first year back at school. I know I'm a few months late on that one, but you'll have to forgive me for being a little busy with buying the house. Once I had the chance to pick out the ring you'd like, I did."

It was a beautiful little ring. Tasteful and the right size for Lenny. I knew what she wanted since Hannah had helped me find out, and the look Lenny had on her face was priceless.

It was a perfect fit, and I had to admit, I loved the way it looked as it glistened on her finger.

"I love it," she said at last. "Really, I do."

"And I love you," I said. I'm assuming that's an official 'yes'?"

“It is,” she laughed, throwing her arms around my neck. “I love you, and I can’t wait to be your wife.”

“I can’t wait for our life together,” I said. “Every part of it.”

And I meant it with every part of my being.

THE END

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