

My

BESTIE'S

Dad

BROOKLYN COX

My Bestie's Dad

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Amelia

Amelia

"Ames, I'm telling you that we would have the time of our lives. I would love my dad's beach house—it overlooks the water, and it's so huge, so you wouldn't have to worry about privacy."

I sighed as I transferred the rest of my clothes from my small dressers to the suitcase. Reagan was attempting for the hundredth time to convince me to spend the summer with her and her dad at his beach house in Malibu. I appreciated her efforts, but I was so done with pity.

A few weeks ago, I'd walked in on my boyfriend having sex with a girl that lived three dorms down from me and Reagan. Obviously, I'd expected to catch my boyfriend of three years in the act, but what was so humiliating was the way Michael had reacted to my stunned expression. The words he'd said had been playing on loop in my head for several weeks straight: "I don't know why you're so surprised, Amy—it's not like you were putting out."

The whole incident was humiliating enough, but Michael's very public reminder to me, and apparently anyone who would listen that I was a virgin, just added more salt to the wound. It wasn't like I'd set out to be a virgin into my early twenties, and it wasn't like I hadn't had opportunities to have sex. It just never felt quite right. Maybe it was the way I'd heard other girls talk about it, like it was just something to get over with. I'd been warned more than once that I probably wouldn't like it at first, and with the way Michael pawed at me, I believed that. Every time we came close to going all the way, something stopped me. It wasn't like I was expecting any big romance, like rose petals or something like that. I just thought that I probably should have known like I wanted to throw up right before I had sex with someone.

When I'd shared my feelings with Reagan, she'd laughed out loud. You clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, girl, but if you were around it's about upchucking right before you did the deed, then Michael clearly was the one to be giving your V-card to."

As if that wasn't humiliating enough, it turned out the girl Michael brought me to with, Scarlet, saw fit to tell everyone on campus all the gory details I really including the apparently "hilarious" look of horror on my face and how prudish I must have been. My misery was the source of her current joy. The girl love for gossip drove students I'd never even met to leave me notes on my door and a neverboard of my dorm room telling me in various crude ways how they could help me "loosen up." It was like some bizarre reversal of the Scrooge story had been stitched to my chest with my virgin status being spread around on campus like wildfire and some men finding it to be a personal challenge.

As distressing as that was, for the most part, others on campus didn't really vocalize to share in her delight. Instead, they looked at me with pity, and I could still catch people whispering behind their hands, "That is the girl that...," or "I heard she's a virgin."

Honestly, in this day and age, I would have thought we were all girls taken enough to not care. Apparently, I was dead wrong.

I only had one semester left before I graduated college—somehow Michael reminded myself of at least twenty times a day now, and I hated how the way the end of my college days were spent feeling like I was right back in high school. High school had been miserable. I'd been the girl who would do anything to avoid conflict, and I had been well on that track in college, too, until I met Reagan. Reagan had my back from day one, she'd given me the courage to put myself out there. In no time, I had a boyfriend, a circle of friends, and a new lease on life. But as great as

id, then had been, the last few weeks had shown me that it was going to take a lot of worried work from myself to keep from reverting back to my doormat status. It was not just that I was part of the reason I kept refusing her offer to stay with her

summer. As appealing as a summer in a beach house lolling about with my friends would be, I was wounded, I didn't want to feel like I was mooching off my best friend's tail—getting dumped. Unfortunately, that meant that I would be spending what would have been a summer in my old bedroom in my parents' house when I wasn't taking a job. Herat the burger shack for extra cash—so much for not feeling like a loser on the schooler again.

My friend said, “Reagan, you know I appreciate the offer, but I need to figure this out on my own,” I told her as I zipped up my suitcase.

My friend Reagan rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. “Uhh, that whole ‘go it alone’ island’ bull. Our society has over-romanticized going it alone. It doesn't seem anything wrong with leaning on your friends in times of need.”

“I know, I just think I need to do this on my own,” I told her. She rolled her mouth to argue more, but the text alert chirping on my phone interrupted her. “That's food,” I said, slinging the strap of my purse over my shoulder. “I'll be back in a few minutes.”

Begrudgingly, she allowed my excuse to work, but not without a massive eye roll. “You can dodge me now, but this conversation is not over,” she warned.

I smiled at her. “Yes, mother,” I called over my shoulder, ducking into the bathroom to miss the pillow she threw at me.

“And don't forget extra soy sauce,” she called after me as I shut the door behind me. God bless her, that girl had been holding my hand every day since Michael's betrayal. I really didn't deserve her as a friend. Reagan

like real always knew just what to say, and as I walked across the courtyard, my heart felt a little bit lighter knowing she was rooting for me.

for the Maybe I would come back to school in a couple of months as a whole new person. Maybe I would reinvent myself and no longer be the woman everyone looked at with pity or laughed at. As if I conjured it, I heard laughing behind my back...all too familiar laughter. Before I could stop myself, I shifted and looked back, and there she was. Scarlet. She had her arms wrapped around the very familiar neck of a tall, lanky man who was my ex-boyfriend, and she was grinning like the Cheshire cat as she locked eyes with me. When our eyes met, her grin widened, and she held my gaze as she started kissing the side of Michael's neck. Next to them, I saw one of Scarlet's friends looking around and laugh maniacally when she realized what was going on.

There's I ripped my gaze away and rushed towards my destination, the coffee shop across the street. My face burned as I hoofed it across the street and it occurred to me how much I'd spent my life trying to fix everything. Everything was ok, which was particularly difficult considering I had a horrible poker face. I was so damn tired of soldiering on. I smiled politely at the cashier when I picked up my order, acting like I hadn't just been humiliated yet again.

“Over,” The cashier's name was Lucy. She was a friendly girl who I'd paired with on a few projects in various classes. She took one look at me and just indignantly, “Oh no, what happened?”

Oh God, please not now...shit, too late. My face crumpled. I scrambled to the door to recover, but to my horror, the tears were already streaming down my face. I sprung a damn leak.

“Oh no, oh, Amy,” Lucy said sympathetically as she came from behind the register and hooked an arm through mine, leading me somewhere

ly stepsprivate. Whether this was to save me from further embarrassment or from ruining the appetites of the dine-in patrons, I wasn't sure. All the new was that I was now in the kitchen of Chen's Cafe, bawling my eyes out and a whomy former lab partner patted me soothingly on the back and encouraged me to let it all out. I did just that. I spilled everything I just saw and even myself, I that had been going on for the last few weeks and how I was probably around to be a virgin forever and why the hell did I waste three years on a man and she couldn't even remember my birthday but could remember all the v men our Blink 182's "All the Small Things."

ing the By the time all of it was out, Lucy was holding me and Mrs. Chen, the cafe's owner, along with one of the waitresses were circling around me. A waitress, whose name tag read Alyssa shook her head in disgust. "No Chinese shit, you remember that," she said, pointing at me.

street, "Not all men," Lucy said.

pretend "Yes all men," Alyssa insisted, scooting out of the kitchen with a pitcher of water.

lately at Lucy sighed. "Well, I can't say I agree with her, but as far as your ex-boyfriend is concerned—,"

"Fuck that guy," Mrs. Chen interjected.

returned "Well, yeah that," Lucy said with a small smile. For the first time in a long time, I laughed, a true genuine laugh at the sound of sweet Mrs. Chen talking about Michael. It was only three simple words, but something about the conviction in them shoved some of the weight off my chest.

ace like "There you go, that's better," Lucy encouraged. "Look, I know this is dark now, but you're going to have a great summer, I just know it—I've read that reading auras. You have some amazing things ahead of you, you can do more."

to keep “Thank you, Lucy, Mrs. Chen.” I nodded towards the older woman. I knew Mrs. Chen nodded and tapped Lucy on the shoulder. “Two extra eggs in her bag, on the house.” I thanked her, and she disappeared towards me back.

Nothing “I’m sorry for taking you away from your job,” I sniffed. “No. Not going to be sorry. I’m just glad you could get it out. Here,” she said, pulling a notepad out of her apron pocket and tearing off a sheet and handing it, along with a pen, over to me. “Write down your birthday and the minute you were born, and I’ll do your chart for you— free of charge. I bet it’ll back up the doctor when I’m getting from your aura. You just wait and see. Your life is a change, Amy.”

When I couldn’t say I really believed her, but I wrote down the information she asked for anyway because she’d been so sweet to me. After thanking her profusely, I finally gathered up my order and left. I walked around the corner of the way to get back to the dorm room, not feeling hungry anymore despite the appetizing smells wafting up from the takeout bag in my hand. I was still feeling embarrassed, of feeling cornered and alone. I was mad at the fact that I was holding back tears once again over my dirtbag ex-boyfriend, and just so over all the bullshit. When I stepped into the dorm room I shared with Reagan, she took one look at me and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Without saying a word, before I could talk myself out of it, I told Reagan, “I think I want to go out with you for the summer.”

“What? That’s awesome!” She jumped up from her bed. “Oh my gosh, we’re going to have so much fun...” She continued on, excitedly rambling the whole time, and as we dug into our food, we came up with plans for all the things we would do on the beach, just a couple of single, carefree women enjoying the sun.

“Ooh, I need to call my dad and tell him we’re going to have even more fun this summer since you’re going to be there,” she said, reaching for the phone.

“Are you sure he’s going to be ok with me crashing the party? I don’t want to interrupt any quality time you were planning on having.”

Reagan waved off my concern. “No worries, he has a home office at the beach house, so he still spends a good deal of time working during the summer.” She looked up at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, “Which means you’ll have plenty of time to find some trouble of our own.”

I smiled but silently vowed to myself that while I would spend the summer having fun with my best friend, I would also take the opportunity to venting myself and try new things—no more little miss doormat. No more pool

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“Ooh, I need to call my dad and tell him we’re going to have even more fun this summer since you’re going to be there,” she said, reaching for her phone.

“Are you sure he’s going to be ok with me crashing the party? I mean, I don’t want to interrupt any quality time you were planning on having,” I worried.

Reagan waved off my concern. “No worries, he has a home office at the beach house, so he still spends a good deal of time working during the day.” She looked up at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, “Which leaves us with plenty of time to find some trouble of our own.”

I smiled but silently vowed to myself that while I would spend the summer having fun with my best friend, I would also take the opportunity to work on myself and try new things—no more little miss doormat. No more poor Amy.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Julian

Julian

My fingers tapped impatiently against my desk as my client continued to drone on and on in my ear. His voice was starting to rise in a nasally pitch, and it took everything in me not to tell him to snap out of it and talk like a man. The man in question currently had his perfectly sculpted face plastered over every billboard and movie marquee across the country as part of one of the biggest movie franchises since James Bond—thanks to the client’s shark of an agent and me. I acted as the expert legal counsel that made multi-million-dollar contracts ensuring my thespian character was covered to the hilt legally and that all of his needs and wants were to be met by the studio or else.

It took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get where I was at that moment. So, I did not particularly appreciate being used as a sounding board for my client over the lack of variety at the craft services tables on his current project. I still remember when this kid was jumping for joy over getting the lead role in a hemorrhoid cream commercial. Now, he was bitching long and loudly about how the lack of crudité on the menu and how this had to violate his contract somehow, not to mention his personal liberties.

I tried to reason with him. “Look, Stone, if it bothers you that much, just order a vegetable plate from GrubHub and have them deliver it.”

He was outraged at my suggestion. “You clearly don’t understand the severity of the situation, Julian. This is a personal rights issue. I would think that as my lawyer you would be incensed about their lack of care for my client.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Look, kid, you want to talk about personal liberties, you go ahead, but your ‘suffering,’ if you can even call it that, doesn’t compare to what’s going on in the real world. My suggestion

real problem to get mad about. And, kid? Find someone else to bitch at.” I hung up the phone before I had to listen to another whiny word hit this his mouth. I knew full well that my office would probably receive a phone call from the kid’s agent, but I was having a hard time caring. I was having that problem with just about everything these days.

The one part of my life that I could still muster up some enthusiasm for was my daughter. She was the light of my life and my greatest accomplishment, and I was sorely looking forward to spending some time with her this summer. She was growing up so fast. Another year would be graduating college and moving onto law school just like

man. I just hoped that she didn’t follow the same exact path as I did. I looked around at the walls of this spacious office. It had all the trappings of a very, and I mean very, successful lawyer: multiple awards and accolades were framed behind glass along with the myriad of framed photos of myself rubbing elbows with my ultra-wealthy clientele. I couldn’t care less about any of it at this point. I spent more time inside these four walls than I did in my own home. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept in on the weekend, and the worst of it was that I was

completely and utterly alone. There was a time after my divorce that I felt like just to have someone to come home to.

I looked around me, disgusted with myself. Evidently, I was not getting any work done in this frame of mind. I grabbed my cell phone and personal keys and headed out passing by my assistant, Jacob, on the way. “I’m out for the afternoon. Just tell any caller I was unavoidably detained.”

“Right, sir,” Jacob said. I turned to go and the phone on Jacob’s desk rang. I heard him answer in his most professional voice, “You’ve reached

it about offices of Miles and Stafford, how may I help you?” I was halfway
l out of door when I heard him say, “Right, yes, of course, let me see if he’s
an irate Jacob pushed the hold button and called out to me, “Mr. Miles, I am so
g about but it’s Stone Cage’s agent, and he’s very upset.”

I sighed and looked at the kind and expectant face of my belea
asm for assistant. This poor guy had to listen to even more bitching and no
greatest than I did in his quest to field the worst of the babble for me. Whatever
quality paying him couldn’t possibly be enough, I mused to myself.

and she “You know what, Jacob? Tell Stone’s agent he can go fuck himself.

her old Jacob’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth gaped open. He recovered
me—a quickly, though, and managed to squeak out, “A-are you sure, sir?”

s of my “Yup,” I said, then added, “those exact words, too.” He blinked
successful phone in his hand nervously as I started out again, but I thought bett
ng with and turned back, “Oh, and Jacob?”

famous “Yes, sir?” he answered quickly.

re time “Next week, I want you to schedule a meeting for you and me, and
iber the going to discuss a pay raise for you. Sound good?” I asked him.

t I was His grin almost split his face in half. “Yes, sir, that sounds great.”

reveled I turned to leave again and smiled as I heard Jacob pick up the pho
ould be and say, “Mr. Trent, Mr. Miles says, and I quote...”

The door shut behind me before I heard the rest, but I chuckled to
going to as I walked to my car. This day may have started out shitty, but I was
and my believer that I was the ruler of my own destiny—if I wanted somet
out for change, then I needed to be willing to put in the elbow grease to ma
change.

sk rang. What I sorely needed at that moment was a change of scenery
the law company of a very special lady, so I was going to do just that.

out the

in, sir.”

o sorry, After stopping off at the florists first, I pulled up to Greendale’s Retirement Community with an arm full of colorful blooms that included sunflowers, lavender, and white roses. Only the best for Angela Miles.

onsense I didn’t visit her nearly as often as I should, and she was always sure I was me hear about that. Despite her eagerness to remind me of my shortcomings as an attentive son, I still managed to always leave here feeling a little

” lighter. It didn’t matter that I was in my forties. Sometimes, a guy still himself the encouragement of his mother. Plus, Angela Miles did not punch punches, especially if she cared about you, and something in me sensed

l at the her tough love was exactly what I needed at the moment.

ter of it When she answered the door, she put her hand to her chest and raised her eyebrow. “And who is this handsome man at my door? It couldn’t possibly be my son. I hardly remember what he looks like anymore.”

d we’re “Ma,” I groaned, exasperated.

She gave me an indulgent smile and clucked her tongue. “Ah, I should give you a harder time, but you did bring flowers, so I guess you in,” she said, opening the door wider and letting me into the apartment. I gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug and told her I’d take

myself to dinner later if she was up for it.

s a firm “Sorry, sweetie, I can’t. I have plans with the girls,” she said as she put flowers into a ceramic pot that Reagan had fingerpainted for her years ago. I wasn’t too surprised since my mother was always busy. I heard from

like that friends that moving their parents into a retirement community had been a fight and struggle, but for my mom, she jumped at the chance. She said and the didn’t have to fuss with maintenance or cooking if she didn’t want

she'd found a group of friends to hang out with. She said it was like high school all over again, except this time she knew when someone was faking it. Luxury and wasn't bothered by it.

Ma was not one to put up with any kind of nonsense. She said I was much too short to waste time on that, so I wasn't surprised when she immediately looked at me with her examining squint and asked, "So, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Ma, I just wanted to see you is all," I told her, not wanting to get into my meaningless problems with her.

She rolled her eyes and put a hand on her hip. "Julian, I held you inside that body for almost ten months. It took—"

I rolled my eyes and interrupted her, reciting the line I knew better than the back of my own hand at this point. "*Forty-plus hours!*" I mimicked.

"That's right," she continued. "Forty-plus hours to claw you out of me." She turned her hands into claws to solidify the point. "I think I know something is wrong with my son. Now spill!"

I sighed, settling on the couch. "It's nothing Ma, I'm just restless. I'll let you know...maybe it's a mid-life crisis or something."

She made a face, then said, "Nuh-uh, nope—you're not having those." She shook her finger at me like it was an option I could choose to reject at will. "You know, your father had one of those, and he was

put the pain in my ass during that time." She looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. "Well, he was a giant pain in my ass most of the time, but

in some ways, that time, it was a miracle that your parents didn't end up on an episode of *COPS*. No, you're too smart for that. Now, tell me what it is you're afraid of, and I'm sure we can figure it out."

I knew better than to argue. My mother was not known for letting

ke highgo. So, I laid out what had been going on in my head, and when I wa
ull of itshe looked at me like I was the biggest idiot. “Julian, for goodness’
keep telling you—you need a woman, you’re lonely. And I don’t
ife waswoman just for the hoochie coochie stuff. I mean someone you can a
almostshare your life with.”

what’s I sucked in a deep breath. This topic wasn’t a new conversation, bu
one she hadn’t pushed lately. “Ma, I told you, I tried that, it didn’t w
t reallyso well.”

She moved over to me then and put a comforting hand over mine. “
side mybut not every woman is Renee,” she said, referring to Reagan’s mot
my ex-wife. In truth, I’d gotten over Renee a long time ago. But getti
han thewhat she’d done to me...that particular bit of business was a little tou
let go. I definitely was not one to put myself out there. “Beside
of me.”continued, “how fair is it that you’ve cloistered yourself up and she
w whenallowed to move on...and on...and on.” She rolled her hands or
another for dramatic effect, referring to Renee’s multiple marriages si
I don’tdemise of our own.

“C’mon, it has nothing to do with Renee. It’s just that...” I trailed
one ofsure how to describe it, but I didn’t need to.

oose or My mother was right, and she did know me better than anyone. “J
a giantknow it’s scary laying your heart bare, especially after what you’ve
t beforethrough. But you’ll have no chance of finding that one true love unl
: duringtake the risk and put your heart out there. Maybe it gets broken ag
sode ofmaybe not...you’ll never know if you don’t try. You’ll just spend the
feeling,your life in that office making other people’s dreams come true.”

She was getting to me, and she knew it. Still, she really went for
; thingswhen she asked, “What would you tell Reagan in this situation?”

is done, I laughed when she compounded her question with a smug, yet
sake, Ismirk. "That's a low blow, Ma."

mean a She continued to smirk, but it had lost its smugness, replaced ins
actuallyfondness. "I never said I fought fair."

I smiled back, grateful once again for her wisdom and humor. "I
t it wasMa."

ork out "Always," she said, kissing my cheek before I stood to go.

"You owe me a dinner," I called to her over my shoulder before I
I know,her door.

her and "Yeah, yeah," she said. "Oh, and Julian? I know you're planning on
ng overto the beach house with Reagan soon. Just promise me you will actual
gher tosome time off and not work the whole time you're there."

s," she I nodded, knowing that it was just to appease her. "Yes, ma'am."

's been "You do what your mother tells you and your dream girl will appea
ie overyou worry," she said.

nce the I laughed at that but answered dutifully, "Yes, ma'am."

"Looove you," she called out in a sing-song voice as I went thro
off, notdoor.

"Love you, too, Ma," I said before shutting the door behind me. Jus
ulian, Isuspected, I already felt a lot better. She was right, as usual. I was lon
/e beenmade a lot of excuses over the years for why I wouldn't pursue a
ess yourelationship: the firm was too busy; I didn't want to bring another pers
ain, butReagan's life yet; it just wasn't the right time. But it all came down
rest ofthing really: I didn't want to get my heart broken again. Ma wa
though. Unless I was willing to risk my heart, I would never find the
the killwho I hoped to share my life with and grow old with.

As I walked out of the retirement complex, I looked towards the sl

cheesy, day was clear and beautiful, and I suddenly felt a new sense of possi

“Alright, Universe, I’m ready to put my heart out there. Show me w
tead bygot.”

Thanks,

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day was clear and beautiful, and I suddenly felt a new sense of possibilities.
“Alright, Universe, I’m ready to put my heart out there. Show me what you got.”

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Amelia

Amelia

Reagan had not been exaggerating when she described the paradise as her father's beach house in Malibu. While I understood that we lived in Northern California was beautiful in its own right, we spent our time there in classrooms and at work. Here, the white, sandy beach stretched for miles, the vast, blue water sparkled before us, and best of all, I didn't know a soul there. It was heaven.

On the drive down to Malibu, I'd spilled my guts about the whole thing that led to me agreeing to come with Reagan. She shook her head in disbelief after my story was over. "I know you cared about him, but Michael was a rat bastard. Honestly, I think you should start looking at this as a betrayal instead of a heartbreak."

"I know." I sighed. "I just want to start over and get away from Amy."

"Hey, I happen to love the 'old Amy' as you call her. But I'll support you in whatever way you wish to reinvent yourself. You want to start wearing dark eyeliner and black nail polish and rail against the establishment? I'll cheer you on. You decide to go full boho and start your own organic clothing making business? I'm your girl. You want to—"

I laughed at her rambles. "I think I get it, and that's why I love you." I looked out towards the ocean that was zipping past us as we grew closer to Malibu. Reagan was driving with the top down, and the wind was blowing our hair. I felt a renewed sense of excitement as we drove along the road. "I don't think I'm looking to change quite like that. I just want to be more assertive and to get out of my own head."

wind “Ibut Reagan assured me that he was fine with it. “I told him you were in the middle of a bad breakup, a little something he knows about unfortunate in the he said just what I thought he would say—that some sun and sand was the perfect medicine for a dickhead ex-boyfriend.”

agreed I raised a skeptical eyebrow at that. She rolled her eyes and smiled. “Well, he said all of that except for the dickhead ex-boyfriend part. But if you knew all the details, then he would totally say that.”

it it.” I I wasn’t so sure how I felt about this man I didn’t know, knowing you are details about me. But Reagan assured me that if anyone would understand heartbreak, it was her dad.

ing one We spent the next couple of days hanging out and loved exploring the house and surrounding area. There were several other houses nearby, but they were all generously spaced apart, so it felt like we had quite a bit of privacy.

The back porch led directly into the sand and Reagan showed me a small clearing on the beach that wasn’t visible to the neighbors. She teased me that “where to go if I really wanted to let my freak flag fly and go skinny dipping.”

ook me We leisurely explored the sites and lollapalooza about the house watching you to do favorite movies. The kitchen looked like something from a cooking show if I’m honest there was even a white baby grand piano off to the side of the living room. Reagan said one of her dad’s clients gave it to him as a thank you for a particularly nasty contract dispute. I felt my fingers itch every time I

I would play it, but I was waiting until I was alone to play with it. Reagan

listening to me play well enough, but she always wanted me to play something old school, something she could dance to. While I didn’t mind her requests, I was a firm believer in an instrument telling me what it wanted to play. I never gave in. I’d know that might sound to most people, but Reagan and Lucy were the only ones I shared that with who didn’t laugh at me.

e going The piano sitting in that beach house was lonely and wanted to l
ly, and mournful, soul-stirring notes, I just knew it, and I looked forward
ould bechance to see what it could do.

Now, I was having some alone time sitting on the beach with th
“Okay, lapping at my feet. Despite the fact that we were on vacation, Reagan s
ut if heher rigid routine, but I wasn’t too surprised. She’d always been
organized and goal-oriented, which would come in handy for her b
g the law degree.

and my Every morning, she went on a long run. I went with her the first m
but my thigh muscles were still burning from trying to keep up with h
ing the promised I’d get used to it, but I preferred spending my early m
out they communing with the beach and trying to work up my courage to actu
privacy in the water. I’d never swam in the ocean before, and even though I’d
all areato swim while I was still in high school, I’d largely avoided it still.
I knew felt comfortable in a bathing suit. I didn’t possess the same long, lithe
lipping. Reagan or the tiny waist of Scarlet. I was short and curvy, and whi
ing our piece bathing suits made me look decidedly frumpy, bikinis made n
; show, downright obscene. But since it was just me and Reagan here and he
e living beach house was located on a fairly private stretch of beach, I didn’t h
ou for a same insecurities about laying out on the beach in my pink bikini.

passed This morning, I was finally going to build up the courage to go swi
n liked This summer was one where I was going to face my fears, so I figu
me popplace was as good as any to start.

I was a The breeze was fairly light today, and the water was relatively cal
realized sucked in a deep breath and began to slowly wade into the water, e
he first the warmth swirling around my ankles and the way the wet sand squi
between my toes. Out here in the vast sea, my problems felt small, ar

felt out at peace. I started moving further in until I was a little more than waist-deep. The wind picked up all of the sudden, and I could see a wave rising up beginning its descent towards me. I dug my toes into the sand to steady myself. The water came down and knocked me back a bit, but I was stuck to myself. I was so busy trying to stand up that I didn't notice the man's hand supercoming in right behind it. Without warning, I was knocked back on my back and beneath the water. My arms flailed in the water, searching for anything I could use to pull myself back up but to no avail. I could feel my lungs beginning to burn from lack of oxygen as I struggled to get back up. She got sucked in deeper.

earnings *Please, please, don't let me go out this way.*

ally get I started to feel woozy, but just as suddenly as I was swept under, a learned strong band wrap around my waist and what felt like a solid wall at my back. I never that pulled me free from the current. My head popped from the surface lines of water, and I gasped, sucking in mouthfuls of air. Vaguely, I was aware of one-being pulled to the shore, the water slipping away from me and the dark look replaced by the warm sun on my body.

er dad's I was laid out on the sand, and I struggled to make out the form of a man above me with the sun in my eyes. I coughed and squinted against the bright sun. The form squatted down beside me and helped me to a sitting position. I coughed up some water.

red this "It's okay, it's okay," a voice murmured in my ear. "Breathe."

I sat in the sand, heaving in breaths, as the man squatting beside me rubbed soothing circles on the small of my back. I pushed my wet mop of hair from my eyes, enjoying my face and finally looked into possibly the most beautiful set of eyes I had ever seen. I didn't think I had ever seen eyes that color before. The man's hair was a slate gray and kind as he stared down at me. "There you are," he said.

st deep. “You’re okay, just take it easy.” He was still rubbing circles on my skin before I managed to clear my airways enough to respond.

and my “I-I-I don’t know what happened,” I stuttered out.

caught “I saw you go into the water, and when you didn’t come back out, I next onesomething was wrong. First time in the ocean?” he asked in a silky voice. My ass couldn’t decide if it was the sound of his voice or shock making me do anything I break out with goosebumps.

y lungs “Yes,” I admitted, “and apparently my last.” I shot him a sheepish look but just met his eyes but quickly tore them away, feeling my face burn with embarrassment.

“Don’t say that,” he chided gently. “Swimming in the ocean is a challenge. I felt you can’t give up after a few bad waves. You just have to learn how to swim with the currents.”

e of the “Yeah, obviously, I didn’t account for that,” I said shakily. I dared not look at him and saw that he was looking back at me with a patient expression. I noticed the scruff on his face, how it was a little darker than his sandy pepper hair. He was just in his trunks revealing a well-muscled torso sprinkled with hair that trailed down to a tight, flat stomach. With his broad, sturdy shoulders, he looked like he belonged in some body building magazine. It was Malibu, so maybe he was a male model or something.

He cleared his throat, jerking me from my perusal. *Holy shit*, I thought myself mortified that I’d been so openly gawking. This guy had just saved my life and I was staring him up and down like he was a piece of meat. When my eyes found his face again, it was to see an amused smile on his full lips. I’d “I-I’m so sorry, I think I lost too much oxygen. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, and I don’t know how to thank you for saving me,” I told him softly.

n when making sure this time that my eyes stayed firmly on his face, though a
looking as he was, that also felt a little obscene.

“I know how you can thank me,” he said, his voice dropping. I
figured suggesting what I thought he was? I wasn’t sure, but it looked kind of
voice. I was looking me over. Then again, I was in my bikini, which left very
y flesh the imagination, every curve and bulge on full display. I could definit
myself reddened now, and I shifted my position so that I could at least
smile. I some of myself. “Relax,” he said, “I’m not trying to hit on you, I pro
n with just thought you could let me show you how to move with the currents
next time a wave comes, you’ll be prepared.”

wonder I was really embarrassed now. First, he caught me gawking, and
to flow stupidly believed he was hitting on me when he was really just tryin
nice. “Oh, I, um, couldn’t ask you to do that.”

another “You’re not, I’m offering. I don’t want you to quit going into the
ression because of one bad experience, but I would feel better if I could lea
salt and knowing you know how to handle it,” he said. I stumbled for a re
d chest when he said, “I’m sorry, I’m being so rude. You don’t even know my
s wide, I’m Julian,” he said, sticking out his hand.

uilding I stared at his large hand for a little too long, but he patiently waite
;. I cautiously shook it. It engulfed mine so easily, and it held onto mine
ught to but with power. “I’m Amelia,” I told him softly.

it saved “Amelia. Pretty,” he said. I immediately liked the way my name s
: When on his lips, and I definitely liked his use of the word pretty right ne
lips. Our hands were still clasped when he said huskily, “Let me show you
; wrong things, Amelia.” His head nodded toward the water.

ld him, If I were back home, I would have immediately came up with some
and fled. But I wasn’t back home, I reminded myself. I was away f

s good-that mess and away from the Amy who ran from things just to avoid
or because I was nervous. Hell, that was why I'd been out in the water
Was he first place. I straightened my spine, pushing out my chest in the p
like he "Okay," I said a little tremulously.

little to "Okay?" he asked, that amused but patient smile still curving his lip
ely feel "Yeah," I said more assertively. "Let's do this."

conceal "Atta girl," he said, clapping his hands together. "Alright, Amelia
omise. I with me." Something about the way he said those words made my
; so the belly clench. He grabbed my hand and led me back into the water.

right now, everything is relatively calm, but what you have to reme
now, I that could all change at any second," he said as he led us into the water
g to be was waist deep. It barely reached his hips. "You're doing good, th
go," he encouraged.

e water He glanced behind him, and I saw what stole his focus. There was
ve here wave cresting and fixing to meet us in a couple of seconds. "When y
esponse one come, no matter how small it might look, you want to make sure y
/ name your side to it and don't lock your knees or it will just knock you righ

Okay, here we go." I moved so my side was facing the current, but I
l until I tight to his hands. The wave met us and washed around me ins
: gently dragging me under like last time. "See?"

"Yeah." I smiled. "That wasn't bad at all."

ounded "I told you. Okay, now look, we've got a bigger one coming. Let's
xt to it again," he said. The next one met us, and I did what he said and conti
u a few hold on, but this one was much stronger. I lost my footing. I held tight

arms, and in turn, he circled them around my waist and pulled me to h
excuse cheek met his chest. I could feel the soft, wet hair against my face
rom all breath against my temple. I started to apologize, but he was having noi

conflict “It’s okay, Amelia. It just takes practice, and sometimes, even then someone in the will just knock you off your feet. It happens,” he assured me.

process. I took his assurances to heart, and he showed me a few techniques to handle swimming in the ocean versus the pool. Not long after, I was the closest I could to breast strokes under the circumstances, and he was swimming next to me like a fish. When our heads were both above water, I asked him, “You swim every day?”

lower “I wish. When I’m in Malibu, I swim damn near every day. This is a beautiful area, too beautiful not to get a taste of it every chance I can, but most of the time I’m stuck behind a desk,” he admitted.

until I “Really? You don’t look like it,” I blurted out before I could stop myself. He laughed and said, “Well, thanks. I do try to make it to the gym every day, but I can’t.”

a small This was usually the part where I would feel embarrassed again somehow, when I looked into his face, that all melted away. You turn intimidatingly sexy as this mystery man was, there was also something over inexplicably comforting about him. “So, um, Julian, what brings you here now?”

stead of “You mean other than saving a beautiful woman from the current?” he smiled, and I felt my blush all the way down to my toes. He chuckled at my reaction and continued, “I found myself suffering from work burnout and decided I needed to get away for a while, recalibrate. You?”

ued to “Same. I mean, not from work or anything. Maybe I’m just burned out on my life? It’s just been a really hard few months, and I’m looking to work on myself—recalibrate like you said,” I told him.

and his “And what is it that you’re trying to work on exactly?” he asked, looking a little skeptical but still good-natured.

nothing “I’m working on being more assertive, of taking charge of my life, of not worrying about what other people think and doing more things that I want to do,” I told him, surprised at how easily I opened up to this man.

“Is that what the swimming was about? Doing something that scares you?” he asked, floating closer toward me.

“Yeah. I don’t want to miss out on opportunities just because of my shyness,” I said.

“Are you feeling like you missed out on a lot because of that?” he asked. I thought about it for a moment, and I was surprised by the answer that came out of my mouth. “Actually, not really, not yet anyway. I feel like there’s a lot of people around me who make me feel like I’m not who I’m supposed to be or like I’m a late bloomer, but to tell you the truth, I do like I’ve really had the opportunity to explore. I just never felt comfortable enough with anyone. At the same time, I worry that my shyness will keep me from experiencing things I want to experience.”

“And just what are those things you’re wanting to experience so badly?” he asked.

“Love, adventure, someone to share my life with,” I said, and that was the first time I’d actually spoken the words out loud—the things that I wanted so desperately but was so afraid would never happen to me. Some of the things I’d burnout seemed safe to say it to this stranger. He appeared to be nonjudgmental. I realized then that I’d never really felt like I was good enough, or entitled to anything for that matter, to deserve those things. Michael doing what he wanted and the way people on campus had reacted had just seemingly proven me right.

Now, floating in the water with a man I just met with gorgeous eyes looking at me, I was realizing that my own body was reacting in ways I’d never known before.

fe...notrealized that all those feelings of low self-worth were just that—f
it scareFeelings weren't always facts.

And the fact that was becoming glaringly obvious in that moment v
d you?" Julian, my impromptu lifeguard and swim instructor, was watch
carefully now, those beautiful, slate eyes falling to my mouth. There
fear," Ione standing behind me I could attribute his stare to. There was no c
for once that this beautiful man was staring at me with want in his eye
sked. he said next made something clench inside my chest. "The very same
ver thatwant, Amelia." He swam closer, but he was still respectful enc
eel likemaintain some distance between our bodies. "And I was recently
ere I'msomebody very wise that if I was ever going to have those things,
n't feelneeded to be willing to put myself out there. I've been pondering for
fortablefew days if I'm brave enough for that. So, I guess the question is: d
leep mewilling to be brave enough to go after what you want?"

He was right in front of me now, his eyes darkening as they lingerec
badly?" mouth. My heart thudded in my chest as I did something I'd neve
before: I reached for him. "Yes, I think I am," I said softly as I pla
was thehands on his forearms. He bent down then, anchoring one large hand
nted sowaist possessively and cupping the side of my face with his othe
how, itbringing me flush against him. He was hard everywhere, and I shivere
ental. Isensation.

ough of "You're shivering," he said huskily.

he did "Then warm me up," I told him, having no idea where that boldne
ed that.came from. It must have worked, though, because he smiled at me
s and abefore bending down all the way and laying his mouth across mine. I
efore, Iwere gentle at first, teasing, but they turned more passionate in a m
seconds as I tilted my head and opened my mouth, allowing him acc

feelings took quick advantage, nibbling at my lips and causing newfound sensations to surf through my body. It wasn't like I'd never been kissed before, but somehow, when Michael and I had kissed, I'd always felt like an imposter, as if I was playing a part and worried about whether I was doing it right. In Julian's arms, which had tightened around me, I wasn't the least bit vulnerable. I was just enjoying the moment and how he felt. When he swept his lips against mine, I moaned before I could stop it. I'd never moaned like that before, but this moment felt so right. I could feel him harder against me.

I felt a surge of power at the evidence of his arousal, and it spurred me to rub my palms up over his well-defined chest. I swear I could feel his rumble up from his chest and into my mouth, and it made him taste sweeter to me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing my breasts to him in the process, and my nipples tightened in response. We were both so consumed by the moment that we didn't notice the shift in the wind or how the waves were crashing, so the crash of the wave took us by surprise and swept us onto the sand. At that point, we'd already been close to the shoreline, and so, the wave took us and swept us the rest of the way to the warm sand, knocking us together in each other's arms. We lay there laughing at how perfectly the water moved us to the shore, still clasped in each other's embrace. I found the slight lines around Julian's eyes unimaginably sexy, especially when he laughed.

He was hovering over me, the side of his mouth tilted upward as he kissed my neck. His lips took in my face. "You said you want to be more assertive, so tell me, what do you want?"

I took in his handsome features hungrily and said possibly the most

isationsthing I'd ever uttered. "I don't want you to stop." My voice sounded
ore, butto my own ears.

poster, His face turned serious. "Yes, ma'am." Then, he leaned down to l
ight. Inagain, delving his tongue deeper this time. I met him stroke for stroke,
vorried.drunk off the taste of him. His hands began to wander, and my back
tongueoff the sand when he palmed my breast, my nipple beading almost p
duringat the contact. I whimpered beneath his mouth, and he broke th
en evenmurmuring against my mouth as his hand kneaded my breast. "You
good, Amelia. Do you have any idea just how beautiful you are?"

l me on I'd never been told anything like that before and certainly no
s groangorgeous man plucking at my nipple through my bikini top while I
all thebeneath him. I grabbed his face in my hands and kissed him again, if
distract myself into calming down, though it quickly became evident
i in thecalming down was not going to be a possibility. Remembering my
imed inbeing more assertive, I gave in and let my hands roam over Julian's
es wereran my hands over his broad shoulders and down his chest and abc
off ourmuscles that flexed beneath my fingers. I could feel his desire pressed
ie wavemy thigh, but I didn't let my fingers go there just yet, instead lettin
king usdance at the waistband of his trunks.

ctly the He stilled then and gently moved my hands away from his waistba
und thepinned them on either side of my head. "Not yet, Amelia. Not before
hen heyou come." His voice was husky, and the words he'd uttered made
like I was on fire. "Tell me you want that," he said, and I was delig
his eyesthe urgency in his voice.

Amelia. "Yes," I moaned, "please." Who was this woman lying half-naked
beach rolling around with some guy she just met and begging him t
:honesther come? This definitely fell into the category of trying new and

breathy things, and I silently cheered on this new version of myself. Amelia was not to be pitied because she was being practically ravished by a kiss on the beach, I thought to myself.

feeling Julian peeled one of the cups of my wet bikini away and sucked an arched, hardened nipple into his mouth. The feel of his rough tongue against my breast nearly made my eyes roll back in my head. As he suckled my breast, his fingers danced down my stomach, making my muscles quiver in their need to feel so hard to remind myself to breathe when his fingers suddenly dipped into my bikini bottoms. His mouth released my breast, and he watched me react by leaning carefully as his hand smoothed over my mound. My lips parted, expelling a long breath in anticipation. He watched me bite my lip with avidity only to be before he finally parted me with his fingers and found the hot and needy cunt that nestled between my thighs.

goal of I let out a low moan, and the sound seemed to encourage him as he worked my body. He made tight, little circles that quickly had my hips bucking up to meet his comical touch. "Please," I moaned.

against "Please what? Tell me, Amelia," he encouraged.

giving them "Please, give me more," I begged.

With a seductive smile he obliged my request and dipped his fingers into my cunt and pressing it against my hot, wet entrance. I'd never craved being touched like this before, but it felt so right that I couldn't stop my hips from bucking against him, pushing me forward and trying to get closer. He didn't make me wait, slipping his fingers inside and moving slowly. I saw his expression change, worried, and his eyes met mine seeking the answer. I don't know what he saw, but his lips formed into a kind, anticipatory smile in response. He held my gaze as he added another finger, stretching me.

scary He murmured words of encouragement as he pumped his fingers in

Parker of me, flicking my sensitive bundle of nerves with his thumb and not mansparks appear behind my eyelids. I was quickly approaching the precipice of my pleasure, and I clutched onto his shoulders, moaning his name.

“That’s it, that’s it, Amelia. Let it happen, beautiful,” he rumbled against my skin. I went over the edge hard, the buildup of my desire crashing over me like the wave that had washed up to shore. I let out a long, loud moan, my name pouring from my lips like some sort of enchantment.

It took a while for me to come back to myself, but when I did, he was leaning over me, waiting patiently, stroking my hair and looking down into my eyes. “That was amazing,” I said in between heavy breaths. He grinned, smiling at me a megawatt smile.

“Yes, it definitely was,” he agreed, his voice rough as he traced his fingers lightly over my face. He was leaning down a hair’s breadth away from me when the shrill ring of a phone pierced the moment. In my orgasm haze, it took me a moment to realize it was my ringer. My eyes widened, and he understood immediately. “That you?”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” I apologized, scrambling out from beneath him and rushing a few feet to my bag. I dug out my phone as the ringing stopped. I saw with a gut punch that Reagan had texted me several times with increasingly frantic messages.

Seeing my face, Julian asked, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s my friend,” I explained. “She thinks I’ve been kidnapped, something, says she’s fixing to send out a search party,” I said sheepishly. Julian stood, adjusting himself in the process, but still nodding. “It sounds like you have a good friend. You should get back to her, she won’t worry.”

“But what about...” I started as Julian sauntered towards me and

making took my phone from my hand.

Quickly, he typed in his number. “To be continued...” he said, placing the phone back in my hand. “But I better hear from you soon, Amelia. We’ll finish my unfinished business.” He started to back away, at first not breaking contact with me but soon turning around to head back toward the water. “Wait!” I called before he got farther away. He stopped, and I ran toward him, threw my arms around his neck, and laid a long kiss on his cheek. When I finally released him, he gave me a lopsided grin. “Make sure you don’t wait too long, Amelia. A man can only take so much,” he teased as he walked away.

I rushed through the sand and back around the little cove that had been shielding us and back towards the beach house, dialing Reagan to tell her to call off the hounds and that I would be back at the house shortly. She post-told me she’d gone out driving around to find me, but that she would be home in five minutes. I turned my eyes back towards the house. “What happened to you?” she questioned.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Look, I’m almost to the house, I’m going to shower off really quick, and then, we can talk,” I told her. “That interesting, huh? Can’t wait to hear it,” she said.

“Let’s just say that goal I made about being more assertive and trying new things—yeah, I’m crushing that.”

“Alright, alright, girl, love to hear it. Should be home in about thirty minutes, I’m going to go pick us up some lunch,” she said.

We hung up, and I made my way up the stairs of the beach house, my mind immediately going back to what had just happened. Maybe Lucy had been right, sorry. This summer was going to change my life for the better.

gently

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ve have
ng eye
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s lips.
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Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Julian

Julian

I emerged from the water for the umpteenth time looking toward the shoreline. Once Amelia left, I'd gone back into the water desperately to work off my frustration, but I was having a hard time (intended) keeping my mind off her.

I'd decided to head down to Malibu a couple of days early. I didn't feel that Reagan would mind, and I just couldn't face another day at the office listening to more entitled rich people whine about their issues. When I got to the beach house, I could see Reagan's stuff spread out all over the house, but she was nowhere to be found. I figured she and her girlfriends were out to see the sights, so I decided to take a walk on the beach and get an early morning swim. The morning and the water were just too beautiful not to take full advantage of it.

As soon as my feet hit the sand, I immediately began to relax. The very next moment, I thought that maybe I was spying an oasis when I saw a beautiful young woman with generous curves standing in the water.

It was obvious that she wasn't used to the ocean water, but she was determined to gain her sea legs. I walked slowly along the beach, watching her surreptitiously, knowing that it might be a little creepy but also not being able to help myself. There was just something about her. From the moment she was at, she was facing away from me. There was something sweet about the way she waded into the water, like she was trying to coax it to play nice with her.

I was smiling to myself and watching her wade back and forth in the water, feeling an odd sensation in my chest when I heard her giggle with sheer delight at the sand squishing up between her toes. That combin

her incredible body definitely had my interest, but when she finally
rds theand I got a look at her face, that odd sensation in my chest unfurled c
tryingand spread warmth throughout my body.

(no pun My feet started moving toward her on their own volition, but I
myself to stop and turn back. She looked so free and happy by hersel
get thewasn't about to interrupt that. I looked back over my shoulder one fir
y in theto see the current take her down. One second, there was a beautiful wo
When Ithe water. The next, it was like no one had ever been there.

ver the I raced across the sand and dove into the water, struggling at first
rd wenther. Then, after what felt like much too long, I saw the trail of her long
go for aswam over and grabbed her around the waist, my heart pounding ins
to takechest, terrified that I was too late.

What would happen after I pulled her from the water was con
n, for aunexpected. I was so relieved that she was okay, but I felt like I'd un
autiful,some divine creature. Her face was so open and intriguing. Standin
with her in the sand, my mother's words came rushing back to m
seemed*dream girl will appear, don't you worry...*

atching I knew that I should have made sure she was okay before leaving he
it beingto enjoy the rest of her day, but I couldn't stop talking to her. The
angle Isomething oddly comforting yet exciting about talking to this
out thewoman...and when we touched, I couldn't seem to help myself. I'
ce withyears in a place servicing people who made their livings pretending
someone else and projecting carefully stylized images. Eve
nto theconversations with my clients and their associates felt staged.
gling inappeared to be genuine and guileless, and when pressed on what s
ed withtrying to work on, it was to be more authentically herself—to be less s
almost laughed at her response, honestly, not because I thought it was

turned stupid but because what were the odds that I'd hightailed it out
outward Angeles in severe need of something more real and I instantly found
rather, I found her, swimming not far from my beach house, as real
forced natural as you please.

f, and I She was young, probably close to my daughter's age, but my body
ial time not to give one shit about that unsavory fact. Especially after feeling
oman in my arms. The feel of her luscious, curvy body against my own with
between us but the tiny scraps of fabric that served as her bathing suit
t to see swim trunks, it felt so natural yet exhilarating. I'd been in Malibu for
g hair. It was two hours, and I already felt more alive than I had in years.

side my I looked out into the vast expanse of sea, feeling a sense of exc
course through my body. I was finally calmed down enough to wal
pletely into the beach house and not reveal anything that would surely s
earthed daughter for life. I turned and started making my trek back to the
g there enjoying the weight of the sand sliding over my feet as I made my as
e: *your* the steep passage that led to the back staircase of the house.

I was excited to see my daughter again, who I hadn't seen since the
er alone break. Between my work and her schooling, we didn't have a lot of
ere was see one another, but we talked several times a week. She would also Fi
young me often, so I could see what her space looked like and what she wa
d spent The fact that we'd always stayed so close was forever a relief to me
g to be her mother and I had split, it had been contentious. I was worried that
en my would feel like she would have to take sides, but she managed
Amelia amazingly neutral about the whole thing. I'd carried so much guilt ab
he was being about to make my marriage to her mother work, but several
cared. I after the divorce was finalized and we'd finally agreed on a custody si
silly or that seemed best for Reagan, a teacher had informed me during a

of Losconference to keep up whatever Renee and I had been doing since
d it. Orhad seemed much happier and was excelling in her studies.

and as That was when I realized just how toxic our marital home had b
Reagan and that it was better for her that she had two happy homes t
seemedinstead of one miserable one. Still, I'd found myself trying to make up
; her infact that her mother and I weren't still together. I was fiercely prote
nothingour routine, and I tried not to bring girlfriends or dates around to so
and mymitigate the many husbands her mother seemed to be going through
r all ofmuch tissue.

Briefly, I wondered what Reagan would say if I started dating a
itementyounger than myself...someone closer to her age. I shook my head o
lk backthis thought. I was getting way too ahead of myself, but that couldn't s
car myexcitement I felt at potentially hearing from Amelia soon. I hoped I
house,scared her off.

cent up I climbed the back steps of the beach house, excitement mounting
so—it was going to be a good summer, I could feel it in my bones.
holidaymyself in, I could hear music playing in the kitchen, and I smiled as
time tomy daughter dancing along to the frenetic sounding pop song as she di
acetimeout of bag and set up plates and utensils. I smiled when she broke out
s up to.at the top of her lungs. Reagan had always been such a joyous, positiv
. Whenfrom the time she was tiny. Her grandmother had always warned me n
Reaganthat light dim. I'd taken it on as my mission in life to protect that b
to stayspirit, and here she was. Just one more year and she would be going i
out notschool, I couldn't believe it. All her greatness considered, my little gi
monthsnot carry a tune in a bucket. I flinched a little as she hit a particularly
ituationand screechy note. She twirled around, singing into the fork in her han
parent

Reagan she spied me there watching her and jumped about a foot into the air.

she shrieked. She held her hand to her chest. "Holy crap, you scared me
een for "I'm sorry, sweetie, didn't mean to sneak up on you," I told her.

o go to She waved a dismissive hand in my direction. "Don't apologize,
for the mean, it is your house, I just wasn't expecting you for a couple more d
ctive of "I know, I just got anxious to get out of L.A.," I said.

newhat She tilted her head to the side, eying me over for signs of anything
like so wrong. "Everything ok?"

"Yeah," I said, hoping it sounded convincing. "I just really ne
woman break."

clear of "That's totally understandable," she said as she took a big bite
stop the burrito. "I mean, you really do need to think about getting a life, Dad."

hadn't I raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that I was 'unalive' as
suggesting."

as I did She spoke with her mouth full, not caring for manners around her o

Letting "I wouldn't say 'unalive' necessarily, but all you do is work. Learn
I spied relax...maybe find someone to relax with, is all I'm saying."

ug food I rolled my eyes at her and groaned. "Uh, you and my mother."

singing "Hey," she admonished, pointing a finger at me. "Don't you dare ta
re spirit about my Gigi," she warned playfully.

ot to let I smiled at her, shaking my head. "I wouldn't dream of it, sweetie."

ea utiful "I'm just saying," she said around another bite of burrito, "all work
nto law play makes Jack a dull boy."

rl could "Who's this Jack?" I asked, but she just continued on like I had
high...anything at all.

d when "...and then I'm going to be hearing about you on the news chasing
around with an axe, saying 'here's Julian!' I just don't want it to get t

“Dad!”okay?” she finished.

e.” I rolled my eyes at her. She could be so silly sometimes. “Alright, enough with the dramatics. I’m here, aren’t I? And I have every intention of relaxing—”

ays.” “And finding someone to relax with?” she inserted.

g being “Sweetheart, you don’t need to worry about my dating life,” I assured her. “You’ve got to have one first in order for me to worry about it,” she said with a raised eyebrow, then her face fell. I could practically see the question written all over her face before she asked it. “Dad, you’re not still hung up on Mom, are you?”

of her I barked out a laugh, unable to help my response at the ridiculous question. “What? No,” I said firmly. The idea was truly laughable. For once you’re Renee and I had truly burned every bridge when we split. The only remaining tie we’d had was Reagan, and that tie was severed the second day he graduated high school. For another, it had been twelve years since our separation, and it felt like a lifetime ago.

“I didn’t really think so,” Reagan responded. “I just want to make sure you made sure to keep that stuff away from me when I was going through my mess up, but Dad, I’m a grown woman. I am more than capable of the idea of dad being in a relationship.” At that moment, an image of Amelia flashed into my head. God, I had to be rusty. I’d spent an hour rolling around on the beach with a gorgeous, young woman, and I was already thinking about relationships. For all I knew, Amelia just wanted something casual, and that was all for. Reagan chose that moment to break into my thoughts again. “I just want to make sure you’re happy,” she said, then with a mischievous smile, she continued, “and you know, not to feel guilty for leaving your dad that far, as I travel the world.”

I could hear the laughter in her voice, but I was serious when I told her, "You should never feel guilty for living your life."

She looked at me meaningfully. "Exactly."

I smiled at her. "How the hell did you get to be so smart?"

She gave me a small, trickster smile, then answered with a devious expression, "Gigi."

"Ah," I answered, laughing. "Too bad that didn't rub off on me."

Reagan, as usual, changed gears quickly. "I am really excited you're picking up on me, though. I can't wait for you to meet my friend. She just went up to the shower and change really quick, but as soon as she gets down here, she'll tell you both my 'maybe' big news together."

"Maybe big news? Why maybe?" I asked, intrigued.

She sucked in a big, excited breath, and I marveled at how some people never changed. As a little girl, she would come home from school so excited to tell me something that I'd warned her she was going to run out of steam if she didn't slow down. Reagan's zest for life was admirable, and I was sure I was seeing her so excited by possibilities. "It's maybe, because it's not for sure yet. But if it does become a sure thing, this could be huge for my career."

Just then, I heard steps coming down the narrow staircase off the hallway on the kitchen, and Reagan turned excitedly, her face lighting up as she saw a familiar young woman descended down the stairs. My heart rate sped up which I quickly when I saw her. I feared my heart might jump right out of my chest. "As my eyes fell on the same luscious curves that I'd had in my hands just a few hours ago. My eyes met her wide and clearly startled eyes. Her step faltered a bit, but her hand rushed out to grab the railing, saving her from tumbling the last second.

the last second.

old her, “Dad, I’d like you to meet Amy, my best friend,” Reagan went
Amy and threw an arm around Amy’s shoulders, ushering her in
kitchen and right in front of me. She looked suddenly pale, and m
raced hoping to God that my reaction wasn’t as obvious. “Amy, thi
leadpandad, Julian.”

I cleared my throat, struggling to get words out before Reagan
become suspicious. “Amy?”

’re here Reagan forged ahead still, blessedly unaware of anything off. “Yu
stairs tofor Amelia—isn’t that pretty?”

en I can I straightened, nodding my head and holding her gaze as I an
“Beautiful.”

Color bloomed in Amy’s cheeks, a tight, polite smile on her lips. I
: thingsfight the urge to kiss it off her mouth until it turned back into the wi
excitedand the lush, swollen lips from our kissing session earlier. I cleared my
oxygenand stuck out my hand. “Amy,” I said, “it’s a pleasure.” My eyes fell
I lovedto her mouth.

sure... Tentatively, she shook my hand, and even though I knew I should
/ futurethings considered, I couldn’t seem to stop myself from holding onto h

a little longer than appropriate. Reagan had already turned away and
side ofthe fridge to get some drinks, and I rubbed my thumb over the soft
a verythe back of Amy’s hands. Gently, I squeezed her hand, and I felt th
d up sooverwhelming urge to take her into my arms as I did on the beach. I
y chestparted, and she gasped softly. Reagan began to straighten from the Frid
just anto my disappointment, Amy snatched her hand away, moving closer
ltered akitchen counter and to Reagan. I felt the loss of her warmth instantly.

bling at The ridiculousness of the situation crashed down on me with the los
hand in mine, and all the events of the morning processed at rapid

over to through my head. I'd spent the morning making out with a beautiful, into the woman who turned out to be my daughter's best friend...I had my mind daughter's best friend come hard against me and promised her more, so this is my more...*shit*.

My eyes could not help but track Amy, and I could see that she was clearly struggling to act normal and casual in this situation. Understandable there'd been nothing casual about the way she'd responded to my touch, so the way she'd writhed against my hand would be a memory that I would never forget until I was nothing more than dust in the ground.

As I answered, I was the older, more experienced one in this situation, however I still needed to act like it. There was no way Amelia...or Amy I should say I didn't have enough experience to navigate something as delicate as this so I made a wide grin. Though, to be truthful, I wasn't feeling all that confident about it myself. There was no reason that anyone needed to be upset.

briefly I moved toward the kitchen island to make small talk and let Amy know that I was on my own way that things would turn out just fine, when the shrill sound of a pop song rang through the air. "Oops, that's me," Reagan announced, and she handed out her cell phone. She took one look at her screen and her eyes widened as she smiled, transforming her face.

skin on "What is it?" Amy asked, concerned.

the same "I'm not sure yet, but this could be huge," she said excitedly. "Excuse me for a moment." She nearly skipped out of the room as she pressed the phone to her ear, leaving me and Amy all alone.

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at speed

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"I'm not sure yet, but this could be huge," she said excitedly. "Excuse me for a moment." She nearly skipped out of the room as she pressed the phone to her ear, leaving me and Amy all alone.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Amelia

Amelia

When I'd returned to the beach house just a short time before, I was on cloud nine. I hadn't been planning on giving Reagan even the gritty detail of what happened on the beach that morning between me and the gorgeous, mysterious, older man. But I had been excited to share that I had tried something new, and I'd been assertive about what I wanted. The universe had rewarded me with a kind, hot man and the first orgasm I had ever given to myself.

Reagan had returned with bags of food bursting at the seams with some of her own good news. Looking at one another, each of us could tell that the things we had to share would take a while, so we decided to hold off so I could clean up and change out of my wet clothes and she could get lunch set up.

I'd taken a little longer in the shower than I'd planned. Once the water streamed down my body, I found all the sensitive places that Julian had touched waking up again. It was almost like no one had ever touched me before him, and while it was true that no one had touched me *like that*, the way his fingers stroked my face had felt erotic. Standing there under the water, I let my own fingers follow the paths his mouth and fingers had traced, with a giddiness for what might come next making each stroke against my body feel the more powerful.

If I wanted to, I could call or text the number he'd given me right now and I could see him again tonight, maybe. Then, I worried that would be too forward—that he would think I was too eager, and it would turn him off.

He did tell me not to leave him waiting too long, though. I worried about what to do for a while, but as I dried off, I decided that went against the whole point of what I was doing in Malibu and why I did what I did.

beach this morning. Julian himself had encouraged me to be more assertive and go after what I wanted. *So, what exactly did I want?* I asked myself. I smiled to myself in the mirror. I knew exactly what I wanted and I wanted to text him that night.

I felt good about this decision, so now, I just had to try and not talk about it before the evening hit.

I headed down the stairs with a spring in my steps ready to tell about my mysterious beach man when there he was right in the kitchen. Reagan introduced me to her *father*. Even at that moment in my head came to a screeching halt, thinking this had to be some colossal joke, right? Maybe Reagan ran into him out on the beach. I thought this would be funny...except she didn't know yet about what I had done on the beach. *Oh no, oh no, no, no, no, no!*

My mouth turned to dust as Reagan happily walked me towards her father. What the hell did I say to the man? How did I not know? My mind raced, even though somehow in all the time that Reagan and I had been friends, I had never seen a picture of her dad. And I certainly would have never guessed that the man I'd made out with that morning was old enough to have a twenty-or-thirty-year-old daughter.

The relief that coursed through me when he played along and pretended to be my father-in-law was only temporary. I like this was the first time that we were meeting was only temporary. When we touched hands, I thought surely it was obvious what we had.

Reagan seemed none the wiser, however, and I thought I just had to come up with an excuse to run upstairs for a bit and then I would hide. Yup, that was the ticket, I would hide until he went away or at least somewhere I could see him. The more pragmatic side of me knew that was an absolutely ridiculous idea but the only other alternative was staying in this room with this man who

assertive only a couple of hours ago, had his fingers inside me, and now apparently was very much Reagan's father.

So do I. *Oh God, get it together, Amy.*

I sucked in a deep breath reminding myself that I was an adult that I had endured much harder things than this. I would simply wait for an appropriate time to speak to Julian privately and explain to him that the morning's incident should not be reflective of my character, that I loved Reagan, and I thought it best to just pretend like nothing ever happened. There, that sounded pretty reasonable and mature.

Except when Reagan's phone call took her out of the room and left me alone with privacy, all of that reasonable and mature stuff flew right out of my frazzled head.

"Amelia," he said in a calm, deep voice, and I was kind of annoyed. Sexily he said my name, like all of this wasn't hard enough.

I raced. Before he could continue, I rushed forward with an apology, hoping to ever see him make this all go away as quickly as possible, even though it hurt my pride. He completely threw away what had happened that morning between us. "Look," I blurted, "what happened obviously was not something I usually do, and I'm really sorry if you got a bad impression of me. I'm just asking if we forget anything that happened and maybe start over?" I babbled because I was unnerved by the way he studied my face. His eyes dropped to where I was twisting my anxious hands together.

After a long pause that made me nearly break out into a cold sweat, he simply said, "No."

I met his eyes, utterly dismayed. "No? What do you mean no?"

He stepped closer, and it took everything I had in me not to back up. I stood my ground, not wanting to appear even more skittish. "First

arently, Amy, you have nothing to apologize for. We are two consenting adults engaged in something that I have no intention of forgetting about, and I think I could, do you?" I looked up at him with wide eyes, my heart thumping in my chest. I couldn't answer that. I couldn't tell him that I was remembering the way he looked at me, the way he made me feel for the first time in a long time. A person didn't just forget a moment that made them feel so special. When I didn't answer, he went on. "And for another thing, Amy, I'm perfectly happy to step right in front of me. I could still smell the salt air and it was clinging to his skin. "It would hardly do for me to forget what we did together. Julian has every intention of doing it again. Are you saying you don't want to be asked."

"It's not an issue of whether I want to," I said in a hushed voice. "It's just how can't."

"Why not?" he asked quickly, his voice dropping to the same octave as before when he'd been murmuring encouraging words to make my heart pound violently against his hand.

When we were in the kitchen, I opened my mouth to point out the obvious when the obvious point was already made, sailing back into the kitchen. Reagan was practically glowing and so I was going to tell her about whatever it was she wanted to tell us that she didn't notice how long we were standing. "You guys, oh my God, I have so much to tell you. The news I was 'maybe' news is officially official."

"Ah," Julian said, "so, I finally get to hear what the big news is."

He said "You know that internship that I applied for? That one right in Malibu?" she asked. I remembered which one she was talking about.

I had applied to a couple of internships at a couple of law offices, one in Malibu, but I had gotten the one back home but was determined to get one in Malibu, and when that happened, she decided to just take the s

Its whooff and hang out at the beach house. “The office called and left me a n or do I yesterday and said that the intern they’d selected changed his mind at uddingsecond. They wanted to know if I would still be interested. Well, of c ould becalled them right back, but I could never get a hold of anyone, so we’ the restplaying phone tag, but that was them. I got it!”

eel that “That’s amazing, sweetheart!” Julian said, sweeping his daughter ny,” hebear hug.

id sand “That is awesome, Rea, congratulations!” I told her.

when I She moved partially out of her dad’s embrace and beckoned me ove to?” heover here, girl, this is a group hug moment.” *Really?* I thought to m

put a smile on my face and entered the fray, trying my best to ge e. “WeReagan’s arm, but Julian’s arm slipped around my waist. I was alai

how quickly his touch could take me instantly back to the morning. I’ tave ashad anybody that had had that effect on me. The man was like catnip, e comemy God, what was wrong with me? I was hugging my best friend .

man whose hand I humped just hours before, who just happened to it camebest friend’s father. Could my life get any stranger?

excited I broke free from the group hug and asked Reagan, “When do you st

w close Her smile dropped, and she looked sheepish. “That’s the thing. I u—mytotally last-minute thing, so they need me the day after tomorrow. I

days a week—I’m so sorry, Ames, I know I promised we would spen this time together this summer but—”

here in I waved her off with a dismissive hand. “Reagan, don’t worry. This Reaganopportunity, and you’ve got to take it. Besides, I’m a grown woma re backhandle myself for a few days out of the week.”

ried the “I know, I just feel bad. I made such a big deal about showing you summertime down here,” she said.

message “Sweetheart, Amy is right. This is a huge opportunity for you—the last can’t be passed up. Besides, don’t worry about Amy—I’ll make sure you’re entertained.”

ve been My heart started racing again at Julian’s words. I’m sure it was only to reassure Reagan, but it sounded like a dark promise to me.

into a “Thanks, Dad, you’re the best,” Reagan said, hugging her dad. On my shoulder, Julian gave me a look that sent my imagination into overdrive.

I’d come down to Malibu to spend a fun-filled summer with my friends. Instead, I would be spending it passing sex-fueled glances to my dad. What the hell had I just gotten myself into?

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“Sweetheart, Amy is right. This is a huge opportunity for you—one that can’t be passed up. Besides, don’t worry about Amy—I’ll make sure she’s entertained.”

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Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Julian

Julian

The girls spent the afternoon sightseeing and shopping but came home the evening as promised because I'd told them I would treat them to dinner to celebrate Reagan's new internship. I was proud of my daughter's accomplishments. The law firm she would be interning for was a prestigious one, and it would definitely beef up her resume. As much as I wanted to celebrate this milestone with her, I was also hoping to catch up with Amy.

After they left, I paced in my room, realizing that I had come out stronger. I didn't want Amy to feel like she was trapped here with me. That was the last thing I wanted actually.

Mentally, I scrolled back through the last couple of years. Reagan had spoken on the phone several times a week. I'd heard about her friend countless times. Reagan had described her as shy but funny and intelligent (her words). She'd also told me before she drove down to Malibu that her friend would be coming with her because she'd had a really rough few months and a nasty breakup. I knew a little something about breakups, and I'd told her at the time that I thought Malibu would be a great idea for her friend. What better way to get over an idiot than by spending a couple of months in the sand and under the sun?

I'd even looked forward to finally meeting the infamous Amy. I had heard many good things about her, including how she nursed Reagan through her own heartaches and how she cheered her on during her more difficult times.

But never in a million years did I suspect that Amelia, my nymphomaniac pulled from the sea, would actually be Amy. The first initial thought that ran through my head was a surprising sadness because, obviously, I could

pursue my daughter's best friend. Lord knew I was not about to become a cliché. But every second that passed in Amy's presence led me more to the same question? Would it be so bad if I still pursued her? Situations like this one weren't black and white. There were other things to consider...like the fact that I couldn't stop thinking about her. Plus, in which help that now I knew for certain that Amy...Amelia...had to be the person because Reagan had always been a great judge of character. I followed my daughter's instincts.

"Calm down, Julian," I told myself. I was acting like a teenager for what was sake. I sucked in a deep breath. I was trying too hard to figure out even ahead of time. It was a hazard of my job, constantly feeling like I needed to strategize, but it wasn't some contract dispute or some other legal fight. This was my daughter...and her best friend. *Damn, Julian, you know how I pick them.*

Malibu If this summer was going to go smoothly, then everybody needed to be a little less shitty especially me. I'd take the girls out to dinner and just try to have a normal meal...and try not to think about how Amy had felt squeezing my fingers. *Fuck, I was in trouble.*

ending a

The place was buzzing, but thanks to my connections, the three of us procured a relatively private table. This place was supposed to have the best seafood in town, and I wanted to spare no expense to celebrate Reagan's graduation. I'd taken this momentous opportunity. Reagan, as usual, was talking a mile a minute, asking me questions about the dos and don'ts in a law office. Most of them, she knew already. I could tell she was nervous about starting the next day. Amy, for her part,

me that stayed fairly quiet, directing all of her comments toward Reagan. I could blame her really, but I couldn't help but wonder if it was because I'd made her that uncomfortable or if she was avoiding looking or talking about things to because she felt the same, carnal pull I did—hell, maybe it was a combination of the two.

We were only twenty minutes into the dinner when Reagan got a trusted phone call from the law office wanting to go over a quick itinerary for the next day. She slid out of the booth and toward the front patio of the restaurant so she could hear, leaving me and Amy alone once again. I decided I'd do everything going to let that uncomfortable silence fall over us, so as soon as Reagan headed out of sight, I faced Amy. "Amy, look, I just wanted to let you know I'm in a bit of a jam. I know I'm a bit of a pain in the ass, but I'm in a bit of a jam. I know how worried about Reagan finding out about what happened, but you got to tell her she's not going to hear it from me."

I saw her shoulders sag in relief, her voice was quiet and tense with relief. "I'm in a bit of a jam," she answered, "Julian, this morning was—" "Amazing," I finished for her. I may be settled on not pushing her, but she still was not going to let her just sweep it under the rug.

She blushed and admitted, "Yes, it was." She cleared her throat and then continued, "But Reagan is my best friend, and I love her. I know you can understand that. She's always talking about what a great dad she has, and she knows all too well what it's like to feel hurt and embarrassed by someone she thought you knew, and I'd die before I'd make her feel like that."

Damn. I sat thoughtfully for a long moment. Finally, after a long moment, I said, "Well, I see my daughter was not exaggerating when she told me about you, but I'm in a bit of a jam. And you're right, I'd cut off my right arm before I'd willingly hurt my daughter." I scrubbed a hand over my face. "Look,

couldn't last thing I want to do is pressure you, I just know when I've
made something good, and Amy?"

to me "Yes?"

ination "This morning, I found something incredible, so you'll have to excuse
if I'm reticent about losing that. That's also why I can't just forget about
another happened, but I won't push. We're both here to relax, and that's what
for the should do, okay?"

restaurant She nodded, the relief still clear on her face. "Thank you."

was not "Oh, and Amy?"

Jan was "Yes?"

er that I "Let me know if you want any more help in the water while you're
you're told her. I tried to ignore the fresh jolt of want that shot through
me especially when her cheeks reddened and a small private smile tugged at
her lips.

then she Reagan bounded back in, her face lit with excitement. "I'm so sorry
you wouldn't believe all they have planned for me tomorrow."

er, but I "Oh, I'd believe it," I said, thinking of my own law school days and
grunt work I did just to get one tiny space closer to my goal. "Fill us
up, girl," I encouraged, and Reagan proceeded to do just that. Ever the
knower she also went into a long list of suggestions for Amy, even though
she has. I assured her she was perfectly capable of keeping herself busy. I couldn't
do you but pick up on all the musical items on Reagan's list. I seemed to remember

Reagan mentioning that her roommate was majoring in some sort
of music. When I asked for more clarification, I listened raptly as she shyly explained
how that she was still struggling to figure out exactly what she wanted to do
before her degree. She liked playing, and Reagan insisted that she was good
enough to play professionally, but she'd also been volunteering at the youth

found teaching piano to kids. When Reagan brought up the kids, Amy transformed.

I'd been dismayed to see her retreating back into her shell after our conversation. But as she shared about her work with at-risk youth and how much it meant to help them to learn how to play an instrument and how rewarding it was to watch their confidence grow, my heart broke open. I could just picture helping the kids, and it was further proof that she was the type of woman who responded so strongly to helping others, at-risk kids no less. That revelation just made my already burgeoning feelings for her that much more complicated.

After watching her go on about all the progress she was seeing at the center, Reagan and I exchanged amused expressions. "What?" Amy asked herself-consciously.

Reagan rolled her eyes. "Nothing, Amy. I know that you're still concerned about the guys, but to the outside world, it seems like a no-brainer. I mean, the way you talk about the kids..."

"Yeah," she said while smiling. "I guess you're right."

"Just remember," I told her, "There's nothing saying you can't change your mind if you choose one thing and decide in the middle of it that it's not for you."

Reagan laughed. "Yes, preach!" she exclaimed. I raised an eyebrow. "I'm just saying, Amy stuck herself with her deadbeat ex-boyfriend for far too long after she'd told me she told me he didn't really make sense of anything."

"Reagan!" Amy hissed.

"What? It's just my dad, we can be open here," Reagan reassured her. I could tell that Amy was embarrassed.

's face "Reagan, maybe she doesn't want to talk about it. I can understand
said gently.

ur talk. "Well, I don't think it's good for her to stuff all that hurt and e
seemed down. What Michael did was really messed up and—"

was to "Excuse me," Amy said, removing the napkin from her lap and thro
ure her on the table as her chair scraped across the hardwood floor when she
an whoit back. She looked even more embarrassed by the commotion th
relation caused. "I just need to use the restroom," she muttered, then scurrie
i more towards the back of the restaurant.

Reagan looked after her, worried, and started to rise from her seat, b
the recmy hand over hers to stop her. "Just let her be for a while, sweetie."
y asked Reagan sank back down in her seat. "I really mucked that one up
I?"

inflicted, I shook my head at her and smiled. I loved my daughter, but she
ou lightsame bull in a china shop mentality that I did sometimes. While it
quality that would serve her well as a lawyer, it wasn't always the bes
have when it came to comforting a friend. "I know that's not what you
changeto do, Reagan, but you have to remember that people deal with b
it's not differently."

"I know, it's just that Michael was such a waste of space. What s
row insaw in him I still don't understand, and I don't want her wasting on
yfriendsecond on that idiot. So, I guess I just thought encouraging her to get i
her feelher system might help," she said, then looked down at her glass. "I
too hard."

"Your heart was in the right place, sweetheart," I told her.
er, but I She sighed. "My boneheaded move aside, what do you think of Amy
I almost choked on the sip of water I'd just taken. *Jesus, Julian, I t*

that,” It was a perfectly innocent question, yet the film reel of that morning around on the beach with Amy in my arms kept rolling in my head.

emotion I cleared my throat. “She seems as wonderful as you described.”

Reagan smiled. “I just knew you would like her. I’m really lucky I’m knowing it when I did. You know, Mom warned me it could be like a viper shoved college, and she wasn’t lying, but then I met Amy. I just knew we’d be noise friends. She doesn’t have a deceptive bone in her body.”

d away No, it would appear she didn’t, and that just made me like her even dammit.

ut I put Reagan looked at me with a sheepish expression. “You think it’s been enough now I can go apologize without cramping her space?”

, didn’t I shrugged. “I don’t know. Surely, you two have had disagreements. How long does it usually take to make up?”

had the Reagan gave me a relieved smile from my use of logic. “I’ll be right there as he said, jumping up from the table. My mind spun as I watched her go towards the back of the restaurant to where Amy had disappeared. I meant couldn’t help but think about what it might have been that this guy Michael had done to Amy. Reagan didn’t think much of him, so I knew he had to be trash. But I was also concerned with just how quickly I was ready to get out of here ever out this Michael guy when I’d barely met Amy. I really needed to get a grip on myself. I was acting like some punch-drunk teenager.

t out of Reagan and Amy emerged from the back of the restaurant, and I shifted my seat, hoping to God that my emotions weren’t written all over my face.

“All is forgiven...I think,” Reagan announced as the two took their seats.

“I told you, Rea, it’s no big deal. I just needed to use the restroom,” Reagan insisted as she took a sip of her drink. I wondered how often she thought nothing was wrong when someone had hurt her feelings.

rolling Reagan looked like she was about to argue, but I shot her a look, and she closed her mouth. The rest of the dinner went well enough. Reagan vented about all the things she was hoping to do in her internship, and I met her surreptitious eye on Amy. She doted on Reagan, and it was obvious that the two were friends. They seemed to even each other out. Reagan had been boisterous and ambitious, and Amy was much calmer and supportive with a very comforting nature...and I hated myself for the way that dinner made me feel even more. I guess I hadn't realized just how much I'd been relying on that comfort lately.

When I dialed back into what my daughter was saying, kicking myself for being so easily lost in my own thoughts. "Ames, what about—"

before. "Reagan, really, it's fine. I'm a full-grown woman completely capable of entertaining myself," Amy was assuring her.

"I know that," Reagan whined. "I just want to make sure you actually have some fun...and not just hanging out in your room listening to music" she said pointedly.

"You just focus on your new gig, and I will handle myself," Amy said to Reagan.

"Amy's right, sweetheart. Don't worry about us. If it makes you feel a little better, I'll check in with Amy and make sure she's having some fun," I assured my daughter. Amy looked at me sharply, but I just smiled at them like nothing was amiss, and at that moment, nothing was.

I promised Amy I wouldn't push, and I'd promised Reagan I'd make sure she had some fun—both things could be true at the same time...couldn't they?" Amy

insisted

Reagan looked like she was about to argue, but I shot her a look, and she closed her mouth. The rest of the dinner went well enough. Reagan went on about all the things she was hoping to do in her internship, and I kept a surreptitious eye on Amy. She doted on Reagan, and it was obvious why the two were friends. They seemed to even each other out. Reagan had always been boisterous and ambitious, and Amy was much calmer and supportive with a very comforting nature...and I hated myself for the way that drew me to her even more. I guess I hadn't realized just how much I'd been craving that comfort lately.

I dialed back into what my daughter was saying, kicking myself for getting so easily lost in my own thoughts. "Ames, what about—"

"Reagan, really, it's fine. I'm a full-grown woman completely capable of entertaining myself," Amy was assuring her.

"I know that," Reagan whined. "I just want to make sure you actually have some fun...and not just holing up in your room listening to music" she said pointedly.

"You just focus on your new gig, and I will handle myself," Amy told Reagan.

"Amy's right, sweetheart. Don't worry about us. If it makes you feel any better, I'll check in with Amy and make sure she's having some fun," I assured my daughter. Amy looked at me sharply, but I just smiled at the both of them like nothing was amiss, and at that moment, nothing was. I'd promised Amy I wouldn't push, and I'd promised Reagan I'd make sure Amy had some fun—both things could be true at the same time...couldn't they?

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Amelia

Amelia

A gentle breeze swept past the sheers, and the salty ocean breeze caressed my nose. The reflections of the stars on the water created a fairytale in the dark room. I laid in bed in my tank top and panties, staring at the ceiling. I should have been drinking in this beautiful environment. I should have been taking in great, big, deep breaths of the sea air and let it cleanse my weary spirit. Instead, I was tossing and turning, fantasizing about my best friend's father. Somewhere along the way, my life had turned into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

There was no place that was safe from the memory of Julian's hands on my hips, and what was worse was that deep down, I knew that I didn't really want any place to be safe from that memory. He was right at what we'd shared that morning had been incredible, and I'd known in that instant that it had taken place that it would be a memory that I would carry for the rest of my life. But how was I supposed to reconcile that memory with the all too grating fact that the first man to make me truly feel like a woman was also the father of my most treasured friend.

I thought at first when we were on the way to dinner that it was a mounting embarrassment that was getting to me. That was one of the reasons I'd wanted to come here in the first place—to leave the humiliation that seemed to be waiting for me around every corner back home.

As dinner progressed and I got to know Julian better, I began to realize with increasing alarm that it wasn't the embarrassment playing with my nerves. It was the fact that I genuinely liked this man, and if he was Reagan's father, I would be currently having long text conversations with him and mooning over him to my best friend.

And just to make things extra complicated, our little romp on the assailed that morning had awoken sexual urges that I'd never really known before. It wasn't like I'd never had those urges at all, but other than fangirling at the occasional musician or celebrity, I'd never really been able to have those feelings about someone I actually knew. That was part of the reason I was putting it back from Michael. I just felt that I should be wanting intimacy as much as he seemed to, and he'd made sure to make me feel like I was weird for wanting into an whole thing. When I'd shared with Reagan about my issue, she'd maintained that maybe if "dumbass Michael" (as she so often referred to him) would actually put forth some effort, then maybe my lady parts would stop snapping shut like a steel trap every time he decided to get handsy.

dinner: The thing was, Julian didn't have to try all that hard. He had just shown himself...hot, reassuring, comforting Julian, and let me just say, I had never cherish underestimated just how turned on a person could be by comfort of all sorts. I'd felt safe in his arms, safe enough to let go and just feel what he was doing to me. Though I knew I was still young, I knew enough to realize

feeling truly safe with someone wasn't something that just happened overnight. And with the way he kept sneaking looks at me throughout dinner, I knew he felt there was definitely unfinished business between us. When Julian promised that he wouldn't push or let Reagan know that something happened between us, I'd felt a mixture of relief and panic. Relief because I had no idea how that information would affect Reagan, but I could only imagine that it would be really, really bad. The panic reared its ugly head at the thought that I was going to have to be around this man for the next few weeks because he absolutely wanted to touch me...a lot, but that my sole job was to make sure we stayed away from each other.

No, the real danger was not in Reagan finding out about that mornin

the beach real danger was in keeping my hands to myself and my thoughts off to the side. His broad shoulders filled out his shirt, or the way his kind, slate-colored eyes darkened in desire when they'd looked down at me on the sand that morning. So, these were the uncontrollable urges that so many of my friends and I held classmates had claimed over the years. The "I knew I shouldn't do that but I couldn't help myself" line I'd heard cited so often now actually made sense to me.

He had. My mind was dragged back towards the vision of Julian again and I thought to myself, it might have been like if we had gone further that morning than just a few minutes on the sand. I wondered what he looked like beneath those trunks. If the

feeling I'd felt pressed against my thigh had been any indication, then I knew it must have been just as impressive below the belt as he was above it. What I really couldn't seem to wrestle my mind away from, however, was how he would have felt. How would it have felt to have him inside me with his beautiful face looking down into mine and everything moved together?

As my brain spun out of control, my fingers wandered down my body until they were beneath the elastic band of my panties. When I touched myself, I found I was already drenched and that it would only take a few expert strokes to drive myself off. I could practically *feel* him, and it was driving me crazy. A little more...and that's when I heard a rhythmic thumping in the distance beyond my window.

My hands stilled, and I listened carefully with a wildly thumping heart. There it was again, except this time, I swore I heard the sound of breathing. Slowly, I removed my hands from myself and threw back my head. The

the way covers. *I should stay exactly where I was*, I told myself, but my restless eyes and curiosity got the best of me.

morning. When we'd first arrived, Reagan had been excited to show me the kids and room had its own personal balcony, and I'd been delighted myself. , but I with her rigid routine that as soon as her self-appointed bedtime hit the sense was tucked snugly beneath her covers getting her winks in like it was

At the time, I'd hoped the same would be true of her father because what it wouldn't feel self-conscious about wandering out here at night and tangering the beauty of this place. I had a myriad of fantasies about sitting out here bulge listening to music or doing yoga in the moonlight, but so far into the he was Reagan and I had done so much running around, I'd found myself wouldn't be exhausted for such things by the time I went to bed. Tonight, however t inside fevered dreams were obviously awake ones, making the noises outside me, but more intriguing, yet worrisome.

As quietly as possible, I opened the back door and stepped out onto the balcony. There was a comfy looking wicker chair that I bypassed to

the railing and scope out the beach below me. In the middle of the week and the place was mostly deserted. Far out into the distance, I could hear a sound that sounded like a small party. There was laughing and singing, but this close to the house, it was mostly quiet except for that thumping and heavy breathing. Just a

My eyes finally adjusted to the dark, and I could make out the outline of a man... a very well-built man. He appeared to be working out, alternating

between jumping jacks, burpees, and push-ups. I'd never seen someone work out that hard before, and I had to admire his ability to do it in the dark, no less. The man shifted into overdrive and worked even faster, his grunts and heavy breathing finding their way to my ears, the sound oddly titillating. God

had gotten into me today?

essness That question was quickly answered by the man's movement into the hallway. The moonlight shone upon his sweat-drenched back, and my breath caught in my throat because I recognized that back. He turned then and met my gaze. I knew I wished I could make my feet move or my eyes tear themselves away from him, but when those slate-colored eyes nailed me to the spot, I felt paralyzed and helpless to turn away.

Then, in the expanse between us, it was not awkwardness that was felt, but a tension that was what I'd expected. Instead, there was a myriad of feelings and emotions that just hung there, made evident by the glistening sweat on his chest. He stayed where he was, way he stopped and held my gaze. He stepped closer, and if I went down those stairs, I would be in his arms in a matter of seconds. I wanted to go to him, and that urgent desire scared me to death, which finally made my feet move. As I started to back up back into my room, I saw the resignation glaze over his features. As I turned to go in, I heard him say softly, "Goodnight, Amelia."

stand at

knight,

at what In one of the rare times since I'd known her, I was up and at it close to Reagan's morning run. I just had to get out of that house where I knew the object of my desire was so close yet so far from me. So, I left Reagan alone in the house that I had some errands to run and that I'd probably be back by lunch and I hoped to God that when I got back that her father would be busy. He really told me before we came to Malibu that he had his own office in the house and that he'd probably be working a good deal of the time there. Now, I was hoping that wasn't a hyperbole. We needed some time to let this whole situation blow over.

the light. At this point, I was almost kind of wishing he'd been pushier. Might in would have been easier to blow him off then, but he had to be kept in my gaze. Irrespective. While I was deeply appreciative of that, it was hard knowing from was being that good when he appeared to want more. Normally, I would have second guessed myself, told myself that I was reading into things, but the way he'd looked at me, there was no mistaking what he felt. From the moment I'd met him the morning before, he'd been nothing but open and longing. Sure, he hadn't mentioned having a daughter when we'd first met, but and the fair, there hadn't really been an opportune time during that little meeting to say, "Hey, I have a kid that's close to your age." Besides, I wasn't so badly that would have made one bit of difference with the instant chemistry we shared.

I stopped by the small rec center I had spied when Reagan and I had been running errands when we first got here. Sure enough, there was a community board just inside the double doors advertising various classes and events. I didn't take long to find what I had in mind: surf lessons. If I was going to stay true to my original mission in coming here, then I needed to push forward, despite the strange happenings of the last two weeks. I recognized my own knee-jerk reaction to retreat back into my room because of fear of what could happen, but I was resolved to not let that situation stop me from my original plans. And I could not think of a better way to get used to the ocean waters and out of my shell than to go to the beach. Especially now that Reagan was going to be otherwise occupied for four days out of the week, this was the perfect diversion from the hot guy at the house problem I seemed to be having.

I sat in my rental and filled out the sign-up application on my phone. The confirmation email gave me a small list of supplies to have for the

Maybe itlesson, which would be the following day. I followed the car's GPS and located a local sports equipment store and made my purchases. Then, driving my way to a local market and gathered what I would need for a surprise I'd have putting together for Reagan.

But after This internship was a big deal for Reagan. She'd only applied for two from the internships, and the one in Malibu had been the one she'd really had her heart set on. When they'd chosen someone else, she'd been so upset, and she'd spent that night in our dorm room gorging on pints of Ben and Jerry's, watching several rom-coms—our go-to for hard days or situations. I was so sure that the universe had smiled on her and made sure she actually got the internship was huge. I wanted to pull out the stops for her, so

continuing with a tradition that Reagan had started not too long after we'd moved in together. I'd been stressing about this huge project in our community classes and was convinced that I was not only going to botch the whole thing, but that I would also fail the class on top of it. So, Reagan had gotten up early and snuck off to the store. Not only did she come back with a cart full of groceries, but she'd also smuggled in a waffle iron, which was strictly forbidden in the dorm rooms. Then, she proceeded to make me this extravagant "good luck" breakfast with waffles, syrup, fresh fruit, and whipped cream. She'd guaranteed me that all that sugar in my system was sure to make me do well on my project, and sure enough, I'd kick-started my surfing on that project. From that point forward, anytime that either one of us was doing something big, the "good luck" breakfast had to happen. It was a beach tradition, and I would be remiss in my best friend duties if I didn't carry on the tradition.

When I finally returned to the house, I was relieved to find that Julie was there. The fact that he was working in his office, though I would be lying if I said I didn't see him first seeing him. I pushed those thoughts out of my mind and focused on the

until I We went out to shop for outfits appropriate for Reagan for working in
I made office since all she'd brought with her were vacation clothes. We man
e I was make a whole day of it, opting to grab dinner together at this sma
fusion place. We laughed as we sipped on margaritas. "I'm glad
for two having so much fun, Ames. It's good to see you loosening up."

er heart "Thanks for letting me come with you. It's absolutely gorgeous
we had here," I told her.

y's and "I know, and it's already been quite eventful. I mean, I get this inte
the fact you're already crushing your vacation goals. Though I have to say, a
got that as I'm thrilled that I got the gig, I'm kind of jealous I can't go surfi
I was you tomorrow." She smiled.

er we'd "I don't know if I'm going to be surfing so much tomorrow as just
of my down, but it's part of the process." I laughed.

le thing Reagan put her hand to her chest and gave me an exaggerated
up extra expression. "My little Amy is growing up." She sniffed in mock
rap ton rolled my eyes at her. "Who knows? At this rate, maybe we'll get you
was an action before the summer's out," she teased, and I nearly choked
o make margarita. At my response, she chided me, "Oh come on, don't rule
h fruit, possibility."

system "I didn't say I had," I said, hoping we could change the subject soon
ed butt "I mean, hey, it doesn't even have to be anything serious. There's

us had saying you couldn't have a little summer fling. I mean, look around u
first. I said, sweeping her arm around towards the people walking up and do
n. boardwalk clearly visible to us from our place at our outdoor table. "I
an was, good God, everybody here is gorgeous, it's a joke. You might just f
i't miss guy you want to take your V-card here."

Reagan. "Mm-hmm," I said noncommittally as I sucked down my m.

in a lawthrough my straw, a little harder this time. I was not a good liar, and I had pretty much shared damn near everything with one another. I'd love to be able to tell her that I did meet someone gorgeous and that I would happily have him take my virginity and then I'd be a virgin again, but the betrayal of that was too much for me to bear.

She reached across the table, putting her hand over mine. "I just want to be happy, Amy."

I felt a lump form in my throat, and I felt like the biggest asshole ever for thinking the way I was about her father. It had to stop. I cleared my throat awkwardly and squeezed her hand back. "I know, Reagan, and I am not going to believe it or not. I mean, c'mon—I've got wind in my hair, sun on my face, and I'm in the best company—who wouldn't be thrilled with that?"

Never mind the fact that all of me craved to be elsewhere at that moment, doing things with her father that would most assuredly wreck our friendship. I wanted to cry a little, but I didn't want to cry on my face. I wanted to get out the door and go home.

nothing
is," she
own the
I mean,
find the
argarita

through my straw, a little harder this time. I was not a good liar, and Reagan and I had pretty much shared damn near everything with one another since we'd met. I'd love to be able to tell her that I did meet someone gorgeous and kind man and that I would happily have him take my virginity and then some, but the betrayal of that was too much for me to bear.

She reached across the table, putting her hand over mine. "I just want you to be happy, Amy."

I felt a lump form in my throat, and I felt like the biggest asshole ever for thinking the way I was about her father. It had to stop. I cleared my throat awkwardly and squeezed her hand back. "I know, Reagan, and I am happy, believe it or not. I mean, c'mon—I've got wind in my hair, sun on my skin, and I'm in the best company—who wouldn't be thrilled with that?"

Never mind the fact that all of me craved to be elsewhere at that moment, doing things with her father that would most assuredly wreck our friendship.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Julian

Julian

Considering this was my vacation, I didn't have to wake up this early, but old habits die hard. It wasn't like I was getting the sleep anyway. The last two nights I stayed up well into the night working as hard as I could, though that still was not enough to drive away the urges for Amy.

Yesterday, I gave in and checked in with the office. I'd promised before I got here to only spend an hour or two a week on work, but that promise the day before as a means to stay away from the one person I desperately wanted to spend time with.

None of these feelings made sense. A few days before, I'd been struggling with the worry that I'd never find anyone that interested me enough to pursue a relationship or anything even close to one. Now, in such a short time frame, I'd managed to not only meet someone who sparked feelings in me I'd never felt before, but I'd also managed to find the one woman who was unequivocally off limits to me. There was no way I could be that foolish in my forties who went after one of his grown daughter's friends...except for the fact that every instinct in me told me that was exactly what I needed to do.

Now, it was the first day of Reagan's internship, and I was glad I was awake early. It would allow me to revive a tradition that I'd started with my daughter on her first day of school. She'd been so nervous to start school that I'd made sure to make her a special "good luck" breakfast consisting of her favorites and told her that with this breakfast in her belly she was guaranteed to have a successful day. I'd made that breakfast on the first day of every year until she started college and for every big event in between.

I quickly dressed and was in the middle of brushing my teeth when the stinkin' smell of bacon wafted into my room. I followed the smell and the sight that met my eyes caused a tightness in my chest: a red-cheeked Amy with a smudge streaked across her t-shirt as she flipped a pancake. There was a platter of my bacon set off to the side, as well as several bowls with cut-up fruit. I

she'd looked sexy in that bikini, but watching her make breakfast for myself some sort of primal call inside of me.

I blew a kiss. She almost dropped the pancake she was flipping when she saw me. I was watching her with my hands in my pockets. I couldn't blame her for being startled. I could only imagine what I must have looked like to her. A grinning revealed even a little of what I was feeling. Before she could say anything to me, I asked, "The good luck breakfast?"

a short "She smiled shyly. "Yeah, how did you know?"

ling in "I started making this breakfast for her when she was a girl," I said. I instantly regretted it when I saw her dismayed expression.

guy in "Oh my god, I'm so sorry, I should've known it started with you. I meant to mean to step on your toes—" she said, seeming genuinely distressed.

eded to "Amy, Amy, it's ok. You're not stepping on my toes. I'm glad that you were able to carry on the tradition with you," I said, moving to her side. I went to the kitchen island. "You mind if I help?"

with my "Yes, of course, I mean it is your kitchen," she said.

rol, so I "As long as you're staying here, it's your kitchen, too. I want you to be all her comfortable," I said, grabbing a pancake and some fruit to make the ranteedface pancakes I always made for Reagan when she was little. I saw her schooling my artwork. "Are you jealous of the artistry?" I asked, and to my delight, she laughed. I looked at her in mock outrage. "You laugh,

hen they have you know that this pancake smiley face has been featured in all the right go-to culinary magazines.”

th flour She raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to believe that when you plate of the most important part?” she asked in a teasing manner as she grabbed a slice of strawberry and tucked it underneath my whipped cream smile, so the set off it looked like its tongue was sticking out.

“Well played, Amy. I should be wounded, but I’m just glad my dad and I have been able to enjoy the elevated version of these pancakes for the last few years,” I said as I whipped up some scrambled eggs and tried to keep my eyes off her chest. I thought to myself, which was difficult considering the way Amy’s full breasts looked beneath her t-shirt as she whisked the pancake batter. Never in my life had I thought I’d find pancakes so goddamn sexy, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to look at a stack again without thinking about the way her chest jiggled.

Amy and I fell into a companionable silence, though I could feel her nerves, which I both loved and hated. I did not want her to feel the loneliness I didn’t want to feel, but it was also nice to know that she was still affectionate towards me, especially after seeing her on the balcony the night of our dinner out. In that moment, it seemed like all the feelings we’d tripped over since we discovered how we were both connected by Reagan just unfurled between us under the moonlit night. I wanted her, that much was clear, and though there was a distance in between us, I thought I could feel her longing and her connection to me. By day, however, she mostly avoided me. When we did smile at each other, our interactions were overly polite, and it was driving me crazy. I wanted to see the woman I met on the beach, her bright, determined smile, the passion brimming over from her smile. When I’d caught her watching me from the balcony, I saw that woman again, and I would do just about anything to see her more often.

l of the “It’s nice of you to do this for Reagan. You’re a considerate friend,
her as I pulled plates out of the cabinet.

l forgot “It’s the least I can do for her really. Besides, today is a big day, and
bbbed ato send her off with a belly full of love,” Amy said as she gathered
so thatand napkins to set out.

“A belly full of love huh?”

aughter She laughed. “Yeah, I know it sounds kind of silly, but it was sor
ast fewmy grandmother always said. She would always make meals big en
ny eyesfeed a football team, even though there were only four of us.” She w
swayedrelaxing visibly as she talked about her grandmother and the rest
fe did Ifamily. I learned that she had a little brother who just started high sch
able tothat he was mad at her for not coming home for the summer beca
wanted her to teach him how to play the guitar. She guessed fr
eel hercomplaining that he was trying to impress a girl.

east bit “Well, I guess you have to give the kid credit for wanting to go th
ected...mile. It’s funny what people will do when they’ve found someone w
In thatall the buttons for them,” I said, giving her a sidelong glance.

covered Our gazes held for a moment, and to my anguish and my satisfac
in thecaught her eyes flickering to my mouth. “Amelia,” I said huskily.

e was a “Oh my god, I cannot believe you two,” Reagan's voice pierced t
nflictedthe fog of my desire for Amy. Amy turned away from me guiltily
ee eachturned slowly to face the music, sucking in a deep breath in anticipa
nuts. Iwhat would come next.

eyes... “Reagan, I can explain—” Amy started, but Reagan just laughed
ing memoved closer.

t about “There’s not much to explain about my favorite people making a go
breakfast. You all are the best,” she said as she grabbed a plate and

” I told filling her plating, chattering a mile a minute about what lay in store for the law firm. Talking around mouthfuls of pancake and bacon, I wanted to worry aloud as Amy gave her words of encouragement and I gave utensil-minute advice for how to deal with persnickety lawyers. The whole looked suspiciously domestic, and I could almost pretend that my weren’t itching to get on with my daughter’s best friend.

nothing I scolded myself mentally, refocusing my attention on Reagan. “I’m enough to glad I have you both to come home to after this. Between your cheerfulness went on, Reagan nodded towards Amy, “and your advice,” she said, referring to of her feel like I’ve got a leg up compared to the other intern.” She smiled cool and then her eyes widened.

ause he “What’s wrong?” Amy asked, concerned.

om his “I just saw what time it was,” Reagan said, nodding her head towards the clock on the microwave. She wiped her mouth with the napkin Amy had brought extra for her and scooted out of her seat, carrying her dishes to the sink. “Who hit to make sure I’m the first one there. You know, let them know I’m really work hard.”

ction, I I smiled at her, pride swelling in my chest as she went to grab her things. It had happened too fast—her growing up. But I was so impressed with the thorough young woman she’d grown into. I glanced over at Amy and saw amusement, but I was amused that she had the same smile on her face. No matter what happened, or didn’t happen between us, I was glad my daughter had a friend who seemed almost as invested in Reagan’s happiness as I was. Those friendships as she of friendships were important to have and was something I hadn’t had in much time in when I was younger. I wish I had. It would have been good luck to have someone to lean on during the divorce, or just someone to share a breeze with. I think part of me really wanted to find that in a partner.

or her at Reagan reappeared, decked out in a tailored blazer, slacks, and a Reagan-button-down shirt. She'd swept her hair up neatly into a no-nonsense bun. She tugged nervously at her blazer. "What do you think?" she asked, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Beautiful, sweetheart," I told her.

"Ditto," said Amy. "You look like you're ready to nail a perp on the spot."

"But—"

Amy put up a hand. "I know, I know, that's not what you're going to do at us, doing there."

"Honestly, I'll be lucky if I see anything past the inside of a filing cabinet today," Reagan lamented.

"That's ok, it's a start," Amy said as she moved forward and fixed her hair that had gotten loose from Reagan's clip. "Aren't you always dressed for the job you want?" she reminded Reagan.

Reagan gave her friend a teasing smile. "Is that why you're wearing those long, flowy boho skirts and hippie t-shirts?"

Amy huffed out a laugh. "Well, I don't know what job that we're preparing me for."

"A children's music teacher?" Reagan suggested.

"Reagan," Amy drew out her name.

"All you need is a tambourine and a crown of flowers in your hair, and you'll be a regular Mother Goose to the littles with the way you are," Reagan said with a fond smile.

Amy gave her a stern look, even though the corners of her mouth were quirked upward. As I watched this sweet exchange between my d

simple and her friend, I tried desperately to push away the thought of how I would want to kiss the corners of Amy's mouth.

asked, Reagan rolled her eyes at her friend's expression and said, "Okay I'll quit pushing...for now."

"Nobody could ever accuse you of not being persistent," Amy said on the laugh.

Reagan cut her eyes to me. "I come by it honestly." She smiled, and met my eyes at that moment.

g to be "What can I say? We Miles people are good at knowing what makes and what doesn't when we see it." Amy tore her gaze away from mine. "You, young lady," I said moving towards my daughter, "are right you're supposed to be. You're going to kick butt out there today."

a piece "Thanks, Dad," she said, throwing her arms around my neck and giving me a big hug. She turned and gave Amy a hug, too, before waving goodbye. "The next time you two see me, I will be a beleaguered law officer. Always pray for me!"

"Wait, I'll walk you to the car," I said, feeling the last-minute dad duty. She went on her way. I knew she was going to do great, but some things didn't go away just because she was grown up now.

I saw her off after giving her some last words of encouragement, and then I returned to the house, only to find Amy diligently cleaning up the kitchen. Without a word, I jumped in to help. "Oh, that's okay, I can get this. Reagan the mess after all," she said.

"Amy, I contributed to this, too—" I started, but she cut me off. "No, really, it's okay," she said, reaching for the dirty mixing bowl. "I did the same time I did."

Our fingers brushed, and she snatched her hand away like I'd burnt her.

much I That move and the way her eyes widened like a scared animal un
something inside of me, and the tenuous, careful facade I'd been put
y, okay, gave way to my stronger instincts. "Amelia," I said in a low voice, "wi
making you so nervous?"

l with a She gave a fake laugh, but she wouldn't meet my eyes. "I don't kno
you're talking about."

id Amy "Bullshit," I said, and it made her stop what she was doing and
glare at me. *Good*, I thought, *get mad at me*. Maybe it would make h
s sense the nerves and be real with me. "You've been acting nervous ever sin
e. "And found out I'm Reagan's father. I could understand that at first mayb
: where told you I wouldn't tell her what happened. I'm a man of my word,
don't need to worry about that. So, there's got to be some other reas
/ing me making you nervous."

oye and Her posture was stiff as she spoke, "You don't know me. I'm just l
ntern—I'm not all that outgoing."

"You weren't like that when we met on the beach," I pointed out, .
nerves cheeks instantly flamed. I'd be lying if I said that blush didn't caus
e things inside me. "You were a little shy, yes, but not this nervous cat busines
looked annoyed and also like she'd been caught. I couldn't help mys
d when my lawyer instincts went for the kill. "So, be honest with me, Amelia,
kitchen.it?"

I made "It's nothing, I just..." she trailed off, and I could see those walls
in.

Oh no, not with me. "You what?" I pushed.

l at the She blew out a frustrated breath. "I don't trust myself around you,
She looked so embarrassed, and I hated myself for it, but I could t
ied her.

raveled blood rushing to the lower half of my body. *Easy now*, I cautioned
ting up even as I moved closer to her.

Why am I “What is it that you’re afraid you’ll do? Huh? You afraid you’re g
want more?” I asked, now moving to her side, my breath in her ear. “
w what what you want, Amelia?”

“It’s not right,” she said in a breathy whisper.

shoot a “I didn’t ask if it was right, I asked what you wanted,” I demanded.
er drop She looked up at me with wide, frustrated eyes. “I want you...I w
ice you to kiss me, to touch me again,” she admitted quietly.

e, but I She started to turn her face away, but I was not about to let her
so you hook that easily. Gently, I grasped her chin in my fingers and made h
son I’ mat me as I asked her, “See, was that so hard?”

She raised an irritated eyebrow at me, even as her breathing picl
ike this “Yeah, it was, you—”

I cut her off by taking her mouth. It was not a gentle kiss either. My
and hers slanted across hers and my tongue dipped inside, tasting her and mir
e a stir what the rest of my body wanted, no, needed so badly to do to h
s.” She instant my tongue tasted hers, she moaned against my mouth, he
elf, and sagging into my arms. I moved us, so that her back was facing the
what is island, placing my hands on either side of her waist and effectively t
her against me. She seemed to be all for it as she ran her palms up my
closing then wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing herself harder agains
took everything I had not to grind against her sweet, soft, little body.

I speared my fingers into her hair, undoing it from its band. God, I
okay?” anything to feel that silky hair draped over my thighs as I watched h
feel the that sweet little mouth around me. But I was getting ahead of myself

myself, now, it was our mouths mating and our tongues dueling, the sweet s
Amy and whipped cream clinging to the air. I wanted to drown in it.
going to I let a hand wander down to her waist, squeezing her hip before le
Tell me trail upward and squeeze a generous breast through her t-shirt. I cou
her nipple already hard and aching for more than a simple touch fr
hand. Her hips bucked up against me at this touch, and I deepened c
knowing in my bones now that there was no fighting this connection. I
ant you one of us would be ok until we saw this through.

That was when Amy broke my heart a little bit more by breaking c
off the and pushing me away. "I can't do this," she said, breathless.
er look I ran a frustrated hand through my hair, fighting the urge to get
damn knees and beg her to see reason. "Amelia—" I started, but she
ked up. on me then, fire and desperation in her eyes.

"No, no more Amelia. It's Amy... just Amy, your daughter's frie
r mouth matter how much I wish it could be different. We're just going to have
nicking this behind us," she said sadly.

er. The "Again, right?" I said bitterly, shaking my head, "Amel—" I stopp
r body corrected myself, "Amy, c'mon, you gotta know this is bigger
kitchen something we can just put behind us."

rapping "No," she said emphatically, "it can't be. It's as simple as that. So
y chest, just going to have to pretend like none of it happened."

it me. It "Look, I know this isn't the ideal situation. But life has a way of v
these things out, and lying to yourself never works, believe me."

I'd give She tore her gaze away from mine, biting her lip and looking like s
er wrap holding back tears. I wanted so badly to go to her, to comfort her, bu
f. Right knew that was the last thing she wanted from me at this moment. She

cent of her head sadly. “I-I gotta go,” she said, then bolted from the kitchen
her room.

etting it “Fuck,” I muttered to myself as I hung my head, leaning over the
uld feelisland. I had done exactly what I said I wasn’t going to do by push
om myhard and she’d understandably run for the hills. I needed to cool i
our kisscouldn’t seem to help myself around her.

Neither I went back to my office and shut the door behind me. What had ha
to me? I used to be able to control myself. Hell, I was known for my p
our kissin the courtroom, my willingness to play the long game to make su
everybody got what they needed. Now, I could barely contain myself.

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her head sadly. “I-I gotta go,” she said, then bolted from the kitchen and to her room.

“Fuck,” I muttered to myself as I hung my head, leaning over the kitchen island. I had done exactly what I said I wasn’t going to do by pushing too hard and she’d understandably run for the hills. I needed to cool it, but I couldn’t seem to help myself around her.

I went back to my office and shut the door behind me. What had happened to me? I used to be able to control myself. Hell, I was known for my patience in the courtroom, my willingness to play the long game to make sure that everybody got what they needed. Now, I could barely contain myself.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Amelia

Amelia

Just keep moving forward. That was what I kept telling myself, and that was what I'd spent the majority of the last few months telling myself. Nothing lasted forever, so I had to just keep forging ahead.

Except this time, I wasn't so sure I didn't want to turn back. Not if I was leaving behind the maddeningly sexy man in the beach house who made me feel the odd combination of safe and comforted, like I was on fire and he was the only one who could help me.

None of this made sense. I'd had my urges before; I was human and I had feelings. But what I felt with Julian was unlike anything I'd ever known before. I was going to die if I didn't get touched by him soon.

I let out an uncharacteristic string of curses as I drove to my first lesson. After our make out session in the kitchen, I'd hightailed it to my car and briefly considered just packing up everything and making arrangements to head to my parents' house, but something kept me from doing that. It was something I couldn't quite explain. I knew pragmatically that if I was having such an issue being around Julian, then the thing that made the most sense was to remove myself from the situation. But after months of avoiding places in the hope that I could avoid awkwardness with my ex or his girlfriend, I was feeling a streak of stubbornness at the idea of getting out of the way just to make a situation easier...for me or for anyone else, no matter.

I was mad at myself, but I was also pissed as hell at Julian. He had told me that every bit of this was a bad idea. Instead, he kept going on about the importance of lying to myself. Who did he think he was? So what if he made me

wrap myself around him and roll around naked in the sand with him and that were one of those couples on a soap opera? Who needed that kind of d
myself. This thought kept me going as I parked and got out to get
equipment. I didn't have time to waste on worrying about st
t meant annoying, sexy men who wouldn't listen to reason. I had thi
ade me accomplish, thank you very much.

he was The upside to my anger with Julian and our whole situation was t
nerves I'd had about surf lessons were completely gone. Instead,
fter all, relieved from the respite of the house that seemed destined to challe
...like I resolve at every turn.

My surf instructor's name was Toni. She was a short, brunette wom
rst surfa solid build, and she looked like she meant business. I guess I was
y room expecting the character that Paul Rudd played in *Forgetting Sarah M
gements* but I quickly decided I liked her no-nonsense attitude.

. It was She went over basic safety rules and what she expected from each
having for the duration of the classes. We would be meeting twice a week,
it sense wanted each one of us to make sure we got out into the ocean water t
certain every day (weather permitting). She said our body needed to get use
his new rhythm of the sea and that the quicker we could get comfortable in o
g out of bodies, the better we were going to do on the surfboard. I was surpris
for that we only got out into the water for a little bit, but most of the lesson
five of us on our bellies on the board in the sand, practicing how
o know ourselves in various situations. As we went through our drills, Toni pi
e peril the importance of trusting our instincts.

want to “It's always important to remember the safety rules, of course,
most important thing you can do is learn how to trust your instincts.

like wevery often defies logic, and that's why it's so important to listen to
rama? instincts out there and not to get too caught up in your head."

ner my We continued the drills until my arms and legs were sore. The who
ubborn,her words ricocheted through my head. I'd spent my life following w
ngs tobrain told me. Reagan was the one who'd told me that I needed

figuring out if the voice in my head was really me or just what everybo
hat anytold me what I should be. That was something I'd thought about a l

I wasmy breakup with Michael. I'd vowed before I came on this trip to b
nge myassertive and to go after what I wanted, but I'd never dreamed that

wanted could have the power to hurt people I cared about so much. It
an withalmost like some cruel joke that the universe was playing on me.

kind of My mind warned me away from Julian, but every other part of me
arshall,drawn to him like a magnet. There was this odd sense that he was v

was supposed to be, but I just knew that couldn't be right...except m
studentseemed to be saying something else.

but she As I drove back to the beach house from the surf lesson, I thoug
o swimabout whether I'd ever listened to my gut instinct, and I could only c
l to thewith two times where I did so: the semester after I'd met Reagan a
our ownasked if I wanted to share a dorm with her and the other morning
sed thatbeach when I'd let my body take over with Julian.

was the The first event was one I knew had changed my life for the better,
to holdjury was still out on the second one. Though, it was hard to *feel* like
reachedbad. These thoughts were swirling around my head as I cautiously ente

beach house. It was quiet, and after a quick, covert inspection, I sav
but thehad the place to myself.

Nature After a quick shower that I rushed through so I wouldn't be an
tempted to touch myself while thinking of Julian, I went to the area of

to yourside of the living room that housed the impressive grand piano. I still c
believe this thing sat in a house that was unused for most months ou
le time, year. Reagan said a grateful client had given it to her dad and that nol
that mytheir family played, so it had ended up here. It was a beautiful spot f
to startwall of windows facing the beach served as the backdrop, and I cou
ody hadimagine myself playing here for hours, drinking in the sun and be
ot afterlanguid beneath the warmth and the joy that came from playing
e morebeautiful instrument.

what I My fingers had been itching to play it since we'd arrived. I kno
seemedneither Reagan nor Julian would probably mind, but somehow, I wan
first time with this piano to be private. I laughed to myself at how di
seemed sounded, but it was true, and I knew just about better than anyone el
where Ierotic playing an instrument could be. I was the girl who got more tu
y bodyby music than any man...that was, until now.

I slid onto the smooth seat and rested my hands on the keys. Co
ht hardsmooth to the touch, I almost instantly felt my shoulders relax at the f
ome uptouch of the piano keys. I closed my eyes and took a long, cleansing
and shebefore letting my fingers take over. I didn't even have in mind what I
on theto play. I just let my fingers move where they wanted to and out
classic Bach piece that I'd always found satisfying to play. It wa
but theoverly complicated piece, but it had enough ups and downs to make i
: it wasplay and still get lost in the music.

ered the As I played, I felt more myself than I had in a long time. I also
v that Istartling realization that despite my earlier notions, I was capable of
off my brain and just letting my body do what felt good—I did just tha
y moretime I played the piano.

if to the I was nearing the end of the piece when I felt a presence behind me

ouldn'twas nothing to indicate that anybody else was there with me other t
t of theprickling I felt at the base of my neck...and the hardening of my ni
body inshifted on the seat to press my knees tighter together, hoping to assu
or it. Aache that had flared up between my legs.

uld just I knew he was behind me, he had to be, but for the first time si
cominglearned that he was Reagan's father, I did not feel that thread of par
such athrough me. I was relaxed and ready for whatever happened next...at
thought so.

ew that Slowly, I turned around to see Julian leaning against the doorway t
ited mydirectly behind the piano seat. "That was beautiful, Amelia," he said i
rty thatvoice, and I was satisfied to see how his eyes were watching me with
se howof unfiltered lust. I didn't say anything, but I didn't go back to playing
rned onAfter a long, tense stare down, he tore his gaze away and cleared hi:

awkwardly. "Look, Amy, I wanted to apologize—"

ool and "Don't," I said.He looked slightly reticent before continuing on,
familiarthought—"

; breath "Don't do that either," I said, deciding right then and there to go p
wantedpoint of no return. *I'm being in my own body and following my insti*
came aonce. Maybe if I'd done that more often, I wouldn't have ended up c
sn't anhumiliated and the butt of so many people's jokes.

t fun to "I don't understand," he said, confused, but he stepped closed anyw.

For some reason, I couldn't handle that look on his face, so I turne
had thearound to face the piano keys and started to play with them some n
turningdon't either," I said. "I just know I'm exhausted from not being hone
at everymyself. I've listened to my mind my whole life, and so far, it's only er

in heartbreak and embarrassment and..." I played some more. "May
: There would, too, but at least I could feel good for a while."

han the “What are you saying, Amelia?” he asked. I could hear the desperate
pples. His voice. I was surprised at the delighted surge of power and excitement
age theraced through me.

“I’m saying I don’t want to fight my instincts anymore, but we
nce I’dagree on one thing first,” I said, stopping my playing and turning to fi
nic raceright behind me, damn near ready to pounce.

least, I “What would that be?” he asked huskily, his hands clenching into
fists at his sides.

hat was “That this stays between us. Reagan can never know—”

n a low “I don’t know if I can agree to that, Amelia, this...whatever this isn
i a looksummer fling,” he argued.

g either. “We don’t know that,” I insisted, “and there’s no reason to hurt he
s throatnot necessary.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone either, you have to know that...but
“I justbetween us, Amy, this isn’t going to just go away. You may not see th
but...God, what am I saying?” he questioned, running a hand thro
past thehair. Sucking in a deep breath, he looked at me with pleading eye
ncts for rather have some of you then none of you, so if that’s your condition, t
quite so I slid from the bench and faced him, my hands twisting together ner

but I could feel determination blooming in my chest. Assertive Amy
ay. to take control for a change, so that’s exactly what I did. Rising up
ed backtiptoes, I grabbed Julian by the shoulders and pulled him down for
more. “Iunpracticed but equally passionate kiss. He needed no prompting from
est withsliding his arms around my waist and bringing my body flush to his. ‘
ided uphe moaned against my lips, and I relished the need I heard in his v
/be thiskissed him for a long moment before pulling back and looking into h

Those slate-colored eyes had darkened considerably. I drank in the

ation intook in my face, looking like he could swallow me whole...and I love
ent thatsecond of it.

He cupped my face in his hands. "Tell me what you want me
have toAmelia," he told me once again.

nd him I tried to bite back my smile, but I couldn't. I was going to go for
wanted, come hell or high water. "I want all of you, Julian...I want al
anxiousI told him.

"Are you sure? Because I'm not sure I can hold back this tin
warned.

't just a I uttered a soft laugh. "That was you holding back?"

He smiled. "Oh, you have no idea, my dear Amelia," he said, tig
r if it'shis arms around my waist and lifting me up against him.

I let out a squeal of surprise as he carried me a few steps back, ther
what'sme up onto the piano. "Julian!"

at now, "You tell me you want it all, that's what I'm going give you, my
ugh hisgirl," he said while he unsnapped the waistband of my shorts. He hel
es. "I'dshimmy out of my shorts, dropping them on the floor next to the pia
hen..."mouth then attacked my neck, sucking at the delicate flesh as his ha
vously,down my arms. I felt his fingers playing at the hem of my t-shirt, slidir
neededunderneath and tickling the skin of my belly. He yanked the shirt up c
on mybreasts, letting the material rest on top of the swells.

a very His mouth worked its way to my breasts, and my fingers clutched tl
n there,of the piano as he yanked the cups, forcing my flesh to spill free.
"Amy,"satisfaction, he nearly hissed when he laid eyes on my chest, and his
voice. Iwasted no time in showing the same kind of love and attention he paid
is eyes.neck and lips.

way he I was resisting the urge to move my hips when his tongue started lic

d everymy nipples, but when he closed his mouth around one and started sucking, I could feel myself clench. I let out an anguished moan. to do, enjoying every bit of this foreplay, but I needed some relief fast. I even realized that I'd started grinding my hips against him until I heard what I husky chuckle against my breast, the vibration of his laugh only making it need that much sharper.

“Julian, please,” I whimpered.

“Patience, love, you know I’m going to take care of you,” he assured me, a sexy grin before sucking my other breast into his mouth and letting his hand trail down until he was cupping my sex through my panties. I could hardly breathe; I was going off pure physical need, so I started to grind against his hand. “So hot and needy, Amelia. Tell me, will I find you wet and ready when I touch you here?” he asked as he slid the crotch of my panties to the side, then slid his finger through the cleft. We both groaned at his touch. My sweet was soaking, and I could tell this excited him. “Fuck, Amy,” he cursed. “That all for me?” he asked as he placed hot, wet kisses down my quads. His stomach.

“Yes, you know it is,” I moaned, my hips growing restless.

He moved away slightly then, far enough to slide my panties down over my legs, his eyes drinking me in the whole time. I shuddered beneath him.

“You know how badly I’ve wanted to taste you since that morning on the edge of the beach? It’s damn near all I could think about next to what it would feel like to taste you inside you,” he confessed huskily.

I moaned shakily as he dipped his head, flicking his tongue against my engorged bud nestled at the crux of my thighs. I cried out then, “Julian

“Lay back and relax, Amelia. Let me feast on your sweetness,” he said, his breath hot against my core. I cried out again when he slid a finger inside

gently feeling my walls spasming as he worked in and out. When he started :
. I was gently on my bud, I thought my head was going to explode. His mo
hadn't fingers worked in tandem with him taking small breaks to coo lovi
ard his filthy things to me, things that made me clench tight around his fing
ing my long for more. I wanted it all, and I wanted it now.

“Julian!” I cried. “I think I’m going to come.” My words came out
anguished moan. My back was bowing off of the piano, and I could f
ed with orgasm racing towards me.

his hand “That’s it, baby, that’s it. Come for me like a good girl,” he said in
n’t help voice. His voice undid me, and my orgasm consumed me. I screame
inst his couldn’t help it, and he was right there murmuring how beautiful I v
ady for how much he couldn’t wait to take me. It was almost enough to m
s to the come again.

ouch. I I looked into his eyes. I could see the need there, but I could also
sed. “Is immense satisfaction he clearly took from pleasuring me. I reached :
ivering then, kissing his swollen lips and tasting myself on them, the knowl
what we’d just done—what he’d just done for me— making me all the

“Fuck, that was amazing. I can only imagine how it will be after
own my That’s when I heard it, footfalls on the porch steps.

is gaze. I could feel my eyes nearly bug out of my head as I bolted uprigh
on the sounds of steps grew closer. “Shit, shit, shit,” I muttered. Julian heard
I like to helping me back into my shorts and getting me snapped back up just
the front door swung open and Reagan’s voice rang out across the
inst the room. “Honeys I’m home.”

.” By the time she rounded the corner, I was sitting back at the pian
aid, his with Julian casually (as possible anyway) leaning over the back of
ide me, heart pounded so damn hard that I was sure everyone in the room coul

sucking “Oh, no fair!” Reagan exclaimed when she saw us. “You managed to get her to play again? You have to tell me your secret—she’s usually shy and Shrinking Violet when it comes to the piano.”

ers and I hope to God my blush wasn’t too obvious as Julian shot me a wink. “Actually, she was working out a welcome home song, weren’t you?” he said, giving me that easy, infectious smile.

feel my “Yes, right,” I said, then launched into a rendition of Aretha Franklin’s “E-S-P-E-C-T.” A song I knew to be one of Reagan’s go-to songs to pump me up.

d out, I “Ooooh, yes, this is my jam,” she announced, breaking out into a little dance. I laughed at her moves, knowing she was making me intentionally goofy. During one of her turns, a scrap of pink fabric caught my eye beneath the piano. I managed to catch Julian’s eye while Reagan was singing. He turned. Luckily, he saw what I saw and swept the panties back behind his foot. Pasting a smile back on his face, he tried to appear normal as he spun around.

hotter. Julian clapped for both of us as I finished the song and Reagan did a little pirouette as her finishing move. I felt a pang of guilt for having a light-hearted moment after doing something that I was sure would, at the very least, piss off my best friend. I shoved that thought away, though. I knew it, too, would have to get hurt as long as this stayed between me and Julian. I clung to that thought as Reagan slipped off her heels. “Man, oh man, I have so much to tell you all.”

“I was thinking you could tell us all about it over dinner?” Julian asked. “You feel up to going out, or do you want me to pick something up for you?”

d hear. “Oh my god, Chinese takeout sounds amazing right now. Is that ok?”

l to get you, Ames? I just don't feel like going out tonight," Reagan said.

ly Ms. "Yeah, that's fine with me," I agreed.

"Great, that'll give me time to take a quick shower before dinner. lk, then wait to get out of these stuffy ass clothes," Reagan said, slipping ou r't you, rumpled blazer.

"That works, and if you're going to be in the shower, why doesn lin's R-ride along with me?" Julian suggested, grabbing his keys off the count get her I froze slightly, not quite sure what the hell he thought he was doin

quickly agreed to go to keep Reagan from getting suspicious. Lucky f a silly, Julian and I, Reagan seemed too tired to notice any hesitation on my p g them "Okay." Reagan yawned as she headed toward the hallway, callin ight my her shoulder, "And I wouldn't be mad if you wanted to pick up dessert vas still "Right. Dessert," Julian said, looking at me the whole time with a k nd with look.

Reagan *Shit, what had I gotten myself into?*

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ing this
he very
Nobody
1, and I
what a

ffered.

or all of

ok with

you, Ames? I just don't feel like going out tonight," Reagan said.

"Yeah, that's fine with me," I agreed.

"Great, that'll give me time to take a quick shower before dinner. I can't wait to get out of these stuffy ass clothes," Reagan said, slipping out of her rumpled blazer.

"That works, and if you're going to be in the shower, why doesn't Amy ride along with me?" Julian suggested, grabbing his keys off the counter.

I froze slightly, not quite sure what the hell he thought he was doing, but I quickly agreed to go to keep Reagan from getting suspicious. Lucky for both Julian and I, Reagan seemed too tired to notice any hesitation on my part.

"Okay." Reagan yawned as she headed toward the hallway, calling over her shoulder, "And I wouldn't be mad if you wanted to pick up dessert, too."

"Right. Dessert," Julian said, looking at me the whole time with a knowing look.

Shit, what had I gotten myself into?

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Julian

Julian

It wasn't too far a stretch to realize that Amelia was going to drive me crazy. Every touch, every taste of her just made me want so much more. There was a big part of me that realized that I was barreling headlong into one hell of a heartache, but I also could not have stopped myself if I tried to. She was like an addiction. I was already plotting how I could get her to fix.

Hearing her tell me that she wanted everything I had to give had been nearly orgasmic all on its own, but what we did on that piano? God knows I will never look at that piano again and not think of Amelia, our pleasure and longing all rolled into one. Not to mention the little memento I'd grab off the floor after Reagan went to go shower. Amy's pink panties now reside in my pocket, and I was not planning on giving them back.

Now, we were on our way to pick up dinner, and shy, little Amelia was lighting into me with a vehemence that was not helping my barely controlled desire. "What the hell are you thinking having me come with you?"

"What? You don't want to spend more time with me? A couple of more and you're done?" I teased.

She would not be deterred. "You know better than that, but you forget how smart Reagan is. A couple of more stunts like this and she'll have the whole thing figured out."

"Amy, calm down. Everything's fine. Granted, that was a close call, but we'll have to be more careful in the future. We just got a little carried away this time," I said calmly.

She cut her eyes to me. "And do you think we'll get less carried away in the future?" she asked sarcastically, and I laughed because I knew the

no way we were going to be able to hold back in any form. The next time I had the chance, Amy would be mine completely, and that was my determination that my body would not be denied.

“Do you want to stop?” I asked her, my heart pounding at the possibility that she would call the whole damn thing off when we’d barely started.

Her shoulders sagged, and she gave me a quick but revealing look. “Do you think?”

I smiled at her then. “I think that your body needs much more attention and I also think I’m the man for the job.” She was looking out the passenger window, but I could see the smile she was trying to hide. “Am I just full of shit here?” I asked teasingly.

She looked over at me with a mischievous smile when she said, “Both.” I laughed and shook my head. I liked seeing this side of her, and when I drove to the takeout place, I managed to see that side a few more times.

“He asked me if you were walking back to the car when she asked conversationally, “How did you do with my panties?”

“Oh, those? They’re in my pocket,” I informed her casually. “Of course,” she said with a grin. “How convenient. I can just shove them in my purse now,” she said, holding out her hand.

I clasped her outstretched hand in mine and looked down into her face with a lascivious grin. “You want them that bad, Amelia, come get them yourself.” I told her.

“You’ve got to be kidding me? You’re holding my panties hostage?” she asked incredulously.

“You bet. Thought I would just keep them for myself, so I have a little memento from the piano.” I dropped my voice playfully. “But

“I really need them,” I said, turning to face her, arms stretched out, “could you help me with them. Just keep in mind, I just now got that part of my body to calm down enough so that I wouldn’t scare strangers I passed by.”

She laughed at our banter and heeded my warning. “Alright, point to the door if you don’t want to wake the beast,” she teased.

“Oh, you have no idea, my Amelia,” I said fondly as I opened her car door. “Whichever. I could not believe my good fortune as we drove back to the house. I hadn’t felt this light in a long time. Amy was so easy to talk to, she was a good listener. Best of all, there seemed to be no agenda with her. All of the women I’d dated in the recent past had stars in their eyes or connections to Hollywood. I made a point to not talk about celebrities, referring to my work in the vaguest of terms, but it never failed. At some point, they would bring it up and want to know if I had any juicy gossip. A few of them even revealed themselves to be aspiring reporters. We didn’t talk about work with Amelia, but I got the distinct impression, she wouldn’t be the least bit impressed. In fact, the only people Amy talked about with stars in her eyes were all dead musicians. Not only did I find that comforting, but it also seemed completely on brand for Amy. She liked them unapologetically, but from what she said, that had made it hard for her to fit in growing up.

I found the drive back to be much too short. If we had been in different circumstances, I could easily see myself talking to her into the wee hours of the morning. Before we hit the porch stairs, she pulled me back, a concerned look on her face.

“Julian, earlier was...amazing,” she said, blushing.

“I know,” I said without one ounce of teasing.

She smiled but sobered as she looked at the front door. “But we really

me getto be more careful, that was way too close.”

n down “Don’t worry, Amelia. I shall be the very picture of discretion from
on out,” I assured her.

made. I

loor for “So, then I was like, ‘Okay, Chad, but clearly, we’re both here for the
e beach thing, so why do you think it’s okay to sit around and play on your
to, and while I do all the work?’” Reagan went on about her new internship p
ith her. and all the people she met on her first day. I listened eagerly to the de
ver my her day while also keeping an eye on Amy. I enjoyed the way the
s, only them interacted.

at some In a bizarre way, Amy was much more maternal towards Reagan
elebrity Reagan’s own mother. Of course, that wasn’t terribly surprising. Obv
rs. Reagan’s mother and I had gotten along well enough at one time, b

ion that Reagan was born, our differences became glaringly obvious. Unfortu
r talked we weren’t different in a way that complimented one another. She see

ind this resent motherhood and spent the first few years of Reagan’s life see
ed what trying to recapture her youth. I thought at first it was just a symp

ard for postpartum depression, but as the years wore on and she seemed to c
to rally against parental responsibilities, it became more and more c

ifferent that our relationship was not built for the long haul. Of course, h
ours of betrayal sealed the deal for our doomed marriage. As much as that b

cerned hurt, I often thought her lack of attachment to our daughter was wor
was who she was, however, and Reagan loved her. And maybe in her

act of love towards Reagan, she hadn’t fought me for custody. Reaga
up in a home with a dad who thought the sun rose and set with her, i

ly need

got to see her mom every other weekend. The arrangement was not
m herebut it worked for all of us.

I'd tried to give her the love of both a mother and a father, and of
I'd worried myself sick over her when she'd gone off to college. Now
obvious that she'd flocked to someone who was a nurturer and a care
ie same Amy had a natural way of making people feel comfortable and care
: phone could also see why Reagan was pushing her to pursue teaching m
partners children.

tails of "So, what did you two get up to today?" Reagan asked, popping a
two of in her mouth.

I saw Amy swallow hard, so I jumped in with, "Oh, you know, giv
an than old ticker a workout."

iously, I felt Amy's kick under the table and looked over to see her flashin
ut after warning look, but Reagan, thankfully, did not notice. "Mm, that explai
nately, you looked so flushed when I came in." I bit the inside of my cheek.

med to "How 'bout you, Ames? Oh, I almost forgot, your surf lessons
mingly today, didn't they? How did that go?"

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ontinue and about what her instructor told her. Our eyes met briefly across th
obvious before she ducked her head, and I smiled to myself. Her reaction
er final attempted apology earlier made sense now. Amelia was following h
betrayal and her gut led her to me.

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got to see her mom every other weekend. The arrangement was not typical, but it worked for all of us.

I'd tried to give her the love of both a mother and a father, and of course, I'd worried myself sick over her when she'd gone off to college. Now, it was obvious that she'd flocked to someone who was a nurturer and a caregiver. Amy had a natural way of making people feel comfortable and cared for. I could also see why Reagan was pushing her to pursue teaching music to children.

"So, what did you two get up to today?" Reagan asked, popping a wonton in her mouth.

I saw Amy swallow hard, so I jumped in with, "Oh, you know, giving the old ticker a workout."

I felt Amy's kick under the table and looked over to see her flashing me a warning look, but Reagan, thankfully, did not notice. "Mm, that explains why you looked so flushed when I came in." I bit the inside of my cheek.

"How 'bout you, Ames? Oh, I almost forgot, your surf lessons started today, didn't they? How did that go?"

Relieved to have the subject changed, Amy told us about her surf lesson... and about what her instructor told her. Our eyes met briefly across the table before she ducked her head, and I smiled to myself. Her reaction to my attempted apology earlier made sense now. Amelia was following her gut, and her gut led her to me.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Amelia

Amelia

Morning dawned, and I awoke to soft sunrays creeping in through the shutters. I stretched, enjoying the languorous feeling of lying in bed and reliving the events of the last twenty-four hours.

I refused to let myself worry about what would happen if Julian and Reagan found out. Right now, I was trying my best to enjoy myself, and I had definitely enjoyed myself yesterday on that grand piano. I'd always had a love affair with the piano, but now, I would look at it in a whole new way.

After a couple of hiccups, dinner had gone smoothly, and we'd all ended up scattered across the living room couches watching a movie, though Reagan had passed out about halfway through. She was so tuckered out from her first day at the law firm.

Once everyone went off to bed, I lay awake in my bed thinking not about what happened on that piano but more about what happened in the past. Michael and I had been together for three years, and I never remembered being that easy to just be with him. We certainly never talked quite like we did now. Maybe at first the conversation had been easy enough, but as time wore on, I also got the feeling from our conversations that he was just trying to impress me or to do stuff or be a certain way. To Julian's credit, he treated me like a fully-formed person and not someone to mold to his image of what he thought the perfect woman would be. When Michael and I broke up, I'd spent the first several days after wondering how Scarlet fit the mold so well. I'd been damn near turning myself inside out to fit, and for what? I'd been humiliated and made to feel like trash, apparently.

Julian didn't act like my interests were boring or that I should be a certain way to be something I wasn't. He seemed attracted to who I was, and I liked that.

couldn't just be a physical thing because I wasn't exactly known for my looks. I didn't think I was unattractive. I just knew I wasn't one of the "in bed ones." Reagan was naturally pretty, tall, and lean, big smile and flawless skin.

Shit, I had to admit Scarlet was more conventionally attractive compared to me with her long legs and tiny waist. I was what I liked to refer to as "vertically challenged," and I'd always been thick through the hips and thighs. Growing up, most boys looked right past me. Julian, however, didn't. He looked right past me. He looked at me like I was some prize, and it was an intoxicating feeling for me. One that I could get used to.

I'd drifted off for a little while once everyone had bedded down for the night, but I woke up around midnight. I decided to take advantage of the quiet.

I slipped out of bed and through my balcony door and there he was again—Julian was out on the sand working out. Seeing him made me laugh quietly to myself. I guess he was left hanging earlier when he watched him unabashedly and admired the way his muscles moved in the moonlight and the sheen of sweat on his back and chest. He worked out for a good while before slipping into the darkness and out of sight.

Reluctantly, I went back inside and slid back beneath the now cool covers. Idly, I checked the time on my phone, and that was when I saw that message...from Julian.

Julian: You see what you make me do, Amelia?

I smiled, a giddy surge racing through me. Quickly, I texted him back.

Me: I know I should feel bad, but...

Julian: But you enjoy torturing me, naughty girl.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, trying to quell my excitement. I'd spent my life being a good girl, the reliable girl, the nice girl...it felt t

for my to be referred to as a naughty girl. It was a turn-on that I hadn't
"pretty expecting.

ss skin. My phone buzzed in my hand again...

ared to *Julian: Did you like what you saw, Amelia?*

r to as *Me: Every bit of it...*

ps and I bit my lip, debating on whether I should say more, but
did not remember my mantra for the summer: follow your instincts. So, I f
a new, another text quickly.

Me: I can't wait to see all of it.

for the *Julian: Don't you worry, Amelia, that will happen soon enough...*

of my My heart raced at the thought of what he might have in store for ton
y door, but it was obvious he was not going to reveal more at the moment, wh
ing him probably for the best. I wasn't sure I could get through the rest of the
arlier. II thought tomorrow would be the end of my virginity as I knew it, e
l in the hoped deep down that was exactly the case.

ut for a *Me: Julian? There's something you should know before we...you*

*I've never actually been that intimate with anyone before...I hope
sheets. doesn't scare you away.*

I had a There was a long pause, and nerves bunched up in my stomach. Ha
ruined this whole thing? My phone buzzed in my hands, and I nearly c
it.

ck. *Julian: As long as it doesn't scare you away that knowing you're c
turns me on even more.*

A fresh wave of desire bloomed within me, and I clenched my
ent. I'd together trying to calm the ache.

hrilling *Me: Not scared...just excited*

Julian: Get some sleep, baby girl...you've got a big day tomorrow.

't been *Me: Goodnight, Julian.*

Julian: Goodnight, Amelia. Sweet dreams.

Despite going to bed late, I was up early. I wanted to get my swim i
then, I before the beaches got packed. I didn't mind being out there wit
ired off people, but there was something very meditative about having that stu
sand to myself for a while. It felt like I could commune with nature
more easily.

I met Reagan on her way out for the morning. She was dressed in
orrow, one of the business suits we'd picked up for her a couple of days
ich was "Day two," she announced as she hobbled down the stairs in her heels.
night if me luck."

ven if I "You don't need it, but I will anyway," I told her. We said our go
and parted ways. It was strange to me how I'd so quickly grown accu
t know. to going everywhere in a bathing suit and a sarong. Before coming
pe that here, I'd felt mostly naked in this outfit. A few days here, and it felt
most natural thing in the world.

id I just I untied my sarong and set it down on the sand, along with my ph
ropped far as I could see, I was alone, so I took my time wading into the
enjoying the soft rays of the early morning sun as I grew used to the
i virgin temperature.

I didn't know how long I was in the water—thirty, maybe fo
thighs minutes, but I was enjoying myself. The currents were gentle this morn
it didn't give me a lot of practice to deal with harsher waters, but the
sway was soothing. I thought about what instructor Toni said and focu

letting my body just flow with the water, remembering that it was supposed to work with and not against.

When I finally emerged from the water, I almost felt a sense of relief when I saw an irresistible man with slate-colored eyes standing on the shoreline. He was letting the water lap at his feet, but his eyes were glued to me.

I smiled at him broadly. Typically, I would have felt exposed, especially with him looking at me that way. But after what happened on that previous day before, I felt emboldened. For once in my life, I did not feel the need to shrink or hide myself. “Good morning,” I called.

“It is now,” he said, smiling. As I grew closer, excited nerves bubbled in my belly.

The way he was looking at me made me grow fidgety and nervous. “What?” I questioned when I finally made it to him.

He smiled and shook his head as in disbelief. “You have no idea how beautiful you are, Amelia.” I didn’t know what to say to that, a simple compliment that you didn’t quite seem like enough. Luckily, I didn’t have to worry because he wasted no time in sliding his arms around my waist and bringing me in for a long, thorough kiss.

God, two seconds in his arms and I was already clinging to him. His hands wandered down my back until they grasped my ass, tucking me even more tightly against him so that I could feel the hardness beneath his trousers. I moaned against his mouth just thinking about finally getting my hands on him and getting to explore.

His fingers played at the elastic edge of my bikini bottoms, moving closer to my center with each touch. I reluctantly broke our kiss to get my worry. “Julian, I don’t think I can wait much longer...”

nothing “Longer for what, Amelia?” he asked in a gravelly voice. “Let me h
say it.”

déjà vu I made sure to meet his eyes as I told him, “I can’t wait much longer
at theyou inside me.”

glued to He licked his lips, and I could feel him stiffen even harder against
looked pained as he asked, “Are you sure you really want this, Amel
peciallyou sure you want me to take that from you?” His questions were
ano theand I appreciated that he took the time to make sure I was ready, cons
urge tohow hard he was and the fact that he’d been like that since at least last

“Yes, Julian, I’m sure. I want it to be you,” I said breathlessly aga
ched uplips.

“Christ,” he muttered before kissing me again. I wasn’t quite sure I
restless.got there, I was too busy enjoying his mouth on mine, but someh
moved together a little farther up the beach. I was aware enough to
ea hownobody else was around at the moment and that our little cove p
e thanenough privacy, so when Julian made it clear that he intended to tak
ause hethe sand, I didn’t balk at this idea. I just wanted him any way I could g
to himand the idea of taking the time to walk all the way back to the house
like too much time—time I could be feeling him.

s hands He laid me gently back into the warm sand. Kissing me slowly as he
n morehands roam, he reacquainted himself with the same areas he’d tasted
unks. Ibefore. His mouth was working my nipple, my fingers were dug in I
nds onwhen I managed to gasp out his name, “Julian?”

He stopped what he was doing long enough to look at my fac
slightlyshining in his eyes. My throat threatened to close up in nervousnes
asp outpushed forward anyway. “I want to touch you,” I managed to get c
strangled voice. I watched in fascination as those gray eyes darkene

ear you almost black shade. Working up my courage, I told him, “I want you to show me how to touch you.”

to feel He muttered an oath, then sat up next to me, looking almost like he was about to slap me. He slapped him across the face. “Amelia, you’re going to kill me, you know me. He that?” he asked soberly.

ia? Are I gave him a faint smile. “I just want to make sure you feel as good as you can, sincere, do,” I said.

considering He bit back a groan, then helped pull me upward. “Come here,” he said in a gravelly voice as he positioned me to straddle his lap. I gasped when he pressed his hardness against my crotch. It amazed me how two people with only a few pieces of cloth between them could still create such pleasurable friction. I gave a sexy grin in response to my gasp. “Oh, we’re just getting started, we Amelia.”

to know I bit my lip in heady anticipation as he took my hands. “Amelia, there is a special trick to touching me.” He looked at me carefully, the corner of his mouth rising. “I’m giving you control now—do what you want to do with me, enthusiastically, and I promise I’ll love every second of it,” he said.

seemed He placed my hands on his chest, then put his on my hips, holding me close to him but still giving me free reign. I didn’t know where to start, so I let him do what I liked so far and kissed him. It started tentative at first, but by the day all our other kisses, it very quickly spun out of control. During the kiss, his hair hands started to roam. I petted the beard scruff on his jaw with one hand while the other one wandered down.

to need I decided immediately that I liked the way the hair of his chest tickled me, but I palm. I decided I *loved* the way his stomach muscles clenched beneath the light touch of my fingertips, and then, they were at the waistband of his pants. I moved to his trunks.

to show *Get out of your head, Amy, just feel.* I nipped at his lip and kiss again as I slid my hand inside his trunks. It was quickly met with the like I'd hard length of his desire, and the sound of his moan filled my ears. I was know my fingers around him and gave a tentative stroke. He gasped beneath my mouth. "That's it, Amelia. Keep going just like that, baby girl."

As I started stroking faster and a little harder, encouraged by the small coming from his throat. The sound of his pleasure made me feel bold. I found myself licking my way down his chest as my hand continued to touch him. When my face was hovering over his crotch, I looked up at him with questioning eyes. The answering expression on his face made a decision. His pleasure raced to my core, causing a throbbing need that I'd never felt before. It seemed like with every new discovery, Julian was showing it possible to want more, to feel more. I knew instinctively that we had never reached our depths of pleasure with one another.

He helped me get his trunks off, and I sucked in a breath at the sight of him. All those strong lines, and his manhood proudly jutted outward.

Before I could second-guess myself, I dipped my mouth down and touched the tip of him into my mouth, licking a bead of salty liquid off of his cock, so I moaning at the taste. "Jesus, Amelia," he bit out.

My hand kept stroking him as I moved my mouth down further, testing my limits. I felt like some sort of inhibition had finally been laid to rest as he unabashedly stroked and licked him, loving the way his fingers

worked themselves into my hair and flexed against my scalp. I was having a good time wringing such a reaction out of him that I was surprised when he pulled me off of him, a look of intensity on his face. "Amelia," he barked, "you keep that up, and I'm going to come all over that beautiful

I started to protest, but he was quick to explain. "Baby girl, rest

ed himwe'll get to that later, but right now, I want to be inside you...my tongue long, fingers, everything." His words alone were enough to make me squirm. I didn't protest when he laid me out in the sand. He peeled away my bikini, letting out a guttural sound as my breasts spilled free. Not wanting to lose momentum, I undid the ties on my bottoms and pulled myself free from the scrap of fabric. "Goddamn," he muttered. I smiled at his approval, and his reaction. I pulled him to me then, needing to feel him. I shuttered at the relief when he positioned himself in between my legs. His mouth licked down my neck, and I pushed myself against him, encouraging him to touch the place I so desperately wanted him to touch. He laughed huskily against my skin. "Patience, Amelia." I didn't recognize the breathy voice coming out of me when I told him not yet. "I don't think I have any more of that, Julian."

His mouth found my ear, and I could feel his smile against my cheek. "If you say so," he said, dancing his fingers down my stomach to my groin. It was a feather light touch at first, but once he found my most sensitive spot he began rubbing tight, firm circles, causing my hips to buck up. "Julian," I moaned. "Please, please, I don't want to come yet. I want you to be with you inside me."

"Whatever you want, Amelia. I'll give you whatever you want," he whispered huskily in my ear as he positioned his tip at my entrance. *Breathe. Remember to go with what feels right.* I eased my legs apart, looking him in the eye as he started to press forward. I bit my lip when he felt intense pressure and the slight burning sensation from my walls trying to accommodate him and this new invasion. "Fuck," he breathed. "So tight. So wet...Amelia, you feel fucking unbelievable. Now, tell me—tell me what you want, baby girl."

gued, my I felt giddiness surging through me along with the pleasurable sensa-
m, so I being filled by Julian. I felt him everywhere, and I loved it—I wanted
ini top, of it. “I want more Julian. I want you to take me, please.”

to lose He let loose a feral noise in my ear before replying. “Your wish
om the command, my sweet Amelia.”

eciative He moved slowly at first, allowing me time to adjust to him, but
sigh of started bucking my hips up to meet his, he took the hint and deeper
thrusts. I clutched at his shoulders, moaning at the glorious feel of him
st him, of me as he pumped his hips into me. “That’s it,” he groaned, “take all
ich. He Amelia, just like that.”

I couldn’t believe how good he felt. In the final months of my relat-
Julian, with Michael, the idea of sex had caused anxiety and worry. I couldn’t
my head around the idea of trusting my body with someone else, least
eek. “If Michael. At the time, I just thought that keeping a degree of separati-
ound. It normal and that all those movies and books that depicted these reall-
area, he intimate relationships were just being over exaggerated. Yet, here
having only known Julian for a few days, and I already felt more com-
ant it to with him than I had with anyone else. How was that possible? How
possible that shy, repressed Amy was now having sex on the beach
he said hot, older man? How was it possible that I was already going to o-
Holy crap, I thought. “Julian?” I moaned out.

further “Yes, baby girl?” he said breathlessly.

lip as I “I’m going to come already,” I answered, holding tighter as I started
ying to the spasms growing stronger, making my hips work that much
ght and fervently.

hat you He chuckled huskily in my ear. “That’s my girl, come for me Ame-
me feel you tighten around me. Please, baby girl...let me feel you.”

ation of That voice in my ear had its own power that rivaled what he could
d morehis hands. I could lose myself in that voice...I could lose myself in
realized.

1 is my *Stay in the moment.*

I locked eyes with him, needing him to anchor me in this moment
when Iheat in those eyes, coupled with the way his fingers clenched at m
ned hismade my orgasm crash down over me. I cried out as my channel c
1 insiderhythmically around his shaft. His thrusts quickened in that moment, l
l of megoing a shade darker as he cursed. "Fuck, Amelia, yes," he drew out in
groan as heat shot inside me.

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't wrapthe warmth of the sun on our naked bodies. Finally, he rose up on his
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on was "That was amazing," I breathed in wonder.

y cozy, He chuckled softly, "Yes, it was...and that was only the beginning."

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That voice in my ear had its own power that rivaled what he could do with his hands. I could lose myself in that voice...I could lose myself in him, I realized.

Stay in the moment.

I locked eyes with him, needing him to anchor me in this moment and the heat in those eyes, coupled with the way his fingers clenched at my hips, made my orgasm crash down over me. I cried out as my channel clutched rhythmically around his shaft. His thrusts quickened in that moment, his eyes going a shade darker as he cursed. "Fuck, Amelia, yes," he drew out in a long groan as heat shot inside me.

I held him to me as we came down off the high of our orgasms, basking in the warmth of the sun on our naked bodies. Finally, he rose up on his elbows, looking down into my face with a satisfied smile.

"That was amazing," I breathed in wonder.

He chuckled softly, "Yes, it was...and that was only the beginning."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Julian

Julian

When I saw Amelia out in the water that morning, there was no back.

I'd been trying to distract myself and my body from thinking about hours on end after our little text exchange. Those messages hadn't even all that scandalous, yet they made my blood run hotter than I'd ever before. How was it that I'd lived this long and had never known a desire as potent as what I was feeling for Amy? I could have no more stopped myself from going to her when I saw her on the beach then I could have made myself stop breathing.

Taking someone's virginity was no small matter, and it was not something I would sign up for on a regular basis. Amelia telling me she'd never been with anyone should have given me pause, but somehow I had the knowledge that I would be the first one with her seemed only right. What a problem was the fact that I also wanted to be the last one with her.

I was in some serious trouble.

If I had been entertaining the notion at all that this thing between me and Amy was just going to be a summer thing, then that ridiculous idea had been eradicated the moment we came together.

I wanted to keep her.

It was like a chant in my head whenever she was close: *mine, mine, mine*. Even when my brain wasn't thinking about it, my body seemed to be shouting it. It was like some sort of primal calling that I just couldn't seem to ignore, and I knew that we were headed for trouble if I couldn't get a hold of myself.

Loving every moment that I spent with Amy could not be reason enough to risk hurting my daughter, and I knew that. The quicker I accepted that

thing between us could only happen within the confines of the summer, the more we could just enjoy ourselves without that worry hanging over us. That was what I kept telling myself anyway.

The thing was, something in me knew that delusion was over as soon as I took her on the beach. Hearing the way that she called out my name, feeling her squeeze around me as she came...yeah, I was a goner.

So, my analytical mind kept turning over how I could make this work, how I could make Reagan understand that her best friend was the world, how I could convince Amy that she should take a chance on me

long-term and that I could keep her happy. I knew I would treat her far better than the sad sap she'd broken up with a few months ago, that was the point. But showing her that I could keep her fulfilled and supported, that she could still have it all—that was a whole other thing considering that part of having it all for Amy was her friendship with Reagan. That aspect

at me. It was clear they loved one another. Their friendship was important, and I really did not want to do anything to jeopardize that, even if my friend Amelia said otherwise.

Alas, the pragmatic part of my brain that had ruled for most of my life seemed like it was nowhere to be found. No matter how hard I tried

Amelia, I seemed to be working on pure instinct. While I realized that I would, *mine*, definitely use some more of that in my life, it was frustrating to think about how much was at stake.

That pure instinct was what drove me to spending as much time as I could with Amelia as possible, even if we weren't making love. I just wanted to be around her, soaking her in. After the first morning on the beach, I took her to this romantic seaside restaurant, and we talked for hours about everything—music, art, all the places we still wanted to go to. I told her about the

er, then had already been too, places that I had found boring or overwhelming
er us...realized now that I hadn't been with the right person or in the right fi
mind to enjoy all those opportunities I'd had. Now, I wanted a chanc
on as I them all over again with Amelia by my side. What would those plac
me and like through her eyes?

During our conversation, I found myself hypnotized by Amelia's
work—She had this way of trying to fight her laugh at first, so that finally it b
nan for up until she couldn't help herself anymore. All I wanted to do was fig
e in the new ways to make her laugh. I didn't realize how much I'd been stari
r better her cheeks colored and she asked, "what?"

s a no- I shook my head, "nothing, it's just that has anybody ever told you t
ted and have the best laugh?" Her blush deepened, "I'm going to take that a
ing that and I'm also going to guess that you haven't been told enough ju
ect to be amazing you are."

portant, She gave me a skeptical smile, "I bet you say that to all the women
actions slept with."

I smiled at her playfully, "only the ones I've taken beneath the cove
my life Amelia."

ed with I know we would have stayed longer if it hadn't been for Amy g
I could glance at the time and realizing that Reagan would be off work soon.
k about that we had to be sneaky. At the same time, there was no way I was fo

the opportunity to be with Amy. I loved having Reagan home and
ie without her day, but it killed me to have to pretend in front of both of the
d to be That night, despite everything we had done that morning, I stil
k her to myself out on the beach making my body work to the point of e
thing...Instinctively, I'd known that making love to Amy once would not be e
places I

g. But I but I guess I didn't expect to still possess that gnawing ache that came off from sleeping.

re to do When I finally returned to my room, I noticed a text message on my es look *Amelia: Are you okay?*

I fought the urge to sneak down to her room. She shared a wa : laugh. Reagan, and it would be much too risky. So, I settled for texting her ba ubble *Me: Yes, baby girl. Just needing to work off some excess energy..* gure out *stop thinking about you.*

ng until *Amelia: I can't stop thinking about you either. Today was amazing.*

Me: That's an understatement. Don't think I'm done with you.

hat you Those last words couldn't be truer, but I knew there was going to is a no, time in the not-too-distant future that I would have no choice but to l ist how with her. I tamped down the streak of panic that ran through me thought and returned to my phone, typing quickly before I decided you've my idea.

Me: Hey, I know you have a surf lesson tomorrow, but don't m named plans... I have a surprise for you.

etting a

I hated The night took entirely too long to go by, and I thought Amelia's surf rfeiting would last forever, but I distracted myself by catching up with a fe hearing calls. I was wrapping up my conversation with my assistant whe m. appeared at my office door, freshly showered and ready to go.

I found I cut off my assistant mid-sentence without hesitation. "Jacob, I'm exertion, gotta go. I trust you to make whatever decisions you need to," I to enough, hanging up before he had a chance to respond.

cept me Amelia looked at me nervously, her fingers plucking at the fabric
flowy skirt she wore. It reached mid-calf on her, but the slinky fabric c
phone. her thighs. My mouth watered at the sight of it. My eyes followed the
her body upward, taking in the way her t-shirt molded to her curves. “U
ill with I dressed appropriately for wherever it is we’re going?” she asked.

ick: My eyes met hers, and I briefly considered calling off my original
. I can’t and just taking her across my desk, but I resisted. I was so certain
much she’d love where we were headed, I decided putting off another
blowing orgasm might just be worth it. “You look perfect,” I told her
husky voice.

come a Her cheeks pinkened with pleasure, and she gave me that small, s
e done smile.

at the “Are you ready for our adventure?” I asked her.

against “I think so. I’m anxious to see exactly where it is we’re going,” she
I came to her.

ike any I pulled her to me, kissing her softly on the lips. “Then, we be
going,” I told her, taking her hand as we wound our way towards the
door. As soon as we stepped out onto the porch, Amy slipped her hair
mine.

f lesson I looked at her with a questioning expression. “In case someone
w work don’t know how much your neighbors talk, but we can never be too ca

n Amy She was right, of course, but I couldn’t help but feel a pang of sor
that as we got into my car. I pushed that out of my head, though, as I d
sorry, I into the Pacific Palisades, pointing at various landmarks as we went.

ld him, Finally, we arrived. Amelia looked a little skeptical at first, but as w
our way through the entrance and past the ticket booth, I saw her eyes
in quiet wonder. The Getty Villa was a historical museum built to loo

of the Roman dwelling from the Middle Ages. Tall pillars encompassed
clung to every alcove. Intricate tilework covered the floors and a good deal
line of walls. Everywhere you looked, there was a sculpture on display.

Jim, am I looked at these sites briefly, but mostly, my eyes were trail

Amelia's reaction. "You said at lunch yesterday how badly you would
all plans go to Rome and Greece. I realize that I can't take you to those places
of how now, but I figured I could give you a small taste of them."

her mind- She looked at me with excitement in her eyes. "Julian, this is so beau-
tiful in a mean, if anything, it just makes me even more excited to see the real

someday." I slung my arm around her as we walked through the restorated
museum, enjoying the feel of her close to me and needing to touch her

We spent the rest of the morning exploring all of the exhibits, and
watching her delight in all the details. She got so excited about all the
said as of the pieces, especially when we came across an exhibit featuring

instruments from the Middle Ages. Shy, quiet Amelia became much
more reserved when she was excited about something, and it was a sight to be

in the front It took everything in me just to keep my hands to myself when we w
ould from and about, but as soon as we were back inside the safety of the beach I

held back no more. As soon as Amelia cleared the front doorway, I
kisses. I behind her and gently pushed her up against it. She gasped softly
reful." quickly took advantage of her parted lips by taking her mouth, revelin
in the taste of her. "Do you have any idea how hard it has been not to touch
you?" I muttered.

When I released her mouth, those kiss-swollen lips curved into
a beautiful smile. "I'm hoping as hard as it's been not to touch you."

his eyes widen I leaned into her, giving her another long, wet kiss. "I think it's t
o look like actually get into a proper bed, don't you, Amelia?"

nearly She bit her lip, smiling. "I thought you'd never ask."

of the I led her to my room, ready with the ability to lock the door behind
shut out the rest of the world. Once we were locked in, however, I could
not her fighting her shyness. "Oh no, none of that, my sweet Amelia. All
I like to things we've done together, I want you to forget about getting shy with
me right. In fact, I'm going to need you to be very vocal about what you want."

She huffed out a laugh. "I feel like that's something that people just
don't want to hear *everything* that you want."

I pulled her to me again. "Rest assured, Ms. Amelia: I want to hear
about everything, and I do mean everything. What do you fantasize about
that I can make happen for you?"

I loved She looked at me with uncertainty for a long moment, biting her lip
for a while. Finally sucking in a long breath, she told me, "I want...to
take a shower. It was hot out there, and I would like to wash off." Pulling
herself away from me and heading toward the master bathroom, she stopped just
before the bathroom door and turned around, looking at me coyly. "And I want
you to watch."

"Yeah?" I asked softly, "and what else do you want me to do, Amelia?"
I could see her breathing get harder with every rise and fall of her chest,
and she swallowed hard. "I want you to touch yourself while you watch
me in the then..." she faltered.

"Don't leave me hanging, and then...?"

Her hand reached out to the door frame as if to steady herself. "And
I don't want to suck you off," she said in a breathy voice.

"Goddamn," I breathed. "Like I said before, your wish is my command,
my sweet girl."

She disappeared into the bathroom, and I quickly followed behind.

leaned against the vanity and watched as she slowly peeled off her blouse and then undid the zipper to her skirt before sliding it down to puddle around her ankles. She looked at me pointedly. I grinned at her. Taking the hint, I pulled down the belt along with my fly, shoving my pants and underwear down over my head. It was more than enough for my already hard manhood to spring free. “Is this what you wanted, Amelia?”

She licked her lips, and damn if I didn't want to bend her over the sink right then and there, but this was her moment. We were going to do what we both knew we wanted, even if she was slowly killing me with pleasure. “Almost,” she said. “What do you want?”

I chuckled softly. She was not going to let me off the hook, and I wasn't going to let her. I grasped myself in my hand, giving it slow, long strokes as I waited for her to unhook her bra and let her luscious breasts free as she dropped the bra away from her. Then, she oh so slowly slipped out of her panty. Her hand tightened harder around my member. “Better?” I asked her, and when she gave me a dazed nod, her eyes taking in my hand's movements openly.

“Better?” she asked. Begrudgingly, she moved to turn the water on and gingerly stepped into the shower. I had never been more grateful for my floor-to-ceiling shower door in my life. I could see all of her in all of her wet, naked glory. I was jealous of the rivulets of water sluicing between her generous breasts. She eyed me through the glass as she grabbed the loofah I kept in the shower. I then poured my body wash onto it. With avid interest, I watched that loofah scrub all the places I wanted to so desperately, my hand stroking faster. If I had been more careful, this was going to end before it even started. I slowed my hand, drawing them out, and I saw her sexy smile when she realized what I was doing.

t-shirt, “Enjoying yourself, Amelia?” I asked in a strained voice.
und her “Yes, sir,” she said, ditching the loofah and using her hands to rub
I undid slowly over her breasts. Her eyes were riveted to my hand, and I ab
just farmy load right there when her fingers began plucking at her distended r
u want, She let out a soft moan.

“Fuck,” I breathed. “I could get used to you calling me sir,” I told h
he sink my admission made her grin with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.
that she “You are helping me, right? Instructing me on how to make su
he said satisfied...doesn’t that make me the pupil and you the teacher? It w
only right to call you sir,” she said as she continued to rub soap do
I liked body.

atched “That’s right,” I told her in a gruff voice, “and you’ve already learn
he lacy to tease, haven’t you, Amelia?”

ies, and She smiled seductively. “Maybe I’m just comfortable with you...I f
smiling I can be myself with you.”

vement “You know you can, baby girl. No holding back here,” I told her a
stroking myself.

ed into She shut off the water then and opened the shower door. She step
g glass carefully and toweled herself off. Mercifully, she dropped the towel i
glory. I hamper instead of covering up her beautiful body. I saw a brief fli
breasts. hesitation. “What is it, baby girl?” Her eyes dropped to where my ha
ere and gripping my member, and she licked her lips. I felt myself grow even
h touch at the motion. “Ah, I see. You want me in that sweet, little mouth, Am
wasn’t asked her.

strokes, “Yes, sir,” she said, moving her eyes back to mine.

t I was “Then come here like a good girl,” I directed her.

She moved to stand in front of me, her breasts begging for my a

jutting proudly toward me, those nipples hard and just begging me to nibble on them. “On your knees,” I ordered her. She did as I told her, her lips parted and lost when she came face to face with my hardness. I stroked my fingers across her cheekbone and down to her chin, gripping it lightly in my hand and making her to look up at me. “You want to feel how hard I get for you with my cock, Amelia? Open wide, baby girl.” She did as I instructed, and I pressed my tip on her bottom lip. Seemingly instinctively, her tongue flicked out and licked me. I hissed at the sensation. It should not have set off the pleasure that it did, but there was something about this woman. Even her about her turned me on, and seeing her on her knees before me, poised to take me down her throat, I felt like I’d died and gone to heaven.

She moved her head further onto me, taking more of me into her mouth. Her tongue was hot and velvety, and this time, I didn’t hold back the pleasure I felt like I groaned. She felt too damn good—too goddamn good.

I moved my hand to gently cup the back of her head, guiding her back as I kept forth. “Show me that this is what you want,” I told her. She looked up at me, startled for a second, but when our eyes met, I saw hers darken. Her hand reached out to grasp my base, and my heart started racing even faster as she spread her knees open and her other hand reached down to start stroking herself. “Fuuuck,” I hissed out, “that’s it, baby girl, play with yourself and suck me off. That’s a good girl.” Her mouth started stroking me harder then, going in tandem with her hand pleasuring herself. I knew I wasn’t going to last much longer, but I also knew that it would just take one look from her and I would be ready to go again. “Fuck, you have no idea just how good you are...goddamn, that mouth is so perfect.” She stroked harder, her other hand moving faster against her sensitive flesh. “I’m about to come, Amelia, are you going to swallow every drop?” She nodded and moaned around me, a

o touch was all it took to send me over the edge. I came hard into her mouth, parting someone who'd never done such a thing before, she drank it up hungry over her. I looked down at her swollen lips and the blush that had crept all the way down to her breasts and I knew there was going to be nothing slow or thoughtful about what was about to happen. I'd just orgasmed, and in less than a few seconds, I was hard again, ready for her body.

out and I knew I had to slow down...to calm down, but I was struggling. I tried to focus on what this moment was about. "Amelia," I breathed heavily, "do anything for me what you want.". I needed her guidance here, otherwise I would have been to take putting her in some very interesting positions that she may have not been ready for.

mouth. She licked her lips and told me without an ounce of hesitation, "I would love to take me hard, Julian."

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was all it took to send me over the edge. I came hard into her mouth, and for someone who'd never done such a thing before, she drank it up hungrily.

I looked down at her swollen lips and the blush that had crept all the way down to her breasts and I knew there was going to be nothing slow or gentle about what was about to happen. I'd just orgasmed, and in less than two seconds, I was hard again, ready for her body.

I knew I had to slow down...to calm down, but I was struggling. I needed to focus on what this moment was about. "Amelia," I breathed heavily, "tell me what you want.". I needed her guidance here, otherwise I would be putting her in some very interesting positions that she may have not been ready for.

She licked her lips and told me without an ounce of hesitation, "I want you to take me hard, Julian."

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Amelia

Amelia

I didn't recognize the voice coming out of my mouth, yet I'd never felt more like myself. Being with Julian was liberating, and I felt like I was finally giving voice to some of the fantasies I'd long ago buried. I'd just seduced a man by seductively showering in front of him while he watched me masturbate, and then, I'd sucked him until he'd exploded into my mouth. I realized it probably sounded a little silly, but after being a shy, introverted wallflower for my whole life, it made me feel like anything was possible.

Telling Julian that I wanted him to take me hard had set off a chain of events that still made my head spin when I thought about it...which happened often. It couldn't be helped.

Once those words were out of my mouth, he'd reached down and picked me up by my elbows to a standing position. He moved from where he'd been leaning on the vanity and stood directly behind me. I felt a rush of anticipation race through me as his breath went across the back of my neck. "Put your hands on the sink, Amelia," he instructed. I did as he said, bent over to place my hands on the counter. I felt exposed, bent over in front of him, but as I felt his erection nudge the cleft of my ass, I felt even more excited. He ran a hand up my back and to my shoulder, grasping my hair. His other hand stroked over the curve of my ass a few times before his fingers lowered and playing at my entrance. "You said you wanted to be taken hard, Amelia. Tell me how hard do you want it exactly, baby girl?"

I shuddered at the way he was stroking me. "I want it to be hard, but not too hard that you're all I feel," I managed to get out.

His mouth was by my ear then, promising me, "Don't worry Amelia, I'll make sure you get what you want."

He pushed gently to move me even farther forward, nudging my legs ever farther apart. I felt the tip of him at my entrance, and I found that I couldn't stop my ass from moving farther back, needing him deeper.

His chuckle was low and dark in my ear. "So eager, the perfect punishment," he said before thrusting in deep. I gasped at the impact. His voice was ear-splitting. He instructed me, "You tell me if it gets to be too much, okay?"

I nodded.

"I want to hear you say it, Amelia," he pushed.

"Yes, sir," I rushed out, needing him to keep moving.

At my response, his hands gripped me hard, and he started pumping me. I cried out instantly at the pace, but I loved every second of the sensation of his manhood invading me was so intense that there was no time to think, just feel. His grunts and groans of satisfaction in my ears heightened my pleasure. "Your pussy is so wet for me, I fucking love it," he groaned as his hips pumped into mine, his balls slapping against my neck. He kept that hand at my shoulder and reached his other hand around my waist, squeezing me. He screamed out when his fingers found my engorged bud. "Fuck, Julian, more," he rubbed the swollen nub in tight, little circles as he continued to move in and out of me. Between the sounds of our bodies slapping against each other and the sounds of our collective moans and cries, I was so turned on that I couldn't think, just feel my own wetness dripping down my thighs.

"Look at us, baby girl. Look at me owning your body," he ordered. He looked in the mirror at the sight we made, two people flush with passion. His expression was possessive, and it made me even wetter.

"Julian," I moaned. "I'm going to come, oh my god, I'm going to come so hard."

"Yes, that's my good girl. You come all over me. Do it," he growled.

gs evenear.

ouldn't My hips were now pinned against the counter as his hips took completely, and the feeling made me clench tight around him and the pil," he out into blinding spasms of pleasure and release. "Oh my god," I cried, almost as to catch my breath as my orgasm took possession of my body at that moment.

I could feel Julian's fingers biting into my hips. I met his eyes in the mirror and, feeling empowered by my effect on him, pressed my ass harder against the wild thrusts and breathed out what encouragement my oxygen deprived body could come up with. "Please, Julian. Please, come for me, fill me up." He let out a deep, guttural sound, then surging up inside me once, twice, three times. The times, he exploded inside me.

o space "Jesus Christ," he huffed out, wrapping his arms around my waist and only resting his head on my shoulder. I welcomed the weight of him against me... smiling at our reflection in the mirror. He caught my expression and reached down to kiss the side of my face. "My sweet, sweet Amelia...you're going to kill me."

in!" He I laughed out loud, strangely proud of his announcement. No more in and wallflower here, just a woman who just got what she wanted and brought her man down to his knees in the process.

I could

lered. I The next couple of weeks went by in a blur. Between surf lessons, hanging out with Reagan on her days off, and being with Julian when she was at work, it felt like I was go-go-go all the time...and I loved it. It also added bonus of wearing me out to the point that any guilt I was having was quickly taken over by exhaustion. I had come to the conclusion in my mind that Julian was right. Our relationship was between the two of us, and it

wasn't anybody's business. There was no reason we couldn't enjoy each other, and there was no reason that anybody had to get hurt in this situation spiral. Being with Julian had an interesting effect on me. Initially, I thought, trying was just going to help me explore my sexuality. As time went by, however, the moment had morphed into something much more than student and patient teacher. I knew I could easily attribute my boost in self-confidence to being blissed out on orgasms, but deep down, I understood that it was more than that.

I'd spent my lifetime blending into the crowd. There had never been anything that was particularly remarkable about me—at least that was more I'd thought. Now, I had this gorgeous man telling me how much he

looked forward to hearing my laugh. He actually engaged in conversation and didn't seem bored by my excitement over art and music. In fact, he fed on me, fascinations. I was pretty sure we'd gone to every museum and art gallery within a hundred-mile radius, and he'd never once acted like he was going to me some favor. He acted like he wanted to be there as much as I did.

I couldn't help but wonder if his interest would last past our summer if he would still be as seemingly fascinated by me if this were to extend past our expiration date. Every time that thought intruded into my happiness, I shook it loose. I was determined not to let worries about the future intrude on the present. I was done with that. Right now, everything was in the moment.

It was something I was reminded of during every surf lesson. I was struggling to find my footing on my board, but instructor Toni said she was at the beach to see me improving and that it was just a matter of time before it all clicked. "It's okay to be a late bloomer, Amy. They tend to enjoy their surfing more," she told me, and she was right. I was enjoying the hell out of it on that damn, it was hard not to feel that way when Julian would look at me

and I'd really damn, it was hard not to feel that way when Julian would look at me

and I'd really damn, it was hard not to feel that way when Julian would look at me

my each lust-hazed eyes, and I could tell that he was already doing filthy things in his head, just waiting for the moment he could make those things a reality. It was a heady time in my life, and it transformed me in a way that I never, I thought I was capable of. To my mixed emotions, Reagan noticed. “What have you been up to?” she asked me one afternoon as we strolled out across the boardwalk and enjoyed our gelatos we’d picked up at one of the stands.

When any My pulse quickened at her tone of voice. She didn’t sound mad as what definitely suspicious. I decided to play it off. “What do you mean?” I asked. “I mean, there’s definitely something different about you. I mean, I didn’t think you’re enjoying your surf lessons, and my dad said he took you to all those museums—snooze! I don’t know how you all can have so much fun at all these gallery places, but to each their own, I guess, but...” She slowed down, eyes scanning me thoughtfully. I didn’t acknowledge her examination, terrified that everything I’d been doing would somehow be written all over my face. “There’s something different about you. I just can’t put my finger on it...” *Oh, and past thought to myself, please change the subject.*

“Whatever it is, Ames, it’s doing you good,” she said, and I almost choked on my gelato. “No, I’m serious,” she said, mistaking my choking for a sign of derision. “You’re standing taller, you’re laughing more, and you just have this, I don’t know, it’s this sort of glow about you.”

I avoided her eyes. “I think that it’s just a Malibu tan.” I shrugged. “No, that’s not it,” she said. Damn, she was going to be a good lawyer. She did not know the meaning of letting things go. She stilled all the things I’d done for myself and I dared a glance at her face to see that her eyes widened and her mouth had dramatically dropped open. “I know what it is,” she hissed. “You do?” I asked nervously.

s to me “I do,” she said with an emphatic smile. “There’s a boy, isn’t there?”
reality. asked in a stage whisper.

I never “What? No, there’s no boy,” I insisted, thinking that was not technically
lie. One could hardly call Julian a boy, after all.

ambled “Well, it’s either that or you got a vibrator.” I rolled my eyes at her
e of the “Which, for real, Amy, it’s about time. Every adult woman should have
battery-operated boyfriend. Shit, even if you have a real boyfriend,
had but sometimes you still want some quality alone time, you know what I mean?”

“It’s not that either,” I insisted, laughing.

I know She shook her head at me, smiling maniacally. “Amy, you are the most
o someliar. C’mon, there is a guy, isn’t there? Where did you meet him? Was it
at those surf lesson? On the beach? How romantic,”

ing me “Reagan,” I cautioned.

rything She continued over my protests. “Ooh, when do I get to meet him?
There’s gotta let your best friend vet him out.”

God, I “Reagan,” I said in a pleading voice.

“I just have to make sure he’s not another Michael,” she said, and I
choked laugh to myself, thinking that the man in my life was the exact opposite
a snort Michael in just about every way imaginable.

ist have “Reagan!” I said loudly.

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry. I’m just excited for you...for whatever reason,”
she said, smiling, and I felt like the worst friend in the world. “Whatever,
yer, but it is,” she continued, “keep doing it because I’ve never seen you this happy
sudden, looked up sharply at this comment. “I mean it, Amy, I was really stressed
mouth worry about you for a while. Seeing you like this makes me so happy
mean, if anyone deserves some happiness, it’s you.” I wanted to burst into
tears right there on the spot. She threw an arm around my shoulder

comfort me. “Oh, don’t go and get all misty-eyed on me now, Ames,” she teased.

I tried to swallow around the lump in my throat, I wanted to stop her and tell her everything (well, maybe not quite everything) right there. I thought I could keep up the pretense, but at that moment, with my best friend in the world looking at me so earnestly and telling me how excited she was for my newfound happiness, I could hardly bear the knowledge that everything she was commenting on was because of her father.

I tamped the urge to spill my guts. It wasn’t just me I needed to worry about. If I decided to confess my sins to Reagan, it would not only hurt her... but also Julian. Julian and Reagan adored each other, and I didn’t have the heart to mess that up. So, I shut my mouth and smiled wanly at my best friend. “Thanks Reagan.”

“I’ll always want whatever makes you happy, Amy, no matter what...and I can’t wait to meet this mystery guy,” she added in a hushed tone.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Julian

Julian

The days were rushing by much too quickly. I waffled between wanting time to go by faster so I could get to spend time with Amy and to slow it down so we wouldn't get to that inevitable point where we had no ways.

I did everything I could to not think about that day. I guess a part of me thought that somehow, some way, a solution would present itself before the final buzzer. In the meantime, I just had to stay focused on the present. My current present was a day where Amy was off at one of her surf lessons and Reagan had off. We decided to do a daddy/daughter date like when I was younger. That always consisted of a matinee where we filled up on candy and popcorn and then ice cream afterward.

It was nice to have some time with my daughter. She'd filled me in on all the goings on and drama at the law firm she was working at, and I'd had some similar experiences I'd had over the years in my practice. I couldn't and shouldn't try to fix all her hang-ups and issues she ran into as she navigated her career path, but c'mon. I was her dad, and I was going to give her way more advice than she wanted.

We went to see a horror flick, our favorite. Sitting there in the dark with my daughter and sharing a bucket of popcorn with her, I had an overwhelming urge to let her know that something amazing had happened. That two people she cared about had found one another and made each other happy and that it was something to be celebrated. But when she looked at me with that bright, unassuming smile, I clammed up.

We watched the movie in companionable silence, then per our tradition I took her out for some rocky road ice cream afterward, hoping to mys

her favorite flavor wasn't prophetic.

wanting “This is a lot of fun, Dad, like old times. We should do this more often,” she said, taking a swipe at her ice cream cone.

l to part “Yeah, we really should. And if I have my way, we'll be able to, Dad,” she said casually.

t of me She tilted her head, looking at me suspiciously. “What does that mean for the exact?”

nt. And I shrugged. “Nothing really. I'm just thinking it's time that I cut back on my lessons.”

hen she Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Wow, I knew you were feeling burnt out, but I didn't realize it was that bad.”

I shook my head. “It's not just about being burned out. I just realized that I'm wanting more out of my life...something that clients and successful people can't give me.”

knew I She smiled at me with a raised eyebrow. “Something that a coach could give you?” she ventured.

going to I sighed heavily. “Maybe.”

“No maybe about it, Dad, it's time you get back out there. You still have time to find that special someone. You're not dead yet, for goodness sake,” she said.

ppened. I huffed out a laugh. “Thank you, I think?”

h other “You know what I mean,” she said, waving a hand around dismissively. “You never really got to have that special someone who you can rely on.”

lition, I “Hey, I know things didn't work out, but I was committed to your dream,” I argued, not wanting her to get the idea that I ran around on her mom.

“I know that, it's just...” she trailed off.

“Just what?” I pressed.

often,” She met my eyes, and I could see an old hurt in them. “I know what you did to you, Dad,” she said in a quiet voice.

” I said I felt like someone socked me in the stomach. Her mother and I had been divorced for so long that it almost seemed like it had happened to someone else, but seeing the pain in my daughter’s eyes, it took me right back to that place. “Oh, I see,” I said quietly. “And how is it that you know?” I had no idea since the information wasn’t public knowledge, especially not to her.

Reagan sighed, looking a little tentative before she admitted, “One night when I was staying with her, she came home from a date. It was clear she’d been a little overserved. I had to help her get to bed, and I guessed that booze made her think it was confession time because she told me all the details. Said that my father was a good man and that she’d been the one to screw it up.” I didn’t know what to say to this revelation. Honestly, I was a little pissed. I’d worked so hard to protect Reagan over the years but there were some truths that kids did not need to know about their parents. Then again, here I was hiding something huge from my daughter. I would have rather known than her cheating mother.

’ sake,” A memory dawned on me. “Was that the summer you came home early?” She nodded. “Once she was sober, I confronted her, and we got into a bit of a fight. I just decided I’d rather be at home with you. I mean, I know you can forgive her eventually, but I was really pissed at her for a while.”

commit There was a long silence between us as this new information sank in. Finally, I sighed and said, “Well, I, for one, am glad that you chose to tell me. I know your mother because she really does love you.”

“Yeah,” she said, “I realized that, plus I realized that you two were much better off apart. I mean, she obviously needed to sow some wild seeds.”

and you—you deserve someone more stable and ready to give her
at Mom you...which is why I wish you would go out and find that someone
started with the rest of your life.” She poked at me, raising her eyebrow
and being a goofy display.

Someone “Who says I haven’t?” I blurted out before I could think better of it.
Up to that Reagan’s eyes widened. “Shut up! Have you met someone? Dad!
I had to ask been holding out on me.”

I sucked in a breath, trying to quell the slight swell of panic that
summer inside of me. I hedged, “Well, it’s really new...and a little complicated.
I obviously added the last part for good measure, hoping it would make her change
the subject. I was wrong.

Well about She made a face and said, “Dad, you don’t need complicated.”

Someone to I smiled gently at her. “Sometimes, it’s worth it.”

I was a She raised an eyebrow again, but this time, it was serious. “She must
because get you out of your dry spell.”

Parents. “Excuse me, what do you know about dry spells?” I asked. She opened
her mouth to answer, but I put up a hand to stop her. “Nope, scratch that,
I need to know.”

Early?” She laughed. “Is this ‘new complicated’ person the reason you’ve
been a huge walking around here like you’re ten feet tall?” she asked.

Now I’d I felt a slight hitch in my pulse. We were encroaching on some
territory. “Maybe I’m just really enjoying my summer.”

Thank in. She shook her head at my lack of a real response. “Cagey,” she muttered
and then added, “you and Amy both.”

That slight hitch kicked into overdrive, and my pulse went into
overdrive so gallop. “What about me and Amy?” I asked, hoping to God that my father
wouldn’t

er all toweren't showing on my face. I'd spent an entire career attaining success and getsuccess thanks to my poker face. I sincerely hoped it wouldn't fail me
ws in a "Well, I don't want to gossip, but I suspect Amy has got herself a
Reagan said in hushed tones.

"Is that right?"

You've "Yeah, she won't give me details, but I know something is up. Have
noticed the change in her from the first day we were here to now
surgedwalking with more confidence, she's much quicker to laugh—all th
ated." IMichael put her through...it's almost like it never happened, or
nge thedoesn't matter anymore."

I couldn't help the faint smile that curved my lips. She was right, of
Amy did seem much happier, and I hoped at the very least that this M
person was now firmly a distant memory for her.

st be to Reagan shrugged her shoulders, then said, "Either way, I'm happy f
of you. And I hope that you're able to 'uncomplicate' things wit
ned herspecial friend because I'd really like to see you get a real second ch
I don'tlove, Dad."

I smiled at her, biting back my confession. I wanted to unburden
ve beenbut at what expense? I didn't want to sour their friendship, and
needed at least one parent she could trust. I pushed past the heaviness
e diceymy heart. "I don't know what I did to deserve you, kiddo..."

I gave my daughter a hug, trying to quell the mix of emotions s
uttered,inside of me. I was sure I'd have more answers about what to do by n

I was starting to realize I already knew the answer. I was just scar
o a fullbecause it might hurt like hell.

feelings There was no help for it now. I had to tell Amy how I felt about her.

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Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Amelia

Amelia

Something had shifted...and I couldn't quite figure out what it was, but I knew I had to do something about it.

My time with Julian was different. Whereas there had been a lightness to him and our moments together before, there was a new, deeper intensity to him now. The way he made love to me, the way he whispered sweet things in my ear. Hell, even the way he held me now was intense...like he didn't want to let go.

This kind of scared me—not because I was afraid of him, though in a matter of fact, I'd never felt as safe as I did with Julian. No, it scared me because I already knew I didn't want to let go. The end of the summer was racing towards us, and I had no clue how I was going to handle it. It was one thing to get your heart broken, it was another thing altogether to *know* that a heartbreak was coming for you. Yet, I felt powerless to stop any of it. I wanted to soak up every second I could with Julian, and because of that, I found myself sharing things with him that I hadn't expected to. When this first started, I told myself it might be a good idea to reserve the hopes and dreams conversation. You know, the conversation you had with someone when you might actually have a future with.

One afternoon, as we lay in bed in each other's arms, his fingers running up and down my bare skin, causing goosebumps to appear and a shiver, he casually asked, "Amelia, what do you want out of your life?"

I laughed. "That's a loaded question, don't you think? I mean, what are you referring to?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. "I mean, what are your goals? What things do you want to have or accomplish to say that you have a fulfilled life?"

I answered before I could catch myself, “Well, for a fulfilled life, it was orbe having a family, a partner who understood me, and a job where I could come back.” When he looked at me quizzically, I thought I’d just put my focus to mouth—of course he wasn’t referring to marriage and kids, though I eventually answered honestly.

So, when he answered with, “Me too,” I was shocked for several reasons. For one thing, Reagan had always told me how both of her parents were workaholics. She’d always made it clear that her father made a point to be there for whenever she needed or wanted him around, but I knew he worked in long hours. Still, I’d gotten the impression that he’d like his job, even if he was suffering from some burnout.

I looked at him with a questioning expression. “I thought you liked what you did.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment before answering. “I did, but I think that, I just feel like all I do is help a bunch of rich assholes who already have everything get that ‘everything’ delivered to them just so. I know Reagan is kind of stressed because she’s just starting out, but in a way, I’m envious of her. She’s going in still hoping to make a real change, and knowing I can’t do that.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that,” I agreed.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately, that I want to slow down and do something more meaningful...and I’ve been thinking about really wanting someone to exactly share my life with, but I just didn’t think I’d ever find that person. To be honest, the truth, I was really starting to fear that I’d lost my chance.”

I dared to meet his eyes, even though I was terrified as to what I would find there as I asked, “And do you still think that you’ve lost your chance?”

His eyes searched mine. “I don’t know, Amelia, you tell me...do I

t would chance?”

an give I was at a loss for words. “Julian, I-I don't know what to say.” His face
it in my and it felt like my heart was going to break. I'd thought my heart had
igh I'd over Michael, but that pain was nothing compared to what was threaten
overtake just from one look from Julian.

asons. *Just be honest Amy, be true to your feelings.*

ts were “I want to tell you that there would be a chance. I want that mo
of being anything,” I said, the tears welling up in my throat. I blinked hard to l
logged tears back, but one slipped out anyway.

en if he “Amy,” he breathed, cupping my face in his large hands. The tears
freely then. I couldn't seem to help myself. He swiped them away w
ce what pads of his thumb. “Please, don't cry. I know the situation is no
believe me, I know that. But there's got to be a way—”

lately, I “No,” I cried, “Julian, she'll hate us both, and I don't know if either
ly have us can survive that.” I started to get up, but he pulled me back do
again is hovered over me.

rious of “Amy, don't leave,” he said, “not yet anyway.” He kissed my face
ner, his neck, then my lips. After giving me a long, thorough kiss, he held my
a look that successfully hammered the first fracture in my heart. “Let r
you while I still can,” he whispered. He kissed me again, catching r

nothing We made love, and it was unlike any time we'd ever shared together
body to We clung to one another as if it was our last time, and he whispered o
tell you over again how he loved me, but he didn't push me when I couldn't
back. I'd like to think that he knew how I felt for him, but I knew if I :

ould see words to him, the pain of the inevitable would swallow me whole. So r
' not saying the words could somehow keep the lid on our time together
have a After that afternoon, there was a more potent urgency to our time to

We also took risks we didn't normally. Before, we were only together when Reagan was at work. Now, I was sneaking to his room as soon as I woke up before she was asleep. I'd get up at an ungodly hour to make sure I was in his room before Reagan was up for her morning run before work.

I was getting addicted to sleeping in his arms, and I knew what was doing was dangerous, but I didn't think I could have stopped myself if I tried. It was a few nights after he told me he loved me that everything almost fell apart. The alarm on my phone had gone off one to three times, but Julian kept pulling me back to bed for just a few more minutes of cuddling.

I should have just stayed put, that probably would have been the best option, but I was dazed and tired after a long, incredible night of making love with Julian when I snuck out of his room in a t-shirt and panties. I was in a room halfway between my room at the end of the hall and Julian's bedroom. Reagan popped out of her bedroom, ready to go in her joggers and sports bra.

She raised a questioning eyebrow at me and my lack of clothes. "Ames, myokay?"

My pulse was thundering in my ears as the voice in my head ordered me to move and that staying frozen would only lead to more suspicion. "My sob.yeah," I stuttered, "I just needed to use the bathroom." I silently told myself as I remembered that the bathroom was right next to my room and there was absolutely no reason for me to be this far down the hall.

Her brow furrowed, confused, but she smiled at me like she was talking to a small child. "Ames, the bathroom is right next to your room, remember? I think you need some more sleep, girl. You haven't been sleeping well since you had to do that all-night cram session for your ancient history final."

er while I started to nod sleepily and move towards the bathroom when the bedroom door opened behind me. I held my breath, doing my best to remain calm and not show the panic that was welling up in my chest. A pair of eyes was stoked to an even hotter frenzy when I saw Reagan look behind her. Her eyes about popped out of her head. Slowly, I dared a look over my shoulder to see Julian standing in his doorway dressed in nothing but boxers-briefs.

o many “Daaaaaad,” Reagan whined, “for God’s sake, put some clothes on before you come out. You’re embarrassing me,” she huffed.

I could see the alarm in the tense way he stood frozen, but I hoped it was safe that Reagan didn’t notice it. “Uh, right, sorry,” he muttered and scurried quickly back into his room.

. I was I turned back to Reagan when I heard his door click shut. She was looking down with her head in dismay and a little disgust. “Sorry about that, Ames.” She looks a little hesitant, then gathered her courage to say what she obviously wanted to tell me. “Listen, I know I don’t have to worry about my dad, but you should put on some shorts when you leave your room,” she said to me directly.

‘Uh, y- I smiled at her and simply nodded, not trusting what might come out of my cursed mouth. Watching with a rock sitting at the bottom of my gut, she moved on and out the door, seemingly unaware of any duplicity on my father’s part.

dealing I rushed back to my room, locking the door behind me. The tea room, fresh and hot, and I could not stop them if my life depended on this. I knew deep down what Julian and I were doing could not be painless. The jagged fracture I could already feel starting to form in my heart was evidence of that.

Julian's He told me he loved me...and what was worse was that I knew
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He told me he loved me...and what was worse was that I knew I loved him, too.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Julian

Julian

The hallway incident had shaken up Amy quite a bit. She avoided most of the day, and by the time I got to see her again, Reagan was already home.

What terrified me was the fact that the one time in that evening that our eyes briefly met, I could see her pulling away. I was losing her, and the realization of that was sending me into a panic. We had to get our nerves straightened out. There were three adults in this situation, and there was no reason that this couldn't be hashed out in a mature manner...except I knew deep down that wasn't the case. This wasn't one of my clients trying to position themselves into more favorable terms—there was a friendship, and love on the line.

First things first, I had to make sure Amy and I were on the same page. Then, once that was secure, we could sit down with Reagan and explain how we felt about one another. I knew she'd be upset, but I also knew her as a very pragmatic young woman and that sooner or later she would see that her dad and her best friend were happy together.

Amy didn't come to my room that night. I paced the floor for a couple of hours, trying desperately to figure out what the hell I could do to make this as less painful—none of my solutions were seamless. The fact of the matter was there was just no way this wasn't going to be a little sloppy, but I eventually reached the conclusion that this was just life: it's messy, and when something is really important, it can get particularly messy.

At a little past one in the morning, I couldn't take it anymore. I went quietly and silently to Amy's room, and I didn't bother with a knock, knowing that I could wake Reagan. When I opened the door, it was to discover that

bed was empty. Panic hit me like a bucket of ice water, but just as quickly as I was hit with a surge of relief when I spied Amy sitting out on her balcony, I went to her, and when she saw me, her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Are you doing here? You're going to get caught," she whisper-hissed. "I can't help it, Amy. You didn't come to me, and we really need to talk about this," I said, and she whispered back.

She looked around her furtively, then moved towards me, pushing me into the room. "We can't talk here, what if Reagan hears us?" she whispered, gesturing towards the wall that she shared with my daughter. She was trying to tell me that Reagan liked to sleep with the balcony door open at night, so she still got a sea breeze inside her room.

"Fine, then let's go to my room," I said quietly, starting to turn, but my hand on my arm stopped me.

"No," she said.

"No?" I questioned, and looking down into her solemn, sad eyes, the reality of what was happening hit me like a Mack truck.

Her eyes were welling up with tears as she said quietly, "I can't...anymore."

And there was the knockout. I'd been dodging psychological blows and uppercuts throughout our whole relationship knowing that death was finally your time together would come much sooner than I would ever be prepared for. Now, Amy herself had delivered the hit that would take me out like nothing.

I collapsed onto the edge of her bed in a sitting position, my knees that turned to jelly. My brain churned with urgings to make her take it back, but I was a lawyer, goddammit, and a damn good one, yet I couldn't come up

ickly, I convincing argument after that blow to the heart except to say weakly
ony. more day.”

“What “What?” she asked in a broken voice.

“Give me one more day,” I pleaded, and I could see the war in her
talk,” I the way she bit her lip to hold back a sob. I just wanted to hold he
sensed she wouldn’t allow it at that moment. So, I hung all my hopes
ne back little words, “Please, Amelia.”

spered, She struggled for a long moment, and I could see the tears beginning
is right. freely down her cheeks before she finally uttered a quiet, “Okay.”

gets the Clenching her fists as her side, she turned back toward the b
“Goodnight, Julian,” she whispered before exiting the room and resum
but her perch on the balcony.

“Goodnight, Amelia,” I whispered to the empty room before tak
leave.

res, the I would give her a day she’d never forget. I would give her a d
would make her realize that we were worth fighting for.

it...we

y shots I barely slept that night since there was too much to do. By the time
bell for was up for her morning run, I’d already been to the twenty-four-hour
repared to get all my supplies. I was in the kitchen pouring myself yet another
e I was coffee when she passed by. “You’re up awful early,” she commented.

“I have a few time-sensitive things to take care of,” I said, know
having would assume it was something to do with work.

κ. I was “Hmm, and here I was thinking it had something to do with yo
with a friend you won’t tell me about,” she teased as she turned to go.

y, “One I called after her before I could stop myself, “Reagan...” She
towards me with a small smile on her face, waiting for me to c
talking. “I’m going to tell you all about her soon, we just have some
eyes...we have to work out first.”

r, but I She looked at me oddly but smiled anyway. “Um, okay, Dad.” She
on two for the door with a wave. “I’ll see you later then,” she called behind he
watched as she jogged down the porch steps and set off at a sprint ac
g to falls and.

What I needed to tell her weighed heavy on my heart, and it was
alcohy.between figuring out a way to minimize the damage with my daugh
ing her how much I needed to convince Amy that what was going on betw
couldn’t be over.

ing my

lay that The wait for Amy to be done with her surf lesson seemed interminal
when she returned, I did my best to act like the night before
happened...like we weren’t ticking down our final minutes together.
my way, these wouldn’t be our final minutes together, but I needed
Reagan Mary and fast.

market For her part, Amy seemed determined to pretend it was just like an
cup of day, and I appreciated that from her. I didn’t think I could handle it i
the same look in her eyes as I did the night before, and I was hugely r
ing sheto see her amused smile when she saw where I was taking her. She
over at me. “You can’t be serious?”

ur lady I shrugged nonchalantly. “What, you don’t want a day full of f
stuffing our faces with carnival food?” I looked at what she was seei
boardwalk was crammed with various vendors, and there was a Ferri:

turned along with other rides and booths with a variety of games. It was Montine annual Summer Solstice. During our outings to all of the museums, Amy mentioned how she'd always wanted to go to a fair or carnival but hadn't gotten a chance to as a kid. Considering the conversation that was ahead of us, I figured something light-hearted would be in order.

She laughed. "I can't believe this is what you chose."

"Anything to make you smile, Amelia," I told her in all seriousness. There was a long pause as she looked at me, and I couldn't shake the feeling

she was holding back. Shaking off the moment, I took her hand. "Shall we go?" We spent the next few hours hitting up each booth and riding all the

between us. I did my best to win Amy every stuffed animal I could get my hands on, which was a little tricky considering how most of those games were

but she did walk away with a stuffed panda bear. I even got to kiss my girl. Amelia as we rode the Ferris wheel, and for the first time in a long

time, but I faced the dual joy and agony of potentially life-altering decisions.

On our drive back to the house, Amy was quiet, and this silence filled me with dread. I tried to push it away by filling the air with chatter—telling

her about other fairs and carnivals I'd heard about and about maybe taking her there someday, trying not to be too discouraged at her non-committal

responses.

Once we were at the house, I set to work preparing an early dinner for the two of us, and for a few moments, it felt like maybe things were not

looking well, as normal as they could be under the circumstances. Amy jumped in to help at first, but about halfway through getting everything together, she

stopped, looking up at me with watery eyes. *Oh hell.*

"Amy," I said, putting up my hands, "before you say anything, please just talk about our relationship?"

Julian's head. She shook her head, sniffing. "What is there to talk about? We both had this had an expiration date. We can try to extend it, but we can't avoid it—never inevitable—it will just make it more painful," she said on a hiccup.

I went to her then and pulled her into my arms, alarmed at how quickly tears soaked the front of my shirt. I hated seeing her in this much pain.

"This doesn't have to be painful, and there doesn't have to be an expiration date—"

She shook her head against me, trying to argue, but I pressed forward. "Listen to me. Reagan is reasonable. She may be upset at first, but given time, she'll come around."

She pushed me away then, anger replacing her tears. "What are you saying? You know that's not possible, no matter how easy you make it for her. She'd be devastated and you know it—you say it would be okay now, but when you honestly look me in the eyes and tell me you can handle how badly she will feel with both of us? Could you handle your daughter not talking to you?"

I scrubbed a frustrated hand over my face. "Of course, I wouldn't want to even think about her not having anything to do with me, but I don't think I would come to that, Amy...don't you see?" I asked, pulling her to me.

and looking into her eyes. "This is bigger than both of us. I didn't expect to just feel this way—certainly not with my daughter's best friend, but life isn't always what you want. It always delivers you what is practical." I cupped her face in my hands. "I need you to know that."

"Julian," she said shakily, "You got to know by now that it's not my side, but I can't let myself say it because..." she hesitated.

"Because what, Amelia," I pressed.

"Because then it's real, and it's going to hurt so much to let it go."

h knew admitted tearfully.

oid the “Then don’t let go,” I pleaded with her, “don’t ever let go.” I kis
afterwards, tasting her tears. I let out a groan of relief when she wrap
kly her arms around my neck, clinging to me. Our hands moved on their own
“Amy, There was no conscious thought to what happened next, just clothes l
be an the floor and both of us collapsing in one another’s arms on the ce
wasn’t like all the other times. There was no taking our time, there
d, “No, foreplay. Instead, there was this intense urgency to be as close as pos
time, I one another. I relished the way she clutched at me and the little moans
out against my skin, wishing that it would go on forever. And as I p
ou even into her, I whispered all the ways I wanted to make her mine and
: sound. wanted that to be forever. She sobbed my name against my neck as I
but cantightened around my waist.

etrayed We were lost in each other and lost in the moment, so much so
king to didn’t hear the front door opening, or the footsteps coming towards us
a moment that would stay with me for the rest of my life, I heard a sha
want to and the sound of my daughter’s voice screaming, “What the fuck?”
think it Amelia and I instinctively broke apart, which only made the scr
e again from Reagan worse. I rushed to cover Amy and myself, catching glim
spect to the completely betrayed and horrified expression on my daughter’s fac
doesn’t “What the hell is going on?” Reagan shrieked.

“I love “Reagan, please calm down,” I said as I shoved my pants back on v
couch to block all my unmentionables. Amy had turned away, quietly
ot one-her clothes back on and shaking. I wanted to reach for her but knew it
the time.

“Calm down? Calm down! I just walked in on you fucking my best
o,” she Tell me how I’m supposed to be calm? My God, is this how you’ve

‘entertaining’ her all summer?” she yelled, fire in her eyes. I’d never seen her daughter look so disappointed in me, and it cut me deeply, though I’d expected her to know what I’d been expecting. For her part, Amy looked like she was about to melt into the floor.

“Look, I know this was a shock to you, but it’s not what you’re thinking of,” I began.

“It’s not what I’m *thinking*? Really, Dad? I know what I just saw, and I can’t unsee that. There’s really no misunderstanding what was happening; she let it all out. “And you,” she said, turning on Amy, “how could you do this to me. I trusted you. I worried and prayed over you, and this is how you repaid me? By sleeping with my father?”

Amy was as pale as a ghost, misery etched all over her face, “Reagan, I’m sorry. Things got out of control, and I-I-we never wanted to hurt you. You have to believe me.”

Reagan scoffed at Amy’s words, and I could see how that reaction affected her. “Reagan, I know you’re upset, and you have every right to be—”

“Damn right I do,” she huffed.

“...But you didn’t just walk in on some fling,” I said. Reagan’s disbelieving expression turned suspicious, but I plowed on—no going back now.

“Amelia,” I said, and the silence that swallowed the room made me jump out of my own skin.

A pain smile curved my daughter’s mouth as she hissed out her words, “Un-fucking-believable. And what about you, Amy? Huh? You weren’t to stand there and tell me you fell in love with my *father*,” she spit the word.

Amy bit her lip, tears streaming down her face as she admitted quietly, “I didn’t mean for it to happen, but yes, I do love him.”

een my My heart soared at her confession, but it was quickly shot down by I don'tuttering, "Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you two?" Reagan started l s aboutaway, tears welling up in her eyes but refusing to fall down her cheeks both must think I am some sort of stupid not noticing anything wrong king," Ilaughed humorlessly.

"No, sweetheart, that's not it. Our feelings for one another were 7, and I meant to hurt you, they just happened. I know you're upset right now ening," maybe if we all take some time to cool off, you'll see this isn't that bad o this to Reagan was shaking her head before I even finished. "No, nope, you u repaytalk your way out of this one, Dad. That lawyering bullshit may work everyone else, but you forget that you taught me all of those techniques agan, I-if you think I'm going to fall for this calm, cool, collected mediator p irt you.forget it." By that point, she'd backed up nearly to the door. She between me and Amy one last time before saying in a teary voice, "You . tore atare dead to me."

" Then, she was gone.

"Reagan," I called after her, but I knew it was no use. Those words i believingheart out, but I also knew it was no use to go after her at that moment "I loveneeded time to calm down.

want to I looked to Amy, hoping at least I could get her to calm down and s as hard as this was now, it could get better. She was having none er nextstarted toward her, but she held her hand up to stop me. "Don't," s u goingbefore bolting for her bedroom.

out the Dejected, I sat down on the edge of the couch, running my hands t my hair. This had all gone so wrong, but I couldn't help but feel that ietly, "I still be fixed. At least that was what I told myself—that I couldn't lose even as a part of me knew that was desperation talking.

Reagan I didn't go after Amy, even though everything in me wanted to storm her dressing room and hold her until the tears stopped and she was willing to let me go. "You knew she needed space just like Reagan did. As hard as it was to just sit and do nothing, I felt like for the time being it was my best option. Then until Amy emerged from her room, her bag slung over her shoulder and a never-suitcase in hand.

Now, but "Amy, what are you doing?" I asked lamely, rising from the couch. "I'm staring at her tear-streaked face with my heart in my throat.

You can't "I think it's best that I go—" she started

to work with "No, don't just run away from this, Amy—"

reasons. So, "I'm not running." Her voice rose in anger but evened out

personally, continued, "I am salvaging what's left of my dignity and trying not to

look bad in a situation even worse. I'm sorry, Julian, I really am, but we did

do something we agreed we wanted to avoid the most—we hurt Reagan. And

she's not going to stick around and pile onto that trying to convince her of something

that she'll never be ok with. I'm not going to continue to get in between

you and your daughter."

Eventually. She I stepped into her path, at a loss for what to say, so I said what was

in my heart, "Amy, I love you."

to see that Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks and her bottom lip quivered

with it. I answered tearfully, "I love you, too, Julian."

He said Seeing the resolution on her face even as she told me she loved me

my heart broke all the way this time—no fracture, no little nicks or dings

through this was the full, life-upending break. "There's nothing I can say to make

it could stay, is there?"

Without hope, Biting her lip to keep from crying more, she shook her head.

I almost went down on my knees as she rushed past me with her bag

orm her when the door slammed behind her, I didn't fight it anymore. I sank d
listen. I the floor and wept like a child, the sum of my world having left me
sit there minutes of one another.

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when the door slammed behind her, I didn't fight it anymore. I sank down on the floor and wept like a child, the sum of my world having left me within minutes of one another.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Amelia

Amelia

I didn't remember how the hell I got to my parents' house. I was sure driving with tears in my eyes the whole time was dangerous, but I managed to make it back without any incident.

My parents were surprised to see me. For one thing, it was late, and another, I probably looked like quite a sight with my puffy eyes and a thousand-yard stare. I'd lost the two people who meant the most to me in a fell swoop. At some point, numbness set in, and I'd never been more grateful for that in my entire life.

I would have loved to just go back to school, but I didn't really know anywhere I could go there. Reagan and I had left our dorm room, and I'd planned on sharing an apartment just off campus, but I was guessing that was shot to hell now. So, that's how I ended up holed in my childhood bedroom for the last couple of weeks of summer break, trying desperately to come up with a plan for new lodging and figuring what the hell it was I was doing with my life.

My parents kept giving me worried looks, and I couldn't blame them, but I also wasn't open to their pushing either. Despite how everything had turned out, that didn't change the fact that I was not the same Amy who started the summer. Somewhere along the way, I'd finally accepted the fact that I was someone of worth, even if I had made a mistake. I was not the same woman Michael had cheated on, and I was not the same woman who someone else thought okay to mock or judge. I had loved and been loved, and that was the matter was that even though I absolutely hated the way I hurt Reagan, I couldn't regret one moment I had with Julian.

Maybe my surf instructor Toni had gotten through to me when she pretty much encouraged me to be in the moment—no matter how much it hurts, but I definitely hurting, and my guilt for what I'd done to Reagan knew no bounds.

but I still felt more in control of myself for the first time in my life. I thought about everything I'd done and everything that happened to me, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

During my two weeks back home, I reached out to Lucy and asked if she'd heard of any decent places to rent. She informed me that she had.

perfect place: with her. It seemed that she and a friend had gone to college by having rented a small house just off campus together, but the friend decided we'd move in with her boyfriend, leaving Lucy scrambling to find someone else to rent that plan with the other half of the rent.

I happily left home, though I was a little reticent about being away from school. It felt weird being there without Reagan. Plus, there was the memory of Julian. I hadn't talked to Julian since I'd left, doing my best to make a clean break, but he wasn't making it so easy. I'd received text messages, but iPhone calls begging me to talk to him. Then, flowers had arrived at my parents' doorstep on more than one occasion. My mom was interested in who this "Julian boy" was. Silently, I'd been amused by the thought that I was wondering what on earth I would have told my parents if I had decided to bring home a man who was only a few years younger than they were.

By the time Lucy had agreed to being roommates, I had been ecstatic about it. Reagan, I have to answer any more questions about Julian or how Reagan was doing. It was bad enough that he was on my mind constantly, I really didn't need my mother grilling me about his existence.

So, I spent the rest of the summer picking up odd tutoring gigs and

working at the bookstore. I was finally getting my life back on track, and I was grateful for it. I was finally getting my life back on track, and I was grateful for it.

I was finally getting my life back on track, and I was grateful for it. I was finally getting my life back on track, and I was grateful for it.

So, I spent the rest of the summer picking up odd tutoring gigs and

1 she'din the financial spaces by helping out at the Chinese restaurant tha
. I wasworked at. I liked living with Lucy since she was sweet and only
ounds,crazy, but I missed Reagan...and Julian. At least at my new place, I w
ownedhave to worry about getting flowers and sweet notes from Julian
he bad,though I kind of missed that, too.

The feelings fighting within me were complicated, but I was doing r
d her ifto throw all my attention into my work. It was the nights that w
had thehardest, but I found that Lucy was a night owl and a great listener. Nor
in on awasn't one to share such personal details with anyone, but she alwa
ided tobeen easy to talk to. I realized how bad it must have all sounded
to helpespecially since she was friends with Reagan, too. So, her response

events of my summer surprised me. "Amy, I think you should talk to J
back at "What? There's no way I can do that—not after the way I hurt Rea
e addedargued.

best to "Look, I get that, and I get why Reagan is upset, but, Amy, you can
xts andwho you fall in love with. It's not like either one of you set out
on myanybody. I know that you are not a malicious person, and I seriously
itenselyReagan's dad is either."

oy that, "He isn't. It just got out of control," I agreed.

ided to "See, that's the other thing. You're one of the most in control p
e. I justknow, so the fact that you did lose control over him tells me that w
subject.were feeling was huge. You wouldn't risk your friendship with Reag
e to notwasn't something incredibly special," she reasoned.

oing. It She made a point, but that didn't change the misery I felt at miss
eed mytwo people who had come to mean the most to me.

"Reagan will realize that, too, eventually, Amy," she assured me.

l filling I shook my head sadly. "You didn't see the look of betrayal on her

at Lucy know she'll forgive Julian eventually. They are family, after all. I
a little doesn't have any reason to bother with a friend who went behind her
ouldn't like that, and I really can't blame her."

...even Lucy didn't agree, and sweet Lucy was always perpetually optimistic
wished I could look at the world like that, but I just wasn't built that way
my best Julian's influence on me did have other effects aside from the break
ere the of mine and Reagan's friendship. While I felt like shit for what happened
mally I there was no shaking the confidence that came from being loved by a
ays had good as Julian. I felt that every time I walked on campus. The shame
to her, embarrassment I'd felt from Michael's exploits before had faded away
to the moved with my head held high. I wasn't perfect, and God knew I'd made
Julian." some very big mistakes, but that didn't mean I deserved anyone's laughter
Reagan," I derision. I just no longer had it in me to care what other people thought

So, when I ran almost smack into Michael on my way to meet with my
n't help student for a tutoring session, I no longer felt the same spiky ball of nerves
to hurt my gut. Mostly, I just felt annoyed, especially when he ducked his head
y doubt tried to give me his best boyish smile. "Hey Amy, you look good."

Something in me soured distastefully. "Um...thanks, I guess."

"Yeah, um, hey I was wondering if maybe you wanted to go grab a coffee
people I and catch up?" he asked, rubbing a nervous hand over his hair. How could
hat you had I ever found him cute or charming? He gave off the charm of a
Reagan if it legged rubber chicken next to Julian's sturdy stature, and he was definitely
great conversationalist.

ing the "Actually, I have an appointment I need to get to," I said, starting to
away.

"Oh, okay, maybe later?" he asked, looking hopeful.

face. I I started to say "sure" just to get away, but I thought better of it.

But she said with finality, “not later, not ever, Michael.”

er back He looked crestfallen. “Oh.”

I gave him a small, pitying smile. “Have a nice life, Michael.” I felt
istic. In my own surprise that I actually meant it.

ay. As I walked away, my smile grew. Amelia from a couple of months
breakdown would have melted into a puddle over that interaction. Now? Now, it
opened, like a brief, tiny speck of annoyance.

man as My pride at discarding Michael so easily had me reaching for my phone
me and text Reagan about my exciting development, but I remembered at
y, and I second, and my excitement died out. I missed Julian like crazy, but
I had missed my best friend.

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“No,” I

said with finality, “not later, not ever, Michael.”

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As I walked away, my smile grew. Amelia from a couple of months ago would have melted into a puddle over that interaction. Now? Now, it just felt like a brief, tiny speck of annoyance.

My pride at discarding Michael so easily had me reaching for my phone to text Reagan about my exciting development, but I remembered at the last second, and my excitement died out. I missed Julian like crazy, but I really missed my best friend.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Julian

Julian

Watching Amelia drive away from me had easily been one of the hardest things I'd ever gone through in my life. I knew the pain of divorce and failed relationships, and seeing her shut down and get away without a backward glance? That hurt like hell, and it was a hurt that was not easing over time.

After Amy left, I paced the house for hours. It was dark by the time Reagan returned, looking at me stone-faced. I didn't say anything, but could I say anything after everything that happened? She locked herself in her room and I didn't see her for the rest of the night.

I couldn't count how many times I reached for my phone to call Amy to make sure she was all right, but I knew she wouldn't answer. After a while, certain I wouldn't be hearing from her, I went for a run on the beach, a tried-and-true method of distracting myself by physical exhaustion and working...especially when I came upon a couple clutching onto one another on a nearby pier. They were so amorous of one another that they didn't notice me. I moved on quickly, but the memory of my time with Amy in the car was already triggered.

Sleep evaded me once I returned home. I found myself cleaning the kitchen, re-organizing the drawers—anything to try to distract myself but to no avail.

I was standing on a stool attempting to line the shelves in the cabinet when Reagan's voice behind me made me jump nearly out of my skin. "Well, that's pathetic," she said with no humor.

I turned towards her, steeling myself for her next barrage of much deserved vitriol. What I didn't expect to see was the worried expression on her face. "Where's Amy? She didn't come home last night." she asked bluntly.

“She left, sweetheart,” I told her. “I tried to get her to stay so we could talk this out, but she said she didn’t want to risk hurting you anymore. She went back to her parents’.”

Reagan sniffed, then said, “That’s probably for the best.” She left that, and for the next couple of days, the house was silent save for me when there was dinner or breakfast. On the third day, I finally left the house, hating everything I saw because it just reminded me of Amy.

I wandered down to the water. It was a pleasant cool morning, but I had no mood to appreciate that. I took out my phone and briefly considered calling Amelia, but instead, I dialed the number of a woman who was my friend, just pick up.

She didn’t even say hello, she answered by asking, “Julian? What is going on down there? Reagan has told me quite a tale, but I thought I must have not misunderstood...”

I heaved a sigh, “No, Ma, I’m sure you understood just fine. I didn’t notice for it to happen that way, I just...couldn’t stop myself,” I said, knowing the sandblame that sounded, especially to someone like Ma.

She huffed a laugh. “If I had a dime for every time a man said that.”
“I know, Ma, but this was—” I started, but she beat me to the punch.
“...different,” she filled in. There was a brief thoughtful silence before she spoke again, “We all make mistakes, Julian, but I know my son—you have a good heart. So, tell me what happened...”

I unburdened myself. Obviously, I didn’t get into the tawdrier details I deserved didn’t have to. Reagan had told her about walking in on the two of us. When I finished spilling my guts, there was a long silence until she

“Well, I need to meet this Amelia. She must be pretty powerful to divert you from your near monk status.” I laughed because it was true, no matter

ould allpainful the situation was. “Well, you’ve made a mess of thing
I thinkannounced.

“Thanks, Ma,” I said dryly.

ft after She laughed, and the sound was reassuring. “But, sweetheart, it’s
tellingend of the world, even though it might feel like it right now. Reag
left thereasonable girl. She will come around. And if this Amelia girl is as sp
you both say she is, then she’ll come around, too. Your situation w
was inuh...unconventional, but hey, stranger things have worked.”

sidered “Thanks, Ma. It’s just that Reagan won’t even talk to me—”

sure to “What do you expect? You shtupped her best friend...Julian, it’s jus
to take time. I know you want to run out there and fix everything rig
s goingsecond, but you’ve got to give people time to lick their wounds an
st havedown, then make your intentions known.”

Her words comforted me, even if I knew I was going to have a ha
’t meanheeding them, starting with giving people time. Reagan largely avoi
ng howso I didn’t have much chance to talk to her. Amy wouldn’t pick up her
but I called anyway to let her know I wasn’t giving up on us and, of c
sent her flowers. All gestures went unanswered, and after a while, I t
. hint.

ore she It was several days after Amy left that Reagan actually talked to
. have apurpose. There was no small talk, there was no preamble—just
getting straight to the point like she always had. I was leaning over th
ls, but Irailing staring at the sunset and missing Amy when Reagan came up
s in theme and said, “What I don’t understand is that you wouldn’t even date
he said,longest time after you and mom split. Then, when you did, you woul
est youbring them around me for fear of how I would feel about it...even whe
er howyou it didn’t bother me. I’ve just taken for granted that you would t

s,” shemy feelings first, but this time, you knew who she was to me and yo
anyway.”

I looked at my daughter, and for the first time in over a week, s
not thelooking back at me—and not like I was Satan either, just like she was
gan is asighed, trying to formulate the best response before replying, “I
ecial asneither one of us knew we had you in common when we first met, and
ould betime we figured that out, it was kind of too late...”

“What do you mean it was ‘too late?’” she started, then made
expression. “Ew, oh god.” She shuddered making the same face she di
it goingshe was a kid and I tried to feed her broccoli. She shivered in horror.
ght thiswithout getting into detail, please,” she said, holding up her har
id calmpleading gesture, “explain yourself.”

“Look, I’ve told you before, I’m not a person to just jump into thin
rd timesomeone, but I’d never had that feeling with anyone before. I saw this
led me,having trouble out in the water, I went to help her, and we talked, and
phone,know...there was just something there I’d never felt before. This
ourse, Icarried away. Ma always told me that when it was the one, I’d just kno
ook theI always thought that was just something a parent said to their kid t
them feel better...until I met Amy. It was like everything clicked toge
me onthe first time. Then, we discovered how we were connected, and we
Reaganthat nothing would come of it because we both loved you too much
e porchcomplication, but it was already—”

beside “Complicated,” Reagan finished.

for the I sighed. “Yeah, something like that.”

d never We were silent for a while just watching the sunset. I could f
n I toldlooking at me, and finally, she said, “You really love her, don’t you?”

hink of I nodded.

u did it Reagan took her turn to sigh. “Well, I did not have that on my Bin
for this summer, but I guess that’s something else we have in comm
he was both love Amy, just in different ways...I really do want both of yo
s hurt. I happy, and I guess if that’s together, that’s not too terrible. It’s weird
Reagan, but it’s not too terrible, even though you all sneaking around was mess
l by the I agreed with her on that, then she asked, “Have you tried to get a
her?”

a sour “Yeah. Radio silence,” I told her.
d when She nodded. “I’m not too surprised by that. That girl will avoid
“Okay, like the plague.”

id in a I looked at her before asking, “You going to talk to her?”

Reagan bit her lip with uncertainty. “Not yet. I might get to that poi
gs with her, but not anytime soon.”

woman Despite my disappointment, I understood where she was coming f
I don’t understand.”

igs got She gave me an examining look, then said casually, “I do happen t
ow, and through my socials that she’s okay.”

o make “Yeah?” I asked a little too quickly.

ther for “Yeah, apparently, she’s sharing a place with our friend Lucy...loc
agreed they’re having a great time,” she said with some bite.

for that My brow furrowed at her tone. “Reagan, you know nobody ca
replace you in her eyes. She left because she thought that was what w
for you.”

She shrugged off my words, probably not wanting to show an
eel here motion while things were still so fresh. “Yeah, I know,” sh
nonchalantly, then changed the subject. “Enough of this moping, Da
are we having for dinner?”

go card And just like that, I knew Reagan and I would be okay. I knew it
ion: westill take some time for things to go back to normal, or maybe we wou
u to beto create a new normal, but either way, I sighed a huge sigh of relie
as hell,hadn't lost my daughter in this whole debacle. Amelia, on the other ha
ed up.”
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And just like that, I knew Reagan and I would be okay. I knew it would still take some time for things to go back to normal, or maybe we would have to create a new normal, but either way, I sighed a huge sigh of relief that I hadn't lost my daughter in this whole debacle. Amelia, on the other hand...

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Amelia

Amelia

It had actually been kind of nice getting back to campus early when the place was still a ghost town. It let me catch my breath from the whole summer. I'd faced down Michael and discovered that he didn't have power over me, nor did anybody else with their snide comments.

Now, however, the start of school was quickly approaching, and the more it got, the more nervous I got. I'd gotten into a routine with my studies with Lucy since I'd been back, but I had no idea how I was going to handle it when I saw Reagan again. I wasn't completely certain that I would dissolve into a puddle of tears while begging her to forgive me and about her dad. What a mess.

I remembered that her internship was set to end the previous week, so it was only a matter of time before I saw her again. I'd be lying if I said I didn't get a little nervous every time I went somewhere we used to always hang out at, especially the restaurant. We'd eaten there at least twice a week, and I was picking up extra shifts when I could to make ends meet. I knew it was just a matter of time, and sure enough, one night she came in to pick up her order. I was in the kitchen helping with rolling silverware, but I caught her through the order-out window.

She saw me, too, and we stared at each other for a long, awkward moment. No matter how hard my brain told my body to move or my mouth to say something, I was frozen. Finally, I managed to get myself together enough to give her a small wave. She didn't wave back, just turned on her heel and hurriedly left with her order.

Okay, I told myself, the Band Aid has been ripped off. It'll only get worse to see her now, right?

I kept saying that to myself, even though I knew deep down that it was going to be the case. Impulsively, I pulled out my phone and pulled up the last text message that Julian had sent me a few days before:

Julian: I will quit bothering you, Amelia, but I can't stop loving you here waiting for you whenever you're ready...

I wanted so badly to answer him, even though I had no clue what to say to him. His voice stayed in my head on a seemingly constant loop, reminding me of the sound of it against my ear. None of the guys at school weren't just intimidating anymore. Instead, they seemed kind of boring and unimpressive in comparison to Julian. I wondered if I would compare everyone to Julian for the rest of my life, hating that my gut told me I would. God, I missed her so much. “Hey, I just saw Reagan leave. Are you okay?” Lucy asked as she walked into the kitchen.

I nodded, even though I was far from it.

Lucy looked torn before she finally said, “She still cares about you, right? She messaged me a few days ago wanting to know how you were doing.” “She did?” I asked in disbelief.

Lucy nodded. “Yeah, I'm probably being a bad friend because she didn't want to tell you, but you should really know.”

I felt a little surge of hope spark inside me. “Thanks, Lucy, and don't worry—you've been an awesome friend.”

She smiled at me, then hefted up one of the trays full of orders that she was ready to go, making her way out of the kitchen.

So, Reagan wanted to make sure I was okay...maybe there was hope for me after all.

wasn't When I'd moved in with Lucy, it was with the understanding that s
out the planning on renting to another person as well. The only problem was
third bedroom in the house had been trashed by the previous renter
. *I'll* needed a lot of work. Lucy hadn't had the time or finances to fix it by
but we'd agreed when I'd moved in to fix it up together. With some
[would] shifts at the restaurant, we'd managed to scrape enough together to ge
, and I paint and rent a carpet cleaner. The rest of the damage would just hav
seemed taken care of with good, old elbow grease.

pale in The weekend before the fall semester was set to start, Lucy and
lian for feverishly trying to make that third bedroom presentable because Lu
him. she had some strong interest from somebody to rent, and she thoug
e came would be a good fit with us. We'd gotten up early and scrubbed th
down, and now, we were in the throes of putting a fresh coat of paint
walls.

t, Amy. I took a step back and admired our progress. "So, what time is this
g." supposed to be here?" I asked.

"She said she'd drop by sometime this afternoon. I think you'll lo
told me Amy. I'm really excited for you two to meet," she enthused.

We took a break to eat, then got right back at it. Lucy filled the
d don't with a pleasant chatter that didn't really require much of a response,
brain wandered to Julian. I wondered what he was doing and if he was
at were the beach house or if he'd gone back to L.A. I knew he said he'd wait
but I couldn't help but shake the feeling that once he got back home at
e, after in his routine that he'd forget over time. Maybe he had found somec
already. The thought made me stop, and a panicky feeling raced throug

He can't find someone else because he's mine. The intrusive
reared its ugly head, and once again, I told myself that was nonsense.

she was I could go down the mental rabbit hole of all the different scenarios that played out in my head of how Julian and I would end up, the doorbell rings, so it “That’s probably her,” Lucy said, excited.

herself, I looked down at my ratty, paint splattered clothes. “Hopefully, she won’t judge me as harshly.”

at some Lucy waved her hand. “Oh, she won’t care about that. Would you mind me getting the door though, my hands are covered in paint,” she asked. I headed for the kitchen to clean up.

I were I wiped my hands on my shorts, leaving paint smears, before walking to open the front door. Surprise struck me as I saw Reagan standing on the doorstep. “Hey,” she said tentatively. “I’m here about a room for rent.” Reagan smiled tentatively at me.

on the “Really? I mean, are you sure?” My fingers clung to the door frame. I remembered myself and moved aside so she could come in.

person Reagan nodded as she stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “I can forgive you, Amy, and not just because I really miss my friend, but because I can see that there really was something between you and my dad.”

calmed down, I realized how much you’d done over the years to protect me, ironically just like my dad. And I got to thinking that you and I have really been head over heels to do what you did. As much as that I still have feelings, I’ve been waiting for a long time for my dad to have that for me, love...and why not you? Even if it is a little gross for me.” She finished her speech with a little disgusted shiver, then laughed.

me else I threw my arms around her in a hug that almost knocked her down. “Reagan, I am so relieved. And I really am sorry for hurting you. I promise to do whatever I can to make it up to you.”

Before She pulled back, smiling at me like she used to before even

rios I'd happened. "Well, now, there is one thing you can do to make it up to n
rang. "Whatever it is, I will gladly do it," I promised, excited to get the
and wanting to pinch myself. I'd truly thought our friendship was ov
doesn't this second chance was an unexpected miracle.

She had that familiar mischievous glint in her eyes as she opened t
u mind and popped her head out quickly and said something I couldn't hear
as she popping back in. "I really need you to do something with this sad sac
driving me crazy with all of his moping around and 'missing Amy
ng oversaid, moving to the side and revealing Julian in the doorway. He
; on the bouquet of wildflowers clutched in his hand, and he looked nervous b
t?" She relieved. I understood the feeling—it was relieving to lay eyes on hi
all this time.

me for Tears clogged my throat. I didn't know what to say, yet I had so
wanted to tell him—big, important proclamations of love and lust and
her. "Isilly, little everyday things that I'd found myself wanting to share w
because I since I'd left Malibu.

Once I "I'm not going to stand in the way of you two. You officially h
try and blessing, just please refrain from making out in front of me or show
ou must physical affection towards one another, thank you very much,"
hurt my announced.

kind of I looked to Julian, who was looking at me so hopefully. "My Ma
hed he told me that I would know it when I met the one. I knew the instan
you. You, Amelia, you are the one I was waiting to share this life w
n. "Oh, how about it? Can I be your safe place and your person to have adv
mise to with?"

I could feel my grin spreading across my mouth. I nodded, fighting
rything the words out as I launched myself at him. "I love you, Julian," I sob

ne.” His neck as his arms encircled my waist and he lifted me off the ground
chance “Oh, that is so amazing. Love triumphs!” Lucy said behind us, c
er, and her hands. I held tight to Julian, never wanting to let go.

“Hey, uh, why don’t you show me my new room,” I heard Reagan
he door to Lucy behind me.

before “Oh, right, yes we should leave these two alone,” Lucy said.

k. He is “Damn straight. I do not want to have to gouge my own eyes out.
,”” she this union, but I do not need to see what I saw before, yuck!” Reagan
had a could hear their voices fade away as Lucy led Reagan to her new room
out also Julian put me down, wiping away my tears with his thumbs. “I’m
m after Amelia, for everything I’ve put you through,” he said, sincerely looki
my eyes.

much I I gave him a soft, knowing smile. “I’m not. It got us here, didn’t it?”
l small, He smiled at me, then kissed my lips, “I love you, Amelia, and I can
ith him to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I kissed him again, longer and harder this time. “Then let’s get starte
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Reagan

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his neck as his arms encircled my waist and he lifted me off the ground.

“Oh, that is so amazing. Love triumphs!” Lucy said behind us, clapping her hands. I held tight to Julian, never wanting to let go.

“Hey, uh, why don’t you show me my new room,” I heard Reagan suggest to Lucy behind me.

“Oh, right, yes we should leave these two alone,” Lucy said.

“Damn straight. I do not want to have to gouge my own eyes out. I bless this union, but I do not need to see what I saw before, yuck!” Reagan said. I could hear their voices fade away as Lucy led Reagan to her new room.

Julian put me down, wiping away my tears with his thumbs. “I’m sorry, Amelia, for everything I’ve put you through,” he said, sincerely looking into my eyes.

I gave him a soft, knowing smile. “I’m not. It got us here, didn’t it?”

He smiled at me, then kissed my lips, “I love you, Amelia, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I kissed him again, longer and harder this time. “Then let’s get started.”

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Epilogue: Julian

The following June...

My whole life, my mother had been telling me that if I was willing myself out there for love, then I would be bound to find the great love of my life.

I'd resisted her advice, and it seemed like there was always some reason why I didn't think it was appropriate. I saw now that it just wasn't the right time, and it wouldn't be the right time until that one fateful morning when I saw a young, beautiful woman needing help in the water.

I looked over to my right and admired the glowing profile of my bride. She caught me staring and gave me a coy smile, and the look in her eyes told me that later we would be enjoying some much-needed one-on-one time amidst all of these festivities. Between Reagan's graduation today and the wedding the next day, everything had been a whirlwind for the last few weeks.

My daughter was due to walk across the stage to receive her high school degree. This day was a proud moment for any parent, but after eve-

Reagan and I had been through over the years, it seemed like an especially poignant moment. She'd already secured a position with a law firm in Los Angeles. I was pleased to see that she was following her own path, fighting for those who often didn't have the ability to fight for themselves. I'm glad she decided to forgo entertainment law. I loved my daughter, but I did not see her having the patience to deal with high-maintenance celebrities. She was going to make a difference, and I could not be prouder.

Just a few months prior, at the end of the fall semester, I'd watched her walk across a similar stage to receive her degree. Shortly afterward, I came to one knee and slipped a ring on her finger. It took a while for her parents to get used to the idea, but to those who were closest to Amy, it was a foregone conclusion. Although, Reagan did make it clear that she would absolutely not be calling her best friend "mom." My mother fell in love with Amy in just like I did, and proclaimed that she was glad the right woman had shown up for her boy.

Days later, Amy joined me permanently in Los Angeles. She'd accepted a position at an elementary school as their newest music teacher, and it was obvious from the start that she'd made the right choice. The kids loved her and she adored them. Every day, she came home overflowing with excitement by the progress or breakthroughs she was having with her students. Administration was equally enthusiastic for their new teacher, though I think she made them a little nervous with the scale of her first spring musical. But she and the kids pulled it off without a hitch.

For my part, I'd cut my workload down considerably and now volunteered my legal services pro-bono several times a month to mostly at-risk youth. Everything typically did not have access to quality representation. It felt good to get back, and I woke up with a renewed purpose. Of course, it also didn't

pecially that I was waking up next to Amy every morning—she was one he
in Los Angeles. It didn't take me long to make sure I had a baby grand pi
ath and my Los Angeles house as well, and the things I did to her on it...we
selves. just say that I am a very satisfied man.

r, but I We'd struggled for a little bit on trying to decide a date for our w
ebrities. Personally, I wanted to marry her as soon as possible, but between h
job and my volunteering duties, that was a lot to ask. Ultimately,
d Amy Reagan who suggested that we get married right after her graduatio
lropped said that way, not only would all the families already be there, but i
rents to also be one big party week as far as she was concerned.

oregone Tomorrow, Reagan and Lucy would be whisking Amy away since
tely not bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, and I would miss he
stantly, second of it. But by the end of tomorrow night, Amelia would be m
finally and I couldn't wait.

Afterward, we would be staying where it all started and spending
epted a of the summer at the beach house. I couldn't wait to carry her ac
it was threshold of the beach house as my wife. It was strange how stagn
ved her, mind-numbing things had gotten in my life before last summer. In
g with year, however, it had been a whirlwind...a euphoric, blessed whirlwin
ith her "Reagan Miles," a voice over the microphone boomed. Our whole
music leapt from their seats and whooped, hollering and clapping as my d
e of her walked across the stage and shook hands with the school dean.

She made her way off the stage, and I sat back down with Amy
ntered clasped in my own. "Hey, thank you," I whispered in her ear.

ith who She looked at me confused. "For what?"

giving "For showing up. I really didn't think I'd ever find the one un
n't hurt appeared, and I am beyond grateful that I get to share my life with

ll of antold her, kissing her softly on the lips.

ano for “Julian,” she sighed happily returning my kiss, “not in front of Reag
ll, let’s

edding. **Amelia**

ier new Butterflies were dancing in my stomach as Lucy fiddled with an
it was piece of my hair.

on. She “Alright, Ames, you and Dad aren’t going to do that dainty, little
t could each other cake thing, are you? I want to see some full-on ca
smashing. I mean, really go for it,” Reagan instructed.

it was I laughed at her antics. “I haven’t really thought about that, to be ho

r every “Mm, she’s too busy thinking about the honeymoon,” Lucy teased.

y wife, “No...nope, we’re not going there,” Reagan said loudly in a sir
voice.

the rest “Actually, I was just thinking about how lucky I am. To be honest,
oss the thought I would get this type of life. I guess I figured I’d get
ant and eventually, but not to the gorgeous man of my dreams who makes m
the last and actually listens when I talk and is okay with being just quiet, too..

d. Lucy squeezed my shoulders. “I am so excited for you, Amy, and yo
section beautiful bride. He won’t be able to take his eyes off you.”

daughter I smiled at her through the mirror, but tears pricked my eyes when
joined in and said, “She’s right, Ames. He’s a lucky guy.”

’s hand

We lucked out on the weather. It was a beautiful, sunny day, even tho
breeze did try to steal my veil. I didn’t care, I just saw Julian grinnin
til you ear to ear as I made my way across the sandy aisle.
you,” I

It seemed only fitting that we got married on the beach. Just beyond the altar was the spot we first met. It was also the spot where we first made love, but that wasn't anything anybody else needed to know about. Though later, when we looked back at our wedding pictures, Julian loved to point towards the area behind the altar and announce that he'd seen stars vibrate right there under everybody's noses.

It seemed surreal to me that a year before I'd been rushing, shaming, and crying my eyes out back to my dorm because of my dumb ex-boyfriend's face was the laughingstock of the campus and I'd had next to zero confidence.

What was worse was that I didn't see how things would ever get better. Thank God for friends like Lucy and Reagan building me up and reminding me to keep myself open to trying new things. My summer of learning to sing myself and trying new things had turned into a lifetime of being Mrs. Miles.

I never thought I would be married. Gone were the thoughts that things like this didn't happen to people like me. Gone were the misconceptions that I was somehow fundamentally lacking. I was exactly who I was supposed to be, and I was with the person I was destined to love. There were a lot of moments where I still felt that I was a fraud, but in those moments, Julian took my face in his hands and reminded me, "you and me, Amelia, it is destiny." And he was right. Reagan destiny.

ugh the
ing from

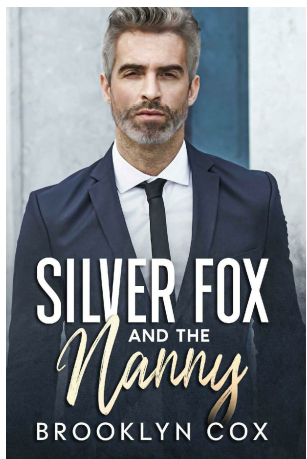
It seemed only fitting that we got married on the beach. Just beyond our altar was the spot we first met. It was also the spot where we first made love, but that wasn't anything anybody else needed to know about. Though years later, when we looked back at our wedding pictures, Julian loved to point towards the area behind the altar and announce that he'd seen stars with me right there under everybody's noses.

It seemed surreal to me that a year before I'd been rushing, shamefaced and crying my eyes out back to my dorm because of my dumb ex-boyfriend. I was the laughingstock of the campus and I'd had next to zero confidence. What was worse was that I didn't see how things would ever get better. Thank God for friends like Lucy and Reagan building me up and reminding me to keep myself open to trying new things. My summer of learning to trust myself and trying new things had turned into a lifetime of being Mrs. Julian Miles.

Gone were the thoughts that things like this didn't happen to people like me. Gone were the misconceptions that I was somehow fundamentally lacking. I was exactly who I was supposed to be, and I was with the man I was destined to love. There were a lot of moments where I still felt the need to pinch myself, but in those moments, Julian took my face in his hands and reminded me, "you and me, Amelia, it is destiny." And he was right: it was destiny.

The End

If you enjoyed this book, please check out "Silver Fox and the Nanny" a billionaire boss single dad nanny romance and also available on Amazon Unlimited here or on the image below:



My job was to be the nanny, not fall in love with the billionaire dad.

I always forget that he's much older than me when I stare at his chiseled body.

It was a bad idea to torture myself around such forbidden temptation.

Except I need the job to survive on my own so I try to remain professional.

When his eyes scan my body I know they are traveling to all of the forbidden places.

His attraction to me becomes unmistakable, making me fantasize about a life with him.

Sharing the common love of his son makes us grow closer and feel like a family.

He's keeping secrets from me and his past is making it harder to do everything important.

ny". It's I'm willing to risk it all - my love for his son, my heart and my job. Kindle with him forever.

Here's a sneak peek...

Chapter 1

The last box was packed into the truck, and in the blink of an eye, my friend Caroline was completely moved out of the small apartment I had been sharing. We had been friends since kindergarten when she kicked me in the face during recess, after which I tackled her. Despite the initial awkwardness, we became fast friends and have remained that way ever since. I moved in with her a little over three months ago, aiming to take over her lease as she finished the purchase of her new house. It had been fun living with my **single** friend for a little while, but I wouldn't miss her coming home at four in the morning every weekend.

Caroline smiled. "I'm really glad we were able to do this before I moved. Remember, you only have six months until the lease is renewed, so start thinking about what you want to go next. I know you don't like to plan ahead." Caroline snatched the keys from my hand. She handed over a small keychain with a single key on it and patted me on the back. I rolled my eyes in amusement at the keychain. She had always been a little obsessed about those kitschy knick-knacks that inevitably ended up collecting dust.

I like a “Thanks for this, Car.” I took the key and shoved it in my back making a mental note to change the keychain out as soon as I could. Caroline gave a simple shrug and shuffled through her purse.

“Of course, Thea. You’re my friend.” Caroline turned around to face me. “Also, I got you an interview with my old boss, Mr. Hale. I haven’t talked about him much, but that’s the way Mr. Hale prefers it – the hiring paperwork – you’ll see. It’s not a hard job, though. Max is so adorable and fun kid.”

She handed me a simple, black card with silver lettering. On the back, a time and date followed by an address. It was an address in the business district, only a twenty-minute drive from my new apartment. Even though we had been best friends, Caroline never gave specifics about her job, so this came as a surprise. All I knew was that she was a nanny but was going to have moved up her position because her new home was too far. That and the building she worked in had what she described as a “million stairs.” The latter likely had more to do with her hatred of elevators than anything else, though.

“I can’t keep saying thank you so much,” I joked, taking the card slowly. It seemed surreal. I hadn’t told her that I had almost completely drained my savings account from paying rent and groceries, but it was as if she knew. It likely wasn’t hard to tell given that I had been unemployed since I moved to this side of town. Money was running out faster than I thought it would, even with Caroline helping with the rent. Caroline was a true friend, almost always intuiting what her friends needed, often before they realized it themselves. It was one of the things that drew me to her and kept me loyal over the years.

“No need to thank me. Just don’t be late. He has a huge thing about time. Mr. Hale is a little strict. – I guess that’s the best word for it.

pocket, on your best behavior. I'll see you later." She got in the truck and started driving. With a wave, I was officially on my own.

~

face me I could feel my hands shaking as I sat in the lobby of Hale Contract Design, I know IDesign. When I arrived, I almost thought I was in the wrong place. Its inmarble floors of the lobby and the poised receptionist contrasted with such an stories Caroline told me of her workday before. Yet, the name matched the slim writing on the front of the card. Under it was a single name: *Stacy Hale, CEO & Lead Designer.*

business "Ms. Delgado?" I nearly jumped as my name was called from across the room and shoved the card back into my pocket. The slim brunette receptionist was standing in front of the desk now, tapping her foot impatiently. I quickly gathered my bag and walked over. She led me through the hallway until we reached a sleek, gray door. There was no nameplate, but it was clearly the office belonged to.

The receptionist gave a quick knock on the door before opening it. I slowly dropped when I saw the spectacular office. It was spacious with floor-to-ceiling windows that gave a beautiful view of the city. I was so distracted by the view that I didn't notice the man sitting at the desk angled in the corner. The only things on the desk were a stack of folders, a laptop, and a cup of pens. Otherwise, the entire office was clean and spare, almost as if it had just moved into it. Given the impressive digs, I doubted that was the case. "Ms. Delgado, I presume? Caroline has told me a lot about you." Mr. Hale began to rifle through the folders on the desk before pulling out a small packet. It looked to be a short resume, though I was unsure how he had it being a hold of it.

Just be "Hopefully all good things. She didn't actually tell me much about

started it— or you, for that matter.” I smiled half-heartedly, hoping that would ease the awkwardness in the room. Mr. Hale cracked a small smile, but I was drowning in that feeling of unresolved tension. A few quick steps across the office had me sitting in front of him, allowing me a better look.

He was tall with suntanned skin and dark brown hair, cut close to all the military style. Still, his hair looked soft, and I felt the urge to run my hand through it. His eyes were a deep blue and, as he glanced up at me, *Spencer* instantly lost in them when our eyes met. It was a connection I’d experienced before and wondered if I’d ever truly experience it again.

It’s hard to describe the electricity that pounded through my body in that second. I swallowed and continued to take my silent inventory of his appearance. His jawline was sharp and had a bit of stubble, as if he’d forgotten to shave. He was older than me. That was easy enough to tell, but being in front of him made me realize just how much older he really was.

“Apologies for that, I take security very seriously in my line of work. My job is a more personal job. Also, it’s just easier to interview clients here than at home.” Mr. Hale took a small breath. His gaze was slightly collected but made my skin feel like a sparkler on the Fourth of July. I truly felt the sensation of butterflies in the stomach for the first time, but I chalked it up to the nerves and pushed it all down.

“Caroline was the nanny for my son, Max. Her moving has left the case open.” He continued without waiting for my response, flipping through Mr. Hale’s pictures before coming up with a small contact sheet. He handed it to me and pulled one of the sleek, metal pens from the cup beside his laptop. I took it without question and began to fill in the sheet.

“Well, I would love the chance to work for you. I’ll admit I need the job and I’ve always loved kids.” I looked up from the sheet to see him w

ease theme. My stomach flipped, and I felt my cheeks turn bright red. It felt like my stillbrain was melting, and I was losing it. In my mind, I was screaming at myself to get it together.

“What’s your goal for the next few years? Where do you see yourself in five years?” He asked, pen poised to write my answer down. I almost wanted to laugh at such a cliché job interview question, yet I couldn’t think of a good response, so I clasped my hands together in front of me and met his eyes again, fighting to never urge to immediately look away.

I found myself saying, “I’m not sure. I just moved here a few months ago, and I’ve found that my whole life plan kind of went out the window. This is my last hope before I have to move home.” I was half-joking, but deep down, I was being serious because I didn’t want to move home. My hand might be forced if I ran out of options. But though the thought of dealing with my parents’ pitiful glances made me want to shudder and curl up under a big, heavy blanket to make it all go away.

He rather said, “Your honesty is appreciated. Did you go to college? Caroline said you had some work history as well as some of your high school accomplishments, but nothing about college.” He was writing in the notebook those of the packet he had pulled out before, glancing between me and the scattered papers. I tried to read what he was writing, but his handwriting was too small and the paper was too far away for me to be able to read much.

He said, “I didn’t. I was going to before I had...” I paused to think about how to phrase it without grimacing. “An unfortunate circumstance. I always wanted to work with children, though.” An unfortunate circumstance was a sob story of putting it. I still had a hard time looking in the mirror after the end of the job relationship. Mr. Hale looked at me as if he knew what I had gone through, though I knew that was impossible.

like my “That’s fine.” Though it wasn’t much, the way he spoke those two
myself words had my head spinning. The way his mouth moved as he spoke
imagining other things that he could be saying. My throat felt dry, and
lf?” He suddenly all too aware of the simple sweater and jeans I had chosen
. It was interview.

ponse. I “I will send you an email over the weekend. Please look out for
ting the stood and walked around the desk, obviously done with the inter
hastily stood, and it hit me how much bigger he was than me. It was
that my taller, but the way he carried himself made me feel tiny. As he ope
before I office door, his hand connected with the small of my back. The small
rious. I felt like electrical shocks, and I had to squeeze my hands together to r
money, into it. I watched him for any indication that he had felt the same thing;
ade me but he just simply glanced at me and gave a slight smile.

t all go “Thank you, sir.” I mumbled as I stepped out of the office, that
feeling slowly dying the further away I got from him. My feet felt lik
ent me of bricks, and I almost didn’t want to leave. I wanted to get closer to h
school I knew I couldn’t jeopardize this job interview any more than I already
argins “Thank you for coming by, Thea.” He said before shutting the c
stack of seemed like he moved a bit closer than was required to me, brushing
small, my arm as he shut the door. I moved on autopilot through the buildi
brain hyper-focused on the way he said my name. As the crisp April v
how to my face, I finally admitted the truth: I had a crush on Spencer Hale, w
wanted possibly about to be my new boss.

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