

A TRAVELING
FLINGS ROMANCE



One

NIGHT

in

HAWAII

JACOB PARKER

ONE NIGHT IN HAWAII

A TRAVELING FLINGS ROMANCE #4

JACOB PARKER

STARK KEY PRESS

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FIND JACOB PARKER

Jacob Parker

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DESCRIPTION



They call me filthy rich. Both words are quite fitting.

But my life is planned out for me.

Get married to an heiress, have some kids who will barely know me, and come home to a wife who's tolerable at best and loves only my bank account.

It's the way of our world, but fate decided to give me an out.

My lovely bride-to-be never showed up at the altar.

My attention moved quickly from heartache to aggravation when my little sister showed up.

With a beautiful friend of hers in need. Of funding. Always money.

This girl is wild and free. Beautiful and a mystery to me.

She would never be accepted in my world and yet I find myself wanting to leave everything to be in hers instead.

It was supposed to be one night in Hawaii.

But that night left me wanting forever. What has this sun-kissed princess done to me?

Whatever it is, all I want is more.

Introduction



Hey! I'm missing you over here in my Insiders Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot and let's connect.

Also, you get a FREE novel for joining. Trust me, you DON'T want to miss it!

See you on the inside...

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ARCHER

I rolled my shoulders in an attempt to relieve some of the tension. My hands were clasped together in front of me. I didn't know what else to do with them. I was feeling just a little uncomfortable with all eyes on me. The tux felt like it was shrinking by the second. It was choking me out. The music that was only supposed to play once while our guests took their seats started over again. It made me want to gag. It felt like I was in a never-ending elevator.

My gaze fixed on the doors at the back. I waited for them to open and for my bride to come through. I kept waiting. And waiting. I wasn't surprised Ashley was taking her sweet time. She was a bit of a diva. I casually glanced at my watch. She was thirty minutes late for her own wedding. I wasn't expecting her to be prompt, but come on.

I didn't really care about the wedding, but I did care I was standing at the altar with a priest by myself, looking like a damn fool. I didn't even know the guy. I hadn't gone to church a day in my life. This was all my mother's doing. She wanted the big, over-the-top wedding to impress all of her rich friends. Ashley's mother had her own demands. Between the two of them, it was a race to see who could come up with the most ostentatious idea. I went along with it because I didn't care.

It was only money.

The wedding was part of my life plan. I worked my ass off and made a lot of money for myself. I built an empire and had more money than I could ever need. The next step was to get

married. I needed the perfect wife and Ashley checked most of the boxes. I had the money to give her whatever she needed to keep herself occupied. My goal was to have a couple of kids. The wife could do what she wanted once I had the children. An heir and a spare and then I retired and died.

That was the life plan. I hoped there would be some fun in between, but the fun was a bonus. It wasn't part of my life plan. I was focused on goals. Goals could be measured. Fun, not so much. I wanted to look back on my life and see my climb to the top. I wanted my children to have children that would all carry my name and remind the world of my success.

The whispers from the three hundred guests were growing louder. My eyes drifted over the venue that was decked out in white roses and gold accents. It was all very extravagant. There were members of the press lingering near the back with their fancy cameras directed at me and the spot where my bride should be. The wedding was the event of the year in the Hamptons' crowd. Guests from all over the country were in attendance. It was a who's who in the New York City social circles. My mother was convinced she was the Queen of England and I was her darling prince marrying his princess.

Except the princess was missing in action.

I could feel my patience wearing thin and my mother's disapproving glare burning a hole straight through me. I wasn't the one that was late. I was exactly where I was supposed to be, wearing the tux they picked out for me. Between Ashley and our mothers, they planned it all. I was simply told when to show up.

I stood at the front of the venue and found myself thinking about what I needed to do when I got back from the honeymoon. Two weeks away from my company was brutal, but it was part of the plan. My people could handle things. When I got back, I was going to have back-to-back meetings for at least a week. Hopefully, if things worked out like I planned, Ashley would get pregnant on our honeymoon. She would be busy designing a nursery and shopping for the baby. She wouldn't care that I was spending all that time at work.

I was lost in thought when I caught my father glaring at me. He was pissed. I considered making an announcement that I wasn't the one holding things up. My dad was trying to lecture me with just his eyes. Weirdly enough, it was working.

Where is she? What did you do? You better make this right. Our family is going to be laughed out of town. This is going to be all over the front page of every newspaper in the state!

I offered my father a slight shrug. There wasn't a lot I could do. If she stood me up, she stood me up. Big fucking deal. I had an inkling this might happen. Last night we exchanged a few texts, but none of them included a guarantee she would meet me at the altar. In fact, for the last few weeks, she'd been very distant. We both said we loved each other but I honestly couldn't say I meant it. I didn't believe she did either. I liked her. We got along and we had the same goals and dreams. Getting married suited both of us. She was a beautiful woman who came from a good family. She was the wife a powerful businessman needed. She knew how to dress, what to say and threw some pretty amazing dinner parties.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Penelope looked embarrassed as she gestured for me to follow her. "Excuse us." I waved to the audience. "It seems my bride is delayed."

We disappeared out a side door. "What the hell is going on?" I asked my sister, who looked like she wanted to be anywhere but where she was.

"She's gone."

"Who's gone?"

"Ashley." She gnawed her lower lip. "She's gone. She's not here."

"I saw her car pull up and I'm not going to lie, I caught a glimpse of her." I didn't believe in bad luck. Luck didn't play into anything. I was in control of my future.

"She left." Penelope was my younger sister and easily one of my best friends. We were an odd couple to say the least. I was focused on work and wasn't really a people person.

Penelope was a beautiful, young socialite that could walk into any room and make a friend.

“What do you mean she left?” I asked.

“I asked Matthew to find out what was taking so long. He went to her dressing room and it was empty. She’s gone, Arch. I’m sorry, but she’s left you at the altar.”

I couldn’t explain what I felt in that moment. Disbelief. Embarrassment. Mostly, I was pissed. “I’ll call her.”

“I’ve tried. A hundred times. I had her friend call her. She’s gone. Go. I’ll make the announcement in a few minutes. It’ll give you time to get out of here.”

“Fuck.” I jerked at the stupid bowtie that was cutting off the blood flow to my brain. “I fucking knew she would pull something like this.”

Penelope put her hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Mom is going to lose her shit.”

“I’ll deal with Mom.” She gave me a hug. “Go home. I’ll take care of this and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I’m fine, Pip. That’s probably wrong, but I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. Now, go. Take my car.” She handed me her valet tag.

“Pip?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t bring Matthew.”

She smiled. “I won’t.”

Her fiancé, Matthew, was a dick. I didn’t like him, but I tolerated him. The whole family did. I was fresh out of tolerance. The last thing I wanted to deal with was the guy I thought was a sleazeball and not good enough for my little sister. Matthew acted like he was God’s gift to the world and my sister was lucky to have him. I might have been biased, but my sister was a ten and Matthew was barely pushing a six. He

was punching way above his weight. He acted like she was the lucky one to have him.

The valet gave me a strange look when I handed him the ticket, but thankfully, he said nothing about the fact the groom was going out the back before the wedding started. My beach house was only a few miles from my parents' sprawling estate where the reception was being held.

The moment I was through the door, I lost the jacket, cufflinks, and cummerbund, dropping everything on the floor as I walked to the bar. I poured a glass of the Macallan scotch I loved. I took the first drink, letting the smooth liquid scorch its way down my throat. It landed in my empty belly, spreading warmth through my body. I unbuttoned the top few buttons of the shirt and stared out the window at the ocean beckoning to me. The sun was low on the horizon, casting orange and pink splashes across the sky. I kicked off my shoes and peeled off my socks, leaving them where I stood.

With the bottle in one hand and my glass in the other, I stepped outside, following the wooden footpath down to the shore. I flopped down in the sand, not giving a shit I was in very expensive tuxedo pants. I couldn't figure out whether to be pissed or bummed. The answer was at the bottom of the bottle and I intended to get to it.

"I thought I would find you out here." Penelope, still in her blue evening gown, sat on the sand beside me. She reached for my glass and took a drink before giving it back to me.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"As you would expect. Don't worry about it. This was a dry run for Mom. She'll know what not to do for my wedding."

"Like count on the bride showing up?"

"I'm sorry," she said with a sigh. "She was kind of a bitch anyway. I think you dodged a bullet. The divorce would have been messy. You would probably lose your beach house and at least one of your cars. You would lose the house in Maine and who knows what else?"

“True.”

“When do you leave?”

“What?” I asked with confusion.

“For your honeymoon.”

“Very funny,” I muttered and refilled the glass.

“You need to go. Don’t sit around here sulking. Go sit on a beach with a waiter delivering fruity drinks with umbrellas while you soak up the sun. It’ll give time for things to die down around here. Do you really want to deal with Mom and Dad?”

“No.” The two weeks off was already scheduled. “Maybe I will go.”

“Hey, maybe I’ll go with you! Yes! That will be so much fun. I’m already a Ryatt.”

“You expect me to take my sister on my honeymoon? Don’t you think that’s a little weird?”

“I’m not going to act like your bride,” she said, snorting. “I could use the chance to get away. And you and I haven’t hung out in a long time. It’ll be fun. Please, Archer.”

I looked at her and saw her quietly begging. We weren’t the kind of family that talked about feelings, but I could see she was stressed. “Fine.”

“Let’s go.”

“Right now?” I asked as she jumped up.

She reached for my hand and pulled me up. “Yes. It’s not like you have to wait for your flight. Call the pilot. I’m going home to pack. I’ll meet you at the airstrip.”

“I’m not sure I can get a flight crew ready tonight.” Despite my protests, I followed her back to my house.

“You can do anything. You’re Archer Ryatt.”

She wasn’t wrong. “Fine. What about Matthew?”

She waved a hand. “I’ll tell him I’m going.”

“What if he wants to come along?”

“No. I need a vacation from my life, including him.”

“I’ll make the call.”

My suitcases were already packed. I was a planner. All of the planning in the world didn’t mean shit when the other party had a change of heart. I hoped this little getaway wasn’t another mistake. But the idea of sticking around and listening to my parents and dealing with the looks of pity did not sound pleasant.

A solo honeymoon was sad, but it was the better of two evils.

SHILOH

I kicked my legs, my face focused on the sunlight above. I broke through the surface and held up the mesh bag. “Got ‘em!”

I doubted Ryder understood a word I said around the regulator in my mouth. He gave me a thumbs-up as I swam closer to the boat bobbing up and down in the turquoise water. I pushed up my mask and pulled out the regulator.

Ryder reached down and took the bag, dropping the coral samples onto the deck before reaching down to help me on board.

“Looks like you have a stowaway,” he said with a laugh.

“What?”

He reached behind me and pulled. He flashed a grin and held up a squid. “This guy.”

“There he is,” I said, laughing. “He was very interested in what I was doing down there.”

I shrugged the tank off while Ryder put the squid back in the water. I sat on the bench and took off my flippers. My wetsuit was like a second skin. I wore a wetsuit more than I wore normal clothes. I grabbed the bag with my booty and headed below deck. I carefully put the samples on the tiny dining table and opened the fridge to grab a bottle of water. I spent so much time in the water, but I was always thirsty.

Ryder came down the stairs a second later. “Did you get what you needed?”

“I think so.” I sucked down my water. “Just in time, too.”

“Is the weekend already over?” Ryder groaned and slid into the bench seat.

“Your weekend is over. The rest of us still have to work.”

“Yes, your work is so hard,” he joked. “You dive every day. You live on a boat and float around the most beautiful place on earth.”

“If you’re trying to get me to feel sorry for you, it’s not going to work,” I said, smiling. “You spend your days surfing. It’s not like you’re wearing a stuffy suit and stuck inside an office all day.”

“True, but I have to deal with people. People that think surfing is so easy and they’re just going to paddle out and ride a wave. The worst are the guys.”

“You’re a guy.”

“I’m a guy that knows how to surf,” he said, grinning. “I can back up the shit I talk. These guys show up from Nebraska and think their cornfed asses are strong enough to handle the ocean.”

I laughed at the image. “I do like my life.”

“What’s your next gig?” he asked.

I made my living helping out with research projects for the university and a few private companies. I was self-employed. I got to live on my boat, going from one port to the next. My boat wasn’t much, but it was enough. I didn’t have to pay rent. I didn’t have to commute to work. I rolled out of bed and literally fell into work.

“I don’t have anything.”

“Really?”

“I’m sure something will come up,” I said, shrugging. “It always does.”

“I think you should take advantage of the time off. You have been working nonstop for two years. You’re working right through your twenties. This is supposed to be the time

when we get to party and make a million mistakes. You're always working or thinking about work."

"I have to work so I can make money."

"I know, I know," he groaned. "You want to chase whales to Alaska."

"I wouldn't be chasing them. I want to follow them. There's a big difference."

"Do you have enough money to do it yet?"

"Close," I said.

"We should head in," he said. "Want me to drive while you change?"

"Please."

He headed upstairs while I went into my bedroom that was just big enough for me to turn around in and get dressed. My living space was all of three-hundred square feet, plus or minus a few feet. I didn't care. The trawler was older than I was, but it was seaworthy, which was what counted. The person I bought it from was a diver and had it outfitted with all the things a diver would need. The boat was perfect for me. It wasn't pretty, but it was solid.

I heard the motor start and the anchor pulling up. Ryder was my best friend. He was straight. I was straight but we weren't interested in each other for anything more than the friendship we had. He spent as much time on my boat as I did. I peeled off my wet suit and hung it up in the small shower. When I said small, I meant it was big enough for me to step in, turn around, and that was it. Just like my bed and my kitchen, which was also my dining room and living room.

Once I was dressed, I climbed up to the deck where Ryder was at the helm. I leaned against the railing, feeling the breeze blowing through my hair. It was the perfect day.

"Hey, there's a party this weekend," he said. "You should go. You said you don't have a job, which means you'll be docked, right?"

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “You know how those things are. Women wearing skimpy bikinis, guys chasing the girls, and a lot of alcohol.”

“That’s exactly what they’re supposed to be,” he said, laughing. “It’s called a party. Since when do you care about skimpy bikinis? You spend plenty of time wearing bikinis.”

“Because I’m swimming,” I countered.

“Come on. One party. You’re going to be setting sail soon. You’re going to be all alone on this ugly-ass boat for weeks.”

“Months,” I corrected.

“Which is why you need to get out and party. Do it for me.”

“You know it’s really not my scene,” I told him.

Ryder sighed. “Fine, but at least let me take you out for a nice dinner while you’re docked. I owe you for letting me tag along again.”

“You know I don’t mind you hanging out with me,” I said, smiling. “And I’m not supposed to dive without anyone on board.”

“No, you’re not,” he scolded. It was an ongoing argument. I promised I was safe, but he didn’t like it.

I thought about it for a moment. I didn’t have any other plans, and a free dinner sounded pretty good. “Alright, I’ll go out with you tonight,” I said, smiling.

Ryder grinned back at me. “Great! I know this amazing seafood place down by the pier.”

“Just so you know, you’re buying.”

“Of course. Am I taking the boat to the usual place?”

“Yes,” I said. “I talked to Bree last night. She was cool with me borrowing a slip.”

He laughed. “You’re lucky you’re pretty. Do you know how much those slips go for?”

“I do and I’m always very appreciative for the free docking,” I said.

Fortunately, I had a lot of friends around the islands. Oahu was one of my favorite places. Maybe because Ryder lived there. He worked on the North Shore, which meant, when I wasn’t working, I could hang out on the beach and watch the women fawn all over Ryder. A little downtime might not be a bad thing.

Together, we docked the boat at the marina. He quickly hopped out and tied it up. I walked him to the gate and gave him a hug. “Thanks for hanging out with me.”

“Anytime,” he said. “Are you going to stick around a couple of days? You better not take off without saying goodbye.”

“I think so. Unless I get a job. I need to stock up on some supplies.”

“I’ll text you later.” He waved and headed up the ramp. I shut the gate and went to the office to talk to the manager.

“Hello, Bree.” The woman I had come to think of as an older sister was behind the desk.

“Shiloh!” She hopped up and gave me a hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Thank you. How are you?”

She blew out a breath. “Busy. As usual.”

“Is it okay if I hang out for a couple of days?” I asked. Her marina was always full. If I wasn’t paying, she was losing money.

“Of course. He’s gone for at least another month.”

“He” was her brother who spent his time sailing around the Pacific. She let me borrow his slip when he was out. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“Just remember to include me in the movie they’ll make about you one day,” she said with a laugh.

“I’m afraid if they’re making a movie about me, it’s going to be a tragic story. I’ll be the little girl lost in the Pacific. Her boat and body sank and were never seen again.”

“Stop,” she chided. “You’re going to be fine. I hope you get lots of pictures. I’m going to be on your grand adventure with you in spirit.”

“I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” I said, smiling. “I’m still a little short on cash.”

“I think you should do a fundraiser. You have a lot of friends that would love to help you.”

“Thank you, but I’ll do it on my own. It’s just taking a little longer than I hoped.”

I left the office and made my way back to my boat. I locked the door and went below deck to make myself a quick dinner. I went to bed early with plans to get up and do some shopping and maybe, just maybe, I would spend my afternoon doing absolutely nothing. That would be a first.

I put on one of my many bikinis and threw on a pair of shorts and my sheer pink coverup and headed out. I decided supplies could wait. I was going to enjoy the beach. My first stop was at one of the many tourist traps that Waikiki offered. The place was packed—as always. There was never any downtime for the busy city.

People wearing colorful shirts and hats meandered in and out of the shops, spending money on trinkets that would sit on a shelf and collect dust. I found the store I was looking for and browsed the titles of the books. I wanted something juicy and spicy.

Armed with a book, a towel, and a fruity drink, I stretched out on the busy beach to soak up some sun. As I lay there, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of restlessness. I had always been one to seek adventure and excitement, and lately, life on my boat had felt mundane and predictable. The thought of spending another day doing nothing but lounging on the beach made me feel antsy.

I had to force myself to shut off that little voice that was always telling me to go here. Do this. Clean that. Research this. I was going to take Ryder's advice and spend the day doing nothing. I took a drink of the strawberry margarita in a plastic cup with a lid and smiled. There was something to be said for taking a day off.

I blocked out the screams from kids running around the beach and all the different music being pumped through Bluetooth speakers from the people enjoying the beach. I gave my full attention to the book. Just when things were really starting to get good, a shadow fell over me, blocking the sun.

“Crap! Sorry!”

I barely managed to hop over the woman stretched out on a blanket. A family with what felt like a million kids barreled toward me and nearly took me out. My only option to spare myself was to hurdle the tanned body barely covered in a black and white bikini.

My foot landed on something cold and wet. I managed to catch myself before I sprawled face first into the sun. I looked down and saw red. Actual red. Blood? My foot didn't feel cut.

The woman sat up and slapped her book on the sand. “What are you doing?” she snapped.

“Sorry,” I said again. “I didn't want to end up falling on you. I figured jumping was the best option.”

She pulled off her dark sunglasses and glared at me.

“Those kids were running amuck,” I tried to explain. I reached down and righted her drink, but it was mostly sand. “Here, take mine. It's a pina colada. At least that's what they told me. I haven't taken a drink. It's clean and germ free.”

She sighed. “It's fine. I don't need a drink.”

“No, please,” I insisted.

I was doing my best not to notice how beautiful she was. Long blonde curls framed her face that was devoid of makeup. I could see freckles across her nose and cheeks. And she had the prettiest green eyes I had ever seen. She was tanned from

head to toe and had the look of someone that spent a lot of time on the beach. With her perfect, tight body, I wondered if she was one of the professional surfers I had been seeing a lot of. Apparently, there was some big competition happening, and everywhere I looked, there were hot women and shirtless surfer dudes.

“It’s fine.” She reached for a pink, gauzy top and quickly put it on. I wasn’t sure if she realized it didn’t actually prevent anyone from seeing her body.

“I am sorry,” I said again.

I was stalling. I wanted to keep talking to her because she was absolutely beautiful. Then I remembered I was in Oahu with my sister on my honeymoon. I had no business looking at women after getting jilted.

She got to her feet and picked up the book she had been reading. I immediately recognized the author name and the cover was very familiar. It was similar to the book Penelope had on the plane. I was a little embarrassed to admit it, but in my boredom, I had picked up the book while Penelope slept. It was the kind of book that could make a grown man blush. I knew women liked to read smut while men preferred watching it, but I now understood why they read the books they did.

“How far are you into the book?” I asked.

“What?” Her eyes widened as she stuffed it into her bag.

“You looked like you were really into it.”

“It’s research,” she muttered, embarrassed.

“Research? What kind of research?”

I pressed. I couldn’t help myself. I was intrigued by this beautiful woman and her secret research. Her cheeks flushed as she hesitated.

“I’m a marine biologist,” she finally admitted.

I grinned. “Really?”

“Yes.” Her tone was haughty, clearly trying to cover the fact she’d gotten busted.

“Is that book about dolphin shifters or something?” Yes, I should probably hand in my man card. I knew what a shifter was. I knew all about shifter romances because of my sister. I was bored and she was asleep. I didn’t have anything better to do than read one of her naughty novels.

Her eyes narrowed at me before she put back on her sunglasses. “Move! You’re standing on my towel.”

I couldn’t stop smiling as I watched her snatch it up and stomp away. I watched her go, admiring the sway of her hips and her firm ass.

“What are you doing?” Penelope asked.

I turned to see her coming toward me in her massive sunhat and Chanel sunglasses. She frowned and looked around. “What’s wrong with you? You’re smiling. Teeth and all. Are you having a stroke?”

“Nope.”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said, shrugging.

“You’re standing here like an idiot. I thought you were headed back to the hotel.”

“I am.”

We started walking across the sand toward the entrance of the hotel we were staying at for the night. Since we had arrived a day early, the vacation rental I reserved for what was supposed to be our honeymoon wasn’t ready until tomorrow. The hotel was packed, as was the beach. I was looking forward to the beautiful, secluded home on the North Shore. I wanted the solitude. I didn’t like the touristy thing. It was loud and crowded and people annoyed me.

As we walked, my mind kept drifting back to the marine biologist with the secret research. There was something about her that made me want to know more. The last thing I needed to do was have a fling while I was on my honeymoon. Although it might help put Ashley in my past for good.

“Hey,” Penelope said, nudging me with her elbow. “Are you even listening to me?”

I snapped out of my reverie and focused on my sister. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, what do you want to do tonight? The hotel has a luau and fireworks show.”

I shook my head. “Not really my thing. I was thinking of just grabbing dinner and trying to get some sleep.”

We reached the hotel and walked inside. The lobby was bustling with people checking in and out, and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore filled the air. As we made our way to the elevator, I couldn’t help but notice a woman standing by the front desk. She was tall, with long, dark hair and deep brown eyes that seemed to stare right through me. She was wearing a tight-fitting dress that hugged her curves in all the right places, and her high heels clicked against the marble floor as she walked toward us.

“Excuse me,” she said with a sultry smile. “Aren’t you Archer Ryatt?”

I was used to people knowing who I was in New York, but I wasn’t exactly famous. “I am.”

She looked at Penelope. “Congratulations.”

“On?” Penelope asked.

“Didn’t you guys get married?”

Penelope shot me a look, but I stepped forward and smiled at the woman. “This is my sister. Excuse us.”

We stepped into the elevator and let the doors close on the woman that seemed very confused.

“That was awkward,” Penelope muttered.

“I’m purposely not looking at the news back home. I don’t want to know.”

We went to our rooms, setting a time to meet in the lobby to go to dinner. I was tempted to check social media, but I didn’t dare. I could only imagine what people were saying

about me. I had been left at the altar. Me. Archer Ryatt, billionaire extraordinaire with thousands of women willing to marry me. I was left looking like a damn fool.

I flopped on the bed, hoping to catch a nap before dinner. Unfortunately, my mind refused to be quiet. I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, and replayed the events of the failed wedding in my mind. I thought I had found someone who would be a good match for me, but I was wrong. Dead wrong. I had let my guard down and let myself believe Ashley would marry me. It was humiliating, to say the least.

At dinner, I noticed Penelope seemed to be very interested in her phone. She'd barely said two words to me. Her sole focus was on whoever she was talking to.

"I could have ordered room service and watched TV," I said.

She looked up like she'd just realized I was at the table. "Sorry."

"What's going on?"

"Matthew," she said, sighing. "I hate him sometimes."

"You're engaged to be married to him. You're supposed to love him, which is the exact opposite."

"I know," she pouted.

I knew my sister. She did tend to be a little dramatic. She had mastered the art of the pout as well as the temper tantrum, done in the classiest of ways. But I didn't like Matthew either. The guy was a pain in the ass. He was obnoxious and rude. He was also very possessive of Penelope. I had been rooting for them to break up for a long time. Unfortunately, our parents and Matthew's parents were pushing for the marriage. Just like they pushed me to marry Ashley. Maybe my humiliation could work to Penelope's advantage. They would see the error of their ways and back off.

Unfortunately, I knew that would never happen. We were pawns to be played. Our parents wanted us to marry people of equal or greater wealth or better social standing. Love wasn't really all that important. Neither was finding a good spouse.

My parents believed in the idea of *tolerating*. If we could tolerate our spouse, it was the perfect marriage.

“Tell him to fuck off,” I said. “You’re on vacation.”

“I can’t tell him that.”

“Sure, you can.” I reached to take her phone. “I’ll do it for you.”

“No!” She snatched it before I could get my hands on it.

“You’re the one who said you wanted to come here and get away. We’re away. Quit texting him. Give yourself the chance to miss him. If you’re going to keep fighting with him five-thousand miles away, then I’ll put you right back on the plane and send you home.”

“Fine. No more texting. What are we going to do tomorrow?”

“We’re going to move to the house I rented,” I answered and took a sip of the fine wine.

She rolled her eyes. “I mean for fun. When’s the last time we were in Oahu? I think we were kids. We’re all grown up and can do whatever we want. What should we do? We could go snorkeling.”

“No thanks.”

“Fine, how about diving with sharks?” Her eyes lit up when she said it. She knew damn well that was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I plan on spending some time relaxing poolside,” I told her. “The private pool at the house.”

She made a raspberry face. “Boring. How about parasailing? I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“Pip,” I said, using her nickname to soften the blow. “I don’t want to do any of that tourist stuff.”

“Are you telling me you’re going to sit in Hawaii and wallow in your own self-pity?”

I finished my glass of wine and put it on the table. “Yes.”

“No, you are not. Period. We’re here to have fun. When was the last time you took time off from work?”

“Never.”

“Exactly, which is why you are going to get your ass on the beach and have some actual fun.”

“A beach is a beach,” I replied. “We just left the beach to come to another beach.”

“You and I both know it’s not the same,” she lectured. “We’re in Hawaii. No one is around to tell us to sit up straight or not to eat with our fingers. We can be free, really free. We should make up fake names. Get rid of that stiff upper lip and have fun with me!”

“We’ve already been recognized,” I reminded her. “I think our parents have spies everywhere.”

“Who cares? They can lecture us when we get home. We’re going out and we’re going to have fun. Period.”

SHILOH

“Thank you, Bree.”

“Such a short visit,” Bree said with a smile.

“I thought I was going to stay longer, but I’m going to dock at Ryder’s place.”

“Ah, I see,” she said, laughing. “I’ve been thrown over for a hot young man.”

“Not quite,” I said with a laugh. “But you are being thrown over for a little peace and quiet. I think it gets busier here every year.”

She rubbed her fingers together. “I know,” she said with her eyes flashing. “I’ll be able to retire sooner than I thought at this rate.”

“You deserve it.”

I walked back to my boat and pulled away from the marina. Ryder had convinced me to stay with them. I wasn’t staying in the house he shared with four other guys, but the house had a private dock that was just deep enough for me to park my boat. I often used his dock when I needed to take a day or two to catalog my research. It gave me a chance to hang out with him and do a little surfing, and he always let me use his shitty little Toyota to run around in. I loved being on the water, but sometimes, it was nice to give my sea legs a break.

I tied up my boat and went to the house to see if anyone was home. They were all out, which wasn’t surprising. The guys all loved surfing. They worked just enough to afford the

rent and spent every waking moment out on the water. It was a passion I understood.

I had my own keys to Ryder's Toyota. He rarely drove anywhere, preferring to use his bike and avoid traffic. My first stop was one of my favorite markets. I picked up the essentials, along with some fresh fruits and veggies. There was always an ice chest in the bed of the truck. I stowed the fruit and veggies inside and walked next door to get a Poke bowl.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" A woman wearing a hat the size of Ryder's Toyota bumped my shoulder. "I guess I should take off my sunglasses."

"It's fine," I said, smiling, and walked past her.

"Oh, that looks good," she said and pointed at my food.

"It's the best on the island," I told her. I could tell she wasn't a local. Her sunglasses and entire outfit probably cost more than my boat. I didn't buy designer anything, but it didn't mean I didn't look.

"Is it really?" Her face lit up. "Can you tell me which is the best one? I've had Poke at home in New York, but I'm willing to bet it's not nearly as good as here."

"I haven't had it in New York, but I think it's the authentic experience that makes it better."

I walked back up to the counter and pointed out a few of my favorites. She quickly ordered and paid with a black card. It confirmed my suspicions she was filthy rich. "I'm sorry to be pushy, but I am a New Yorker," the woman said. "But I'm alone and you appear to be alone. Would you mind if I sat with you? I'd love to pick your brain about the best places to see. I'm here for two weeks and I want to experience everything, not just the stuff the tourists get to see."

"Sure!" I didn't have any girlfriends and the woman seemed nice enough. I guessed we were probably about the same age. She had that look about her that said she got massages and mud masks pretty frequently. She was very pretty and I loved her smile. Despite obviously being wealthy, she was very kind and didn't seem the least bit stuck up.

We sat at one of the small tables outside. The umbrella overhead provided enough shade so we didn't have to wear our sunglasses. "I'm Penelope but my brother calls me Pip."

"Pip?"

She laughed, the many bracelets on her left wrist tinkling together. The woman was so effortlessly pretty. Blue eyes, dark hair pulled back into a sleek bun with glowing skin. I was wearing my usual cut-off shorts and a shirt that hung off one shoulder. My wild hair couldn't be sleek if I tried. Years of sun and saltwater had left it an unruly, frizzy mess of curls.

"My brother couldn't say Penelope without a great deal of trying," she explained. "My parents told me it usually came out Pippi. They refused to allow him to call me Pippi. Somehow, it was shortened to Pip."

"That's cute. I'm Shiloh."

"Oh, I love that name," she exclaimed.

"Thank you."

"Tell me about yourself. Do you live here full-time? Did you grow up in Hawaii?"

"No," I answered with a small laugh. She was very inquisitive. "I actually grew up in San Diego. I moved here when I was sixteen to live and work on my uncle's research. He was a marine biologist. I graduated high school early and then went to the University of Hawaii. I'm a marine biologist too."

"Oh wow! That sounds so fun!"

"I love it. I love what I do. I'm hoping to follow the whale migration next year as part of my research."

"Where to?" she asked.

"Alaska."

"Wow. That is crazy and yet it sounds so fun. I bet we're close in age and the most exciting thing I've ever done is come to Hawaii with my brother on his honeymoon."

That gave me pause. “You’re with your brother and his new wife on their honeymoon?”

She burst into laughter and waved her hand, showing off her perfect manicure. “Oh no. The wife couldn’t make it. She couldn’t even be bothered to make it to the wedding. She stood up my brother. The poor guy.”

“Ouch! That sounds awful. How sad.”

“Yes and no,” she said, shrugging. “I didn’t really like the woman. She was pretty enough and she came from a good family, but I never got the impression she loved him. After she jilted him, I know I’m right.”

“Your brother took his honeymoon trip anyway?” I asked with surprise.

“I told him he should. My brother is a bit of a workaholic. I thought it would be good for him to get away from the city and all the drama that is going to be waiting for him when he gets back. Hopefully, there will be another scandal and his non-wedding will be forgotten. Unfortunately, he’s not really embracing the beauty of this place. He’s been holed up in the rental house working or pouting. I want him to have some fun. Losing that woman is something to celebrate, not sulk about.”

“I feel bad for the guy,” I said.

“Eh. Anyway, tell me more about you.”

I didn’t know if anything I said could be anywhere near as exciting as what she had seen and done in her life. “There’s not a lot to tell. I live on a boat, which is also my research vessel. I travel around the islands doing research I’ve been hired to do by the university or private companies.”

“That sounds exciting.”

“I’m working the little jobs to save up for that whale migration journey,” I explained.

She took a bite of her food and suddenly broke into a bright smile. “How would you like to earn some money?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I want to hire you to be our personal tour guide,” she said. “I’ll pay you thirty-thousand dollars. That’s about two grand a day. I want to get my brother outside. He is going to wallow and become even more isolated than he already is. I’m hoping to show him there is a life beyond the board room.”

I almost choked. “Excuse me?”

“Please. Take him out on a boat or for a hike or teach him to surf. I’ll cover all the costs of whatever activities you get him to do and pay you for your time. It would mean a lot to him. Let me rephrase that. It would mean a lot to *me*. I want him to have fun. I need him to experience life. He’s so in his head all the time. He has a lot of pressure on him. I want him to let loose. This is the perfect place to do that and you’re the perfect person to show him around.”

The money she was offering would be enough to put me over my goal. I would have enough to make the trip to Alaska and then some. I could even eat something other than rice and noodles every day. It was a no-brainer. I would make more spending two weeks playing tour guide than I would make doing months of little research jobs.

“Okay.” I nodded and let the idea sit a little longer. “Absolutely. That would be fun.”

“Really?” she asked with surprise.

“Sure,” I said, shrugging. “I don’t have any jobs lined up at the moment.”

“You rock! Thank you so much. I owe you so much more than thirty grand. I know this will change my brother’s life. He just needs to experience actual fun.”

“He didn’t have fun with his fiancée?”

She snorted. “He doesn’t have fun period. He turned twelve and he lost the fun mechanism.”

“That’s one thing about being on the beach in Hawaii, fun is easy. People come here for a reason. It’s the most beautiful place on earth. How can you not have fun when you’re surrounded by all this beauty?”

“I agree. Tomorrow, we have a fishing trip scheduled. It’s on a luxury boat and they promise we’re supposed to catch fish. I could care less if we catch fish, but I booked it because it seemed like something a man would like to do. I want you to show up but he can’t know we’ve talked. It has to look like a total chance encounter. If my brother knew I paid you to hang out with him, I don’t think I would make it back to New York.”

“You’re not going to be with us?”

She shrugged. “Maybe sometimes, but I have no problem finding fun. He’s the one that needs the help.”

I didn’t think she was trying to set me up with her brother. They were very wealthy and I wasn’t in any danger of stealing away some rich guy. “Let me give you my number.”

We quickly exchanged numbers. “I’ll text you the information for the boat. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this. I’ll warn you, he can be a bit of a stick in the mud at first, but he’ll loosen up. Just don’t take those surly looks personally. He looks at everyone like they stink but it’s just the way he is. He’s not really a jerk.”

“You’re making me worried.”

“Don’t be,” she said, laughing. “It might take him a minute to warm up. And he doesn’t know I booked this trip. I plan on surprising him in the morning. He might put up a fuss.”

“I will do my best to bring the sunshine and fun,” I told her.

“I’ll text you the information.”

I drove back to Ryder’s. I was hoping he would be home. I couldn’t wait to tell him about my quick money. He was going to think I was making it up. Unfortunately, he wasn’t home when I got back which meant we wouldn’t be doing dinner tonight together like he said. I carried my groceries to my boat and put them away. I spent a little time checking my email, making sure I didn’t miss a work opportunity.

I put an away message on my email and got busy jotting down some things I could show my new client. There was a lot

to see and do on the island, but it was off the island that I found the most exciting. I wanted to make sure I did things that would appeal to someone that never did them before. I had surfed a thousand times and snorkeled and done all those things, but someone from New York may not have. I needed to make sure I picked activities that appealed to what Penelope described as a hermit.

With my list done, I crawled into bed early. I wasn't going to sleep. I was going to dream about my voyage. I couldn't believe I finally had the money to do it. Well, almost, but I wasn't going to do anything to screw it up. I was going to make sure Pip and her brother had a great time on his honeymoon.

“D ammit, Pip. Why? On what planet would I want to go fishing? Do I look like the kind of man that goes fishing?”

“Which is exactly why we’re going. It’s not just fishing. It’s like a little baby cruise. We get to see the sunset and drink Mai Tai’s. It’s better than sitting cooped up in this place.”

“I’m not cooped up.”

“Archer, I spent twenty grand on this outing. You will go and you will like it.”

My mouth dropped open. We were rich, but that was ridiculous. “Penelope! Why in the hell would you spend that kind of money? We could have bought a boat for that much.”

“No, we couldn’t,” she said, snorting. “When’s the last time you went boat shopping? You couldn’t buy a speedboat for twenty grand.”

“Fine. I’ll go, but this is a waste of money.”

My plan was to get on the boat and drink until I passed out. They could carry me off the damn boat. When my sister wanted something, she didn’t stop until she got it. I was on the hook. I got dressed in a pair of shorts and a polo shirt, which was very out of character for me. It felt strange to be showing leg. I was usually in a suit, even on the weekends.

There was a car waiting to take us to the stupid boat. On the way, I felt I should remind my lovely sister of a few

important facts. “You know, our great-great-uncle died on the Titanic.”

“Lighten up, Archer. It’s not like you knew him.”

“Nope, never got the chance because he’s sitting at the bottom of the ocean.”

I walked down the dock toward the end where a very nice, large boat gently bobbed up and down.

“That’s us,” Penelope said with excitement. “Just us! I’m so excited.”

“Welcome aboard.” A young man wearing all white greeted us with Mai Tais. “You’re free to take a seat on the deck or head downstairs for hors d’oeuvres.”

“We’ll sit on the deck,” Penelope answered.

I was thinking a little snack and more alcohol was the better choice. I followed behind my sister. Her white sundress whipped around giving her a very ethereal appearance.

She sat down on the sofa that spanned around the deck, then looked over at me and smiled. “Isn’t this amazing? I think I want a yacht. I would love to sail around the south of France for months at a time. I’m going to ask Matthew.”

“Have fun with that,” I muttered. “What would you do all day? You’re stuck in the middle of the ocean.”

“The idea is to relax.”

I sipped my drink and looked around. “Are we going or what?”

I noticed a woman being helped on board. Blonde curls were piled on top of her head. She was wearing cut-off jean shorts with a frayed hem and strings hanging down very tan, toned legs. A simple white tank top with a black bikini top completed the look. I assumed she was an employee but wondered why she wasn’t in the white uniform like the others.

Her bright smile made her glow. She threw her arms around one of the young men in white. They talked for a few seconds. I decided she was probably the reason we hadn’t set

sail. She was an employee and she was late. I was irritated that instead of getting the show on the road, we were forced to wait for them to catch up before she got into uniform and we could go.

Then, someone handed her a drink and she started walking toward us. I looked over at Penelope. “I thought this was a private cruise.”

“It is.”

“Hi!” The beautiful woman pushed up her sunglasses. That was when I recognized her. She was the woman I nearly bulldozed on the beach. Her eyes met mine and I saw the moment she recognized me.

“Hi!” Penelope jumped up and greeted the woman. “I’m Penelope.”

The woman pulled her eyes away from mine and focused on my sister. “It’s nice to meet you, I’m Shiloh Gates.”

They both looked at me like I was supposed to jump and get all excited.

“That’s my brother, Archer.”

“Hello,” Shiloh said, smiling at me.

She didn’t have a drop of makeup on. Her sun-kissed skin didn’t need makeup. She was absolutely beautiful. I had a hard time pulling my eyes away from her.

“Sit, sit,” Penelope said and patted the couch beside her. “Tell me about yourself. Where are you from?”

I thought about getting off the boat. Penelope had a friend. She didn’t need me. Penelope could make friends with anyone, anywhere. She and I couldn’t be more different. She was outgoing. A real social butterfly. I preferred to hang out at home and enjoy evenings in. I didn’t mind the occasional dinner out with associates or my fiancée, but the idea of shaking hands and introducing myself to new people for hours on end was not fun.

The boat started to move, and soon, we were far enough from the shoreline that I couldn’t make out the people flocking

to the beach. The whole time, Shiloh and Penelope talked like they had known each other for years. They were both very energetic, and normally I would be irritated by the nonstop chatter, but I found myself hanging on their every word. I was intrigued by the bubbly woman that had come aboard.

“You should take us with you on some of your adventures!” Penelope exclaimed. “Wouldn’t that be fun, Arch?”

I opened my mouth to say something sarcastic, but that wasn’t what came out. “Maybe.”

I wanted to spend some time with Shiloh. She was a vibrant woman that seemed to breathe life into a day I thought was going to be miserable. It wouldn’t be horrible to spend time with a gorgeous woman.

The drinks and hors d’ oeuvres were plentiful. I found myself relaxing a bit more while even getting in on the conversation now and then.

“You guys want to drop anchor here?” Shiloh asked. “It’s a beautiful spot.”

“For what?”

She got to her feet and kicked off her sandals. “To go swimming!”

“Yes!” Penelope jumped up. “I’ve always wanted to dive into the ocean.”

I thought they were both crazy. I couldn’t even begin to guess how deep the water was. Or what was swimming in that water. “Pip,” I said with enough warning to make her stop taking off her summer dress.

She gave me a dry look. Before either of us could say anything, there was a splash. “What the fuck?” I asked and jumped up. “Did Shiloh just jump overboard?”

“Yes!”

My sister flung off the dress, revealing the two-piece she was wearing underneath. She walked to the edge like she was actually going to go over the side.

“No, Pip. At least go down to the swim platform. That girl is a little on the wild side. I don’t want you to try and keep up with her.”

She rolled her eyes. “Go get on your swim trunks. Let’s live it up!”

“You’re only saying that because you’ve had a couple of drinks. You should wear a life jacket.”

“I’m a damn good swimmer,” she said.

I watched her walk down the stairs. I followed her down. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do if it looked like she was going to sink, but I had been looking out for her all of her twenty-five years.

Just then, time seemed to slow. Shiloh burst above the surface, wiping her hands across her face and pushing her hair back. I was mesmerized. Her eyes looked even greener and her smile bigger. If there was ever a poster in a teen boy’s room that he could get off while looking at, that was the image. She was a fucking goddess.

“I’m coming in!” Pip turned around and perfectly executed a back flip into the water.

I knew she was a good swimmer. We grew up with Olympic-sized pools in all of our houses. We spent hours in the pool with our friends. I waited for her to resurface and shook my head at her. “You’re lucky you didn’t knock yourself out.”

“The water feels amazing,” Penelope called out. “Get in!”

“No, thanks.”

I didn’t care if they thought I was a party pooper. Maybe I was. I took a drink from my glass and watched the women swim around. They dove under, coming up laughing, and seemed to be truly enjoying themselves.

Shiloh slowly swam to the short ladder and pulled herself out of the water. Water dripped down her tanned body, glistening in the sun. My eyes followed the droplets as they traced her curves, down her flat stomach, and disappeared into

the waistband of her tiny black bikini bottoms. I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the sudden tightness in my shorts.

“Come on, don’t be such a stick in the mud,” Shiloh said, holding out her hand to me.

“No, thanks,” I muttered. “I’m not trying to be a shark’s lunch.”

“There aren’t any sharks.”

“No thanks.”

She looked at me and burst into laughter. I blankly stared at her. I wasn’t used to being laughed at. In fact, I was pretty sure I had never been laughed at. It was really very uncomfortable.

“Okay,” she said, grinning. “Stay up here and be afraid.”

“You think I’m afraid?”

“You just said you were worried about sharks.”

My eyes followed another droplet of water that found the perfect path between her breasts.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. “I just don’t feel like swimming right now,” I said defensively.

Shiloh shrugged. “Suit yourself, but you don’t know what you’re missing.”

I downed the last of my drink and thrust the glass at her. She could either take it or it would fall. I reached behind me and pulled my shirt up and over my head before dropping it on the deck. Then, I unzipped my shorts and let them fall. I didn’t care that I was in my briefs.

“Now, who’s afraid?”

I dove off the deck, hoping I looked as graceful and as cool as I thought I did. The water was cool against my skin as I sank several feet. I resurfaced and found Shiloh still standing on the deck and holding my glass. She looked properly shocked.

Penelope splashed water in my face. “Your underwear? Gross!”

I grinned smugly at her. “What? It’s no different than the bra and panties you guys are wearing.”

Penelope rolled her eyes, but Shiloh was still staring at me, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“You really know how to make an entrance,” she said with a laugh. She put the glass on the deck and dove in.

“I couldn’t let you have all the fun or have you laughing in my face.”

Penelope giggled and splashed me again. “Good thing you jumped in. I was about to come drag you in myself.”

“You wouldn’t have dared.”

“I would have,” Shiloh chimed in. She swam away from the boat and turned back to face us. “Well come on. You guys are in the water, let’s venture out a little.”

We followed Shiloh’s lead, swimming out further from the boat. The water was calm and it actually felt pretty damn good to be completely free. I couldn’t help but notice the way the water glistened against Shiloh’s skin. Every time she swam past me, I caught a glimpse of her lithe body. I understood why she didn’t wear makeup. She didn’t have to worry about her mascara running and making her look like a raccoon. My poor sister on the other hand was smearing her makeup every time she tried to wipe it away.

Shiloh was unlike any woman I had ever dated. None of them would be caught dead swimming, like actually swimming. They would be worried about the five-hundred-dollar blowout on their hair or their jewelry getting lost in the sea. Not Shiloh. She was as free as a bird and as at home in the water as a mermaid.

SHILOH

Damn. That was all I could come up with when I thought about the day yesterday. Archer Ryatt was both the biggest dick I'd ever met and the hottest man I had ever gotten to hang out with. He was this grumpy dude that had a perma-scowl, but on him, it was hot.

“Why?” I groaned and got up to dump out the rest of my coffee in the tiny sink in my even tinier kitchen.

I was supposed to be spending the next two weeks with the man. I had to do my best to remember it was a job. I was being paid to babysit the very grumpy billionaire who could buy anything he wanted—except happiness. I never truly believed money couldn't buy happiness, but now I did. Penelope gave me some clues about her family and their wealth. She seemed happy as a clam, but her brother was miserable.

Then I remembered he did just get dumped on his ass. I supposed anyone would be a little miserable if they got stood up at their own wedding.

I was nervous for the day. Penelope had texted me earlier. She was going out on her own adventure for the day and asked me to keep Archer busy. I assumed Archer was being a stinker again, and she didn't want to deal with him. She was paying me two grand a day to keep him occupied and out of the house. That meant I had to spend my day with the sourpuss. I knew he was going to bitch and complain about everything I suggested we do. Penelope was pretty adamant that no matter

what Archer said, I was supposed to drag him out into the world. Her exact words were, “you look like a strong girl.”

I went up on deck to tidy up and saw Ryder walking down. “Hey,” I waved. “You’re up early.”

“You should have come up,” he said.

“No, thanks,” I said, laughing. “I had my days partying with frat boys. Did I hear someone puking around two?”

He grinned. “One of the guys thought it would be funny to mix every liquor we had in the house.”

“Gross.”

“Yeah, it didn’t stay down. What are you up to?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I answered. “I’m helping out a couple of tourists I met the other day.”

“Since when do you help tourists?”

“They are here from New York,” I said. “Brother and sister. The sister is very nice and she is really trying hard to have a good time, but her brother is kind of a downer. They are on his honeymoon after he got stood up at the altar.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, so Penelope wants me to take her brother out to do something fun. I’m just not sure what to do with him.”

I wasn’t going to tell Ryder I was getting paid to take Archer out. Ryder would give me shit. “I have no idea what I’m going to do with him.”

“Me and the guys are going surfing. Bring him.”

“I don’t know if he knows how and I get the very distinct impression he doesn’t do anything unless he knows he’s going to excel at it on the first go,” I said. “Especially with a bunch of surf experts.”

“We teach newbies all the time,” he said, shrugging.

“It’s fine. I’ll broach the subject with him and maybe we can catch up with you guys later in the week.”

“How long are you hanging out with these guys?” Ryder looked a little concerned. “Do you know them? Are you sure it’s a good idea to be alone with them?”

“I’ve swum with sharks, I can handle some tourists,” I joked.

“Alright but keep your phone on you. I will come after the guy if he fucks with you.”

“Thank you.” I smiled and patted his cheek. “I’ll be fine. Are you going to be in your usual spot?”

“Yep.”

“If he’s up for it, I’ll bring him by. Maybe he’s not the alphahole he appears to be.”

“Cool. Bring him.”

It was time to go. The address Penelope sent me was about a mile away. I was pretty sure I could walk along the beach to get to the house. If not, I would find it one way or another.

It was a hot, humid day. The beach was busy, but not as bad as some of the better-known beaches. About half a mile from Ryder’s house, I found myself gazing up at the beautiful homes with beachfront access. I wasn’t surprised by the neighborhood, considering their wealth.

The beach wound into a cove with several signs claiming it was private. That was a bit of an exaggeration. People liked to claim they owned the beach and the water, but experience told me they would never win should a case go to court. The heat of the day was making me feel sticky and icky. There was no one on the beach or in the water, which was just way too tempting for me to resist.

I stripped out of my clothes and left my shorts and shirt sitting on my sandals on the beach. I ran into the water, feeling the cool rush around my legs. I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief as I waded in deeper, submerging myself until only my head was above the surface. I closed my eyes and let the waves rock me back and forth, taking me away from my worries even if it was just for a moment. I needed to be in the right frame of mind to deal with my grumpy companion.

When I opened my eyes, I saw him standing on the deck of the two-story home, watching me. He was tall and muscular, with a strong jawline that looked like it could cut through steel. His hair was a mess of dark waves that fell over his forehead, and his blue eyes, that I couldn't quite see from this distance, were piercing.

Damn, the dude was fucking hot.

“You know this is private property,” he said.

I flipped onto my back. “I'm here to drag you out of the house.”

“No thanks.”

“Are you going to come down here and have some fun or are you going to work all day long and be boring as hell?”

He stepped down from the deck and strode toward me, his eyes never leaving mine. He put his hands on his hips and stared at me. The way he was staring made me feel like he was trying to decide the best way to devour me.

Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

I quickly shook the thought out of my head and made my way back to shore, feeling self-conscious under his gaze. I walked toward him, watching him watch me. If I didn't know any better, I might think he was a little bit interested.

“What are you doing here?” he asked in a thick voice.

“I told you, I'm dragging you out of the house.” I picked up my shirt and pulled it over my head. My feet easily slipped into my sandals and I opted to carry my shorts.

“To do what?”

“Anything you want to do.”

“Anything?” he asked with heat in his eyes.

“Why don't you follow me? I have an idea about what we can do.”

“Follow you where?”

I flashed him a smile and slipped on my sunglasses. “You’re going to need actual swim trunks. I’ll wait.”

“And if I say no?”

I took a deep breath. “Then be prepared for me to annoy the hell out of you until you agree to do what I want.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Why do I think Penelope put you up to this?”

I flashed him a cheesy grin. “Hurry up. It’s hot out here. I’m going to have to get back in the water.”

“You make it sound like I should care if you do.”

I laughed at his surliness. He walked away without another word. If he didn’t return shortly, I would go pound on the door, but something told me he was coming back.

As expected, he returned wearing a colorful pair of blue trunks, a black T-shirt, and boat shoes. He looked very much like a yuppie. I was just glad he wasn’t wearing a ridiculous Hawaiian shirt.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to my boat. Not my boat, but the dock.”

“Are you planning on pushing me off the dock?” he asked dryly.

“I guess that depends on your attitude.”

We had only been walking for about ten minutes when he started to complain. “Where exactly are we going?”

“I told you.”

“How far is it? I have a rental car. We could have driven.”

“Why would you want to drive five miles when you could walk a mile along a pretty beach? You’re in Hawaii. You can drive anytime. Can you get this view in New York?”

“I suppose not,” he said, sighing.

We finally reached the dock, and I could see my boat bobbing gently in the water.

“Is this your boat?” he asked, looking at it with interest.

I nodded. “Yep.

“It’s nice,” he said, walking closer to inspect it.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a little proud. I was going to give him the two-cent tour when Ryder waved at us.

“Hey! Are you guys going to do it?”

“What is he talking about?” Archer asked. “Do you know him?”

“That’s Ryder, my best friend,” I said, smiling.

I didn’t miss the pursed lips and clenched jaw. He practically puffed up before my very eyes.

“Hey, man,” Ryder said with his usual goofy grin. “You must be Archer.”

“Archer, this is Ryder.”

“Are you going to surf with us?” Ryder asked enthusiastically.

Archer looked like he was going to turn around and walk right back to the house.

“Ryder is a surf instructor,” I told him. “So are those guys. If you’ve never surfed, these are the guys you want to learn from.”

“You surf?” he asked me.

“I do. Not well, but I can hold my own. If you don’t want to surf, we can do something else.”

It was like a red flag had been waved in front of a bull. I saw him respond to what he saw as a challenge. I really didn’t mean it as a challenge, but if it got him motivated, so be it.

Archer glanced at the surfboard and then back at me. “Alright then,” he said, his voice firm. “Let’s do it.”

I grinned at him, happy that he was willing to step out of his comfort zone. “We could start with a bodyboard.”

“No. I want to surf.”

“Do you want to put on a wetsuit?” I asked. “I’m sure—”

“Are you wearing a wetsuit?” he asked Ryder.

“Not today.” Ryder shook his head.

“Then I don’t need one.”

I could practically see Archer trying to measure his dick against Ryder’s. I wasn’t surprised by his response. He was a man used to getting what he wanted. People probably bent over backwards to please him. He was likely surrounded by yes men. Ryder would never be the guy that tried to get someone to like him. He was who he was and that was that. Most people liked Ryder because he was very chill. Nothing bothered him. He didn’t pay attention to all the masculine posturing that Archer was putting on.

“I’ll get you a board,” I said with a smile.

I knew he would be fine. He’d probably have a few face plants, but everyone did when they were first learning. It was a hard lesson to learn, but it taught respect for the ocean and all its power.

We walked out to the beach, boards in hand. The waves were small, which was perfect for Archer’s first time. Ryder gave him a quick lesson on how to stand up on the board, and then we headed out into the water.

ARCHER

I listened to Ryder intently as he gave me a brief rundown of what to do. The salty breeze filled the air as we stood on the sandy beach, the crashing waves a stark reminder of what I was getting myself into. This was my first time surfing, and I was both excited and nervous. But damn if I was going to walk away like some pussy afraid to get his hair wet.

“Alright, here’s what you need to do,” Ryder said, his tanned face beaming with enthusiasm. “Carry the surfboard into the water and straddle it, just like I showed you. Then, paddle out past the breakers to the lineup.”

I nodded, trying to remember all the tips he had given me. My heart pounded in my chest as I hoisted the surfboard under my arm and made my way toward the water’s edge. The warm touch of the ocean was a reminder of what I was about to do.

Surfing was not one of those things that appealed to me. I had actually seen the aftermath of a shark attack. I wasn’t interested in being the next guy that became shark bait. But I wasn’t going to back out. I didn’t back down from challenges—ever. I wasn’t going to start now.

“Are you excited?” Shiloh asked as she bobbed on her board a few feet away.

I gave her a look. “Thrilled.”

She laughed, clearly enjoying herself. “It’s going to be a lot of fun. Just let loose. You’re going to fall a few times, but it’s okay. You get up and you do it again.”

“Gee, you make it sound like a lot of fun.”

Once the water reached my waist, I placed the surfboard in front of me and straddled it as instructed. I could feel the powerful force of the water beneath me, and for a moment, I hesitated. Doubts crept into my mind, but I shook them off. This was my chance to ride the waves, and I wasn't going to let fear hold me back. Shiloh was watching. I did have some pride.

“Go for it!” Ryder shouted from my other side. He was paddling out, just like he told me to do.

With determination, I began paddling, using my hands to push the surfboard forward. The water swirled around me, and I felt the board rise and fall with each passing wave. It was a balancing act, trying to maintain my position on the board while battling the ocean's current, but I kept going. Nerves coiled in my belly. Shiloh made it sound totally natural to fall on my face, but that was not something I was accustomed to or wanted to experience. Falling was humiliating.

As I paddled further out, the sounds of the beach faded away, and I was surrounded by the vastness of the sea. It was both awe inspiring and humbling. This was the part about respecting the ocean that Ryder mentioned.

The sun was high in the sky, casting a golden glow over the water, and I felt a sense of freedom I had never experienced before. The Archer that stood at the altar waiting for Ashley never would have done something this crazy.

But after yesterday, jumping off the back of the yacht had opened a door I never thought I would walk through. It had been freeing. I had shed the shackles of my perfectly planned life. Yesterday was the first time I felt anything in a long time. I had been on automatic mode for so long, I forgot what it felt like to actually laugh and feel really good. Penelope often called me a cyborg. It was for good reason.

I glanced back at the shore, where a few of Ryder's buddies stood, watching and cheering me on. Finally, I reached the lineup—a point just beyond the breakers where the waves were forming. I sat on the surfboard, my legs dangling

in the water, waiting for the perfect wave. As I scanned the horizon, a swell started to build, and I felt a surge of excitement.

“Here it comes!” Ryder called out, pointing toward the approaching wave.

I turned my board toward the shore, preparing myself for the ride of a lifetime. I glanced over at Ryder to make sure I was doing it the right way. With a burst of adrenaline, I paddled hard, feeling the wave lift me up. I quickly pushed myself into a standing position, trying to remember all the techniques Ryder had taught me.

For a moment, it felt as though time stood still. I was gliding along the face of the wave, the water beneath me propelling me forward. The rush of the ocean surrounded me, and it was an exhilarating sensation unlike anything I had ever felt before.

My thrill was cut short. I felt myself falling forward. My arms flailed as I tried to regain balance, but it was too late. I hit the water hard, the impact knocking the breath out of me. I resurfaced, gasping for air. Waves crashed over me, dragging me under. The ocean that had seemed so inviting only moments before now felt like a dangerous force. I struggled, panicking as I tried to keep my head above water.

Suddenly, Ryder was beside me, reaching out one hand and helping me back up. “You okay?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

I nodded, still coughing up seawater. “Yeah,” I uttered with some embarrassment.

“You almost had it,” Shiloh said. “That was good. I have to say, I’m glad you didn’t make it all the way to shore. You would have embarrassed all of us.”

“The man’s a natural,” Ryder said. “Come on, we’ll catch the next one.”

I wasn’t going to quit after one failure. I followed Ryder back out and went through the same process again and again. I

was pretty sure I ate more sand and swallowed more seawater than would be considered healthy.

“You got this!” Shiloh called out.

My arms were extended, helping me to balance with my knees bent. Adrenaline pumped through my veins the longer I stayed up. As the wave carried me toward the shore, I couldn't help but let out a joyous whoop.

I was surfing! Me, someone who had never even set foot on a surfboard until today. It was an incredible feeling of accomplishment.

Throughout the rest of the day, I caught more waves, each ride better than the last. I fell a few times, swallowed by the churning water, but I always got back up and tried again.

Shiloh and Ryder's friends surfed as well. They talked shit to me and I had no problem dishing it right back since it was all in good fun. It was the first time since college I could remember hanging out with guys and having a good time. They didn't give a shit about who I was or what I had.

I was absolutely spent after a few hours. Ryder and the guys drifted down the beach to talk with some of their buddies. Shiloh was stretched out on the sand, her gorgeous body on full display. I understood how she stayed in such great shape. Surfing was a lot of work.

I lay down next to her, and the warm sand felt good. “How long have you been surfing?” I asked.

“My dad took me out when I was younger. I can't say I've ever really surfed.”

“You were surfing just fine,” I said.

“I would never win a competition,” she said, laughing.

“Where did you grow up?” I asked.

“San Diego. My dad was a beach bum.”

“And your mom?” I asked, prying into her life a little.

“She's a teacher. They're both in San Diego.”

“Did I hear you tell Penelope you moved here to work with your uncle?” I asked. I had only been partially listening to the two of them talking on the boat the other day.

“Yes, he was a marine biologist. When I was in junior high, my family visited him here in Hawaii. I immediately fell in love with what he did. He told me I could live with him and get started on my own career. He died a year after I moved here to start school. He didn’t have any kids of his own and made me his beneficiary. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough for me to buy my boat and pay my living expenses for a couple of years.”

“You live on your boat?”

“Yes.” She turned to look at me. “You don’t sound like you believe me.”

“It’s just different.”

“I love it. I get to pull up anchor and move every few days if I want. I’ve got a lot of friends around all the islands. They let me use boat slips or use their docks when I need to be on land.”

I was impressed. Her life was one big adventure. She was a free spirit who made a living doing what she loved. I couldn’t imagine waking up every morning and being excited to go to work. I didn’t hate my job but I could honestly say I didn’t love it. I wasn’t excited to put on a three-piece suit every day and sit inside an office dealing with clients and investors.

“Do you ever have a bad day?” I asked her.

She burst into laughter. “Of course, I do. Everyone does.”

“You just seem to be so happy.”

“I am happy,” she replied. “I love what I do. I love where I live. I’m looking forward to keep doing what I do.”

I turned my head, both of us looking at each other with our noses inches apart. Her green eyes drew me in. I wondered what it would be like to kiss her. My eyes dropped to her mouth, taking in the lush lips that I imagined were perfectly soft. I imagined she tasted like the sea she spent so much time

in, but she'd also be sweet. They were perfectly kissable. But I didn't want to make things awkward. Instead, I cleared my throat and looked away.

I had no business trying to make moves on a woman. A few days ago, I was prepared to marry another woman. I was on my honeymoon. Kissing another woman was out of the question. It didn't matter how good I knew the kiss would be.

As we continued chatting, I couldn't help but steal glances at her every now and then. The way she spoke about her life with such passion was contagious and I found myself getting drawn into her world.

One kiss. One kiss couldn't hurt, right? She was talking about coral samples and the importance of protecting reefs, but I couldn't focus on anything else. I decided to throw caution to the wind and leaned in a little closer. I felt her breath brush over my mouth and closed my eyes.

"Hey, we're going back to the house," Ryder announced.

Shiloh and I both pulled away. The guy's timing couldn't be worse.

"I'll see you later," Shiloh said.

"We're going to the bar," Ryder said. "You guys should come. After all that surfing, a cold beer is exactly what you need to finish the day."

Shiloh sat up, her back covered in sand. I wanted to reach out and brush it away, but touching her would be a very bad idea. I didn't think I could stop myself if I did.

"Do you want to?" Shiloh asked.

"Sure," I said, shrugging. "I should go back and change."

"Trust me, you're going to blend right in," Shiloh said, laughing. "It's a bit of a dive bar. The tourists avoid it like the plague. There may or may not be a rumor the place is dangerous."

"Then I would be happy to tag along."

SHILOH

I sat across from Archer, the late afternoon sun casting a warm glow over the beach bar. It was a hidden gem, away from the typical tourist spots on Oahu, mostly frequented by locals. After a day of surfing, I was looking forward to unwinding and enjoying some drinks at one of my favorite places. The place was loud with surfers and the typical service employees all talking about their days.

I couldn't help but notice the faint red tint on Archer's face from the sunburn he got during our surf session. His hair was slightly tousled, and his eyes sparkled with a mischievous charm. Despite the sunburn, he looked incredibly attractive. He looked so much more alive than the first time I saw him on the beach. He had lost some of that stiffness I noticed on the yacht before I cajoled him into jumping in.

The place was filled with casually dressed people, mostly surfers, their skin tanned from the sun. The service staff moved quickly around the room, taking orders and refilling drinks. Sunlight streamed through the windows, bathing everything in a golden glow.

A mixture of salty air, fruity cocktails, sizzling burgers, and cold beer filled the air. It was all very familiar to me. It felt like home.

"I bet you don't drink a lot of flat, semi-warm beer," I teased.

He took a long drink. "It's not that bad. Maybe it's because I'm really thirsty."

“Wait until your burger arrives,” I said, laughing. “After the day you had, you’re going to think it’s the best thing you’ve ever eaten.”

“Are you suggesting it isn’t?”

“It’s good food, but I think they take advantage of the fact the people that order the warm beer and slightly burned burgers are so thirsty and hungry they won’t notice.”

The clinking of glasses and the laughter of the conversations blurred to create an energetic and upbeat atmosphere. The waves crashing onto the shore nearby could be heard in the background. It was perfect. Ryder and his friends were sitting at a nearby table, talking to almost everyone. They were all very well known in the area.

“Did you like it?” I asked him, referring to our surfing adventure. “Today. Surfing.”

He leaned back in his chair, flashing a flirty smile. “I liked a lot of things about today,” he replied with a hint of playfulness in his voice.

A blush crept onto my cheeks. I took a sip of the warm beer, trying to hide my nervous excitement. Archer and I had known each other for all of two days, but today’s surf lesson felt like something big. Like something really shifted.

“I can’t believe you’ve never tried surfing before,” I said.

“Surfing was amazing,” he said, my eyes locked with his. “I never thought I could do it, but you were a great teacher.”

“Not me. Ryder. I cannot teach anyone to surf. I fake it until I make it.”

Archer chuckled, reaching across the table to brush a strand of hair away from my face. His touch sent a tingling sensation through me. “You are a natural,” he said, his gaze lingering on my lips for a moment before meeting my eyes again. “And I had a lot of fun learning with your encouragement.”

The air between us seemed to crackle with anticipation, and I found myself drawn to him like the pull of the ocean.

The shared adrenaline rush of surfing had opened up a new chapter in our relationship—one that held the promise of something more. In the back of my mind, I remembered the fact his sister was paying me to hang out with him. I would hang out with him without being paid. I debated whether or not I should tell him about my arrangement with Penelope. I didn't want to embarrass him. But I also didn't want to lead him on. If the attraction I felt turned into anything and he learned I was being paid, he would think I was only with him for the money. I was pretty sure that made me a hooker.

As the sun dipped lower on the horizon, casting shades of orange and purple across the sky, we continued to talk and laugh. He was no longer that brooding guy that complained and pouted. I had a feeling there was a lot more to Archer Ryatt. It was easy to misunderstand the guy. I had a feeling he didn't really understand himself.

“Ready?” I asked when our burgers were delivered.

“I would be nervous, but I'm too hungry to care,” he said, laughing. He picked up his burger and took a large bite. I waited, watching his reaction. He bobbed his head up and down. “It's a little well done, but not bad.”

Archer's eyes held a mixture of tenderness and desire, and I could feel my heart racing with every glance he stole in my direction. There was an unspoken question hanging between us, and I couldn't help but wonder if we were both thinking the same thing.

I took a bite of my burger. “Not terrible.”

As the evening wore on, the bar filled with more locals, their laughter and chatter creating a lively atmosphere. But for me, everything else seemed to blur into the background, leaving only Archer and the undeniable chemistry that crackled in the air. I didn't know what was happening between us, but I liked it.

“I'm going to get us a couple more beers,” I told him. “They're swamped and I don't want to add more to their workload.”

I got up and walked to the bar that was crowded with locals and a few stray tourists that ignored the warnings about the place. I leaned against the bar and waited my turn.

“What is a beautiful woman like you doing all alone in a place like this?”

I glanced up and saw a man wearing the ugliest Hawaiian shirt leering down at me. “Who said I was alone?” I asked.

“If I was here with you, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight.”

“But I’m not here with you,” I replied.

I had fended off my fair share of unwanted advances. It wasn’t anything new. He was drunk, which was also pretty normal.

“Let me buy you a drink. I bet you’re a margarita kind of girl.”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay, okay, tequila shots,” he said, grinning.

“No. Thank you, but I’m ordering my own drink and then I’m going to return to my table and finish my dinner.”

“Shit, you don’t have to be such a bitch about it,” he snarled.

I rolled my eyes and turned to the bartender, who had just finished serving a group of guys at the other end of the bar. “Can I please have two more beers?”

As the bartender went to grab the beers, I felt a hand slap my ass. I yelped and turned around, ready to read the man the riot act when I saw Archer cutting through the crowd with a menacing look on his face.

He shoved the guy. “Hey, asshole,” he growled.

The drunk guy turned around. “Fuck you.”

I cringed and barely stepped to the side when Archer decked him.

The man stumbled back, bouncing against the bar, and charged at Archer. I watched, stunned, as Archer hit the man again. People were shouting, urging them both to stop.

Archer reached out and wrapped one strong hand around the man's throat. "You're going to leave now."

Ryder was right there, following behind Archer as they forced the man out of the bar. Everyone went right back to what they were doing.

"Here's your beers, Shiloh," the bartender said.

"Thanks."

I grabbed the beer and watched the doorway. Ryder and Archer came back in, shaking their heads. I watched as Archer went back to the table and sat down. He acted like nothing happened. He just picked up a fry and took a bite.

I was so fucking hot in that moment. I could have dragged him into the bathroom and done him right then and there. I wasn't typically attracted to the alpha type, but damn.

I took a deep breath and carried the beers back to our table. "Okay?" I asked him.

"Fine." He picked up the fresh beer. "Thank you."

"So, that was exciting."

"Are you mad?" he asked.

"No. Are you?"

"I didn't like that guy touching your ass."

I had to bite back a smile. "I can't say I enjoyed it. He was drunk."

"Doesn't give him the right to go around touching your ass," he growled.

"No, it doesn't. Thank you for defending me."

"I just happened to be the first one to get there," he said. "Ryder would have handled it if I hadn't."

"How's your hand?" I asked.

My heart was beating a little faster than usual and there was a warmth in my belly. I was trying to think of a reason why I couldn't drag him back to my boat and have my way with him.

"It's fine. Just sore," he said softly.

He was withdrawing from me. I didn't know how to bring him back. I had a feeling fighting was definitely not a part of his typical day. He was way too buttoned-up to brawl in a rundown bar. I had a feeling the progress we had made was gone. He was sinking back into his stuffy, grumpy self.

"I'm sorry I was an asshole," he said.

I reached over and took his hand. "You weren't. I hate to admit it, but I'm glad you were here." He looked at our hands and then met my eyes. "Thank you for being my hero."

"Okay." He took a sip of his beer and pushed away his plate. "I should probably get back to the house."

I nodded, bummed that our perfect day had come to such an abrupt end. We had been so close to actually kissing.

"Okay," I said, smiling. "I understand. I'm sorry things went sideways. Usually, it's just locals in here."

"It's cool. I was thinking maybe we could do something tomorrow. Are you free?"

"Yes!" I remembered to play it cool. "Sure."

He pulled out his phone. "Can I get your number?"

"Sure," I said. We exchanged numbers, but I noticed he was still tapping away on his phone. "Anything you want to do?"

He typed out a text to himself. "I'm up for just about anything."

"Anything?" I teased.

"Within reason," he said, smiling.

"I'm looking forward to it."

I watched him walk away. He was really turning me on, and not just because of his smoking hot body. He was a hard nut to crack, but I liked the challenge. I liked that he didn't just come right out and lay out everything he was thinking and feeling. It was a shame he had to go back to the house. It was a shame I wasn't going with him.

I found Ryder surrounded by friends. "Hey, I'm heading back."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"That was pretty cool what Archer did," he said, grinning.

"Yes it was."

I wasn't about to tell him the whole thing had been a total turn-on. Ryder would give me shit and I didn't want to deal with the teasing.

As I exited the bar to head back to my boat, I realized I couldn't wait for tomorrow to come. I was excited to see where the day would take us. Maybe we'd go hiking or visit a nearby town. Regardless of what we'd do, I knew I was ready to spend the day with him.

I walked down the stairs to my living area and tossed my keys on the table. I headed to my bedroom, peeled off my clothes, and hopped in the shower, letting the warm water cascade over me. My thoughts drifted back to him, imagining his strong hands on my body, exploring every inch of me.

I pushed aside the thoughts, reminding myself he was only going to be around for a couple of weeks. I did not need a fling with a man I would never see again.

ARCHER

I woke up with a pounding headache, the remnants of last night's drinking. As I groggily tried to sit up, I noticed that my right hand felt stiff and sore. Ah, yes, the aftermath of the altercation. The guy who had slapped Shiloh's ass last night deserved a taste of his own medicine, but it wasn't my proudest moment. It wasn't just my hand that was feeling a little stiff. My whole body was sore. That was the result of the surfing and face plants I did on the ocean floor.

Just as I was wincing at the discomfort in my hand, a knock on the bedroom door broke the silence. Penelope poked her head in with a smirk on her face. "You look like crap," she joked, her sarcasm not lost on me.

I managed a half-hearted smile. "Thanks, sis. Always great to get a warm welcome in the morning."

Penelope walked into the room and perched herself on the edge of my bed. She was the complete opposite of me—outgoing, spontaneous, and full of life. We couldn't be more different, but she was my sister, and I loved her. I was the straight and narrow one with alarms on my phone that went off all day. I ran my life by a calendar.

"So, care to share the gory details of last night's shenanigans?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I sighed, feeling a mix of regret and embarrassment. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing, but I know the way a hangover looks and—" She stopped and grabbed my hand. "Did you hit something?"

“Some dude.”

“You hit some dude!” Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head. “Are you serious? How much did you drink?”

“I wasn’t really that drunk. Some dude was fucking with Shiloh. He slapped her ass after she rejected him. It wasn’t cool.”

A slow smile spread across her lips. “Were you jealous?”

“No, I just didn’t think it was cool for some asshole to do that.”

“Of course not,” she said, smiling. “But, you know, there are better ways to handle these things. You could’ve just called the bouncer or something. I don’t think I’ve ever known you to get into a bar fight.”

“I know, I know,” I muttered, running a hand through my disheveled hair. “I guess I let my emotions get the best of me. I saw her jump and it made me see red.”

My sister patted my shoulder. “You’re lucky that you didn’t get hurt worse. And that you didn’t get arrested. Did you hurt the guy?”

“Actually, no one seemed to give a shit. Ryder, her friend, was right there to back me up. The bartender didn’t bat an eye. Everyone just kept drinking and talking. No one called the police. Nothing. It was kind of weird.”

“You’re lucky,” she said. “If you would have hurt the guy, he would have found out who you were and sued your ass. You know how people act when they find out who you are and how much money you have.”

“I know, I know,” I groaned. “It happened before I could even think about it. One minute I was eating a very average hamburger and the next I was stopping myself from pummeling the man.”

“I never thought I would have to be giving you this lecture,” she teased. “But I’m glad. It means you’re coming out of that hard shell you have built around yourself.”

“My hard shell is perfectly intact,” I shot back. “And I don’t have a hard shell. I have a healthy awareness of who I am and what I’m meant to do. I know people want to get close to me to get to my money. My hard shell has saved me a lot of trouble.”

“Ashley,” she said gently. “That hard shell didn’t protect you from that maneater.”

“That was different, and you know it.”

Penelope stood up. “Well, how about some coffee and painkillers to start your day of recovery?” she suggested. “Don’t think this little setback is going to be an excuse to sulk. You’re getting your ass out there in the sunshine. I’ll make the coffee.”

“That sounds like a lifesaver,” I replied, grateful for her caring nature. We argued, but we were close. She knew me, the real me. She knew how our parents could be and why I had to put the hard outer shell in place.

“I don’t deliver. I’ll be in the kitchen.” That was the last thing I heard as she walked out of the room.

I got up and pulled on a pair of sweats. I needed some serious caffeine. I walked into the kitchen and sat down at the bar with my laptop in front of me.

“Drink up, tough guy,” Penelope teased, though there was a softness in her tone. She gave me a cup of coffee and a couple of Advil.

I took the painkillers gratefully and sipped the coffee, feeling the warmth spread through my body. As the headache eased, I couldn’t help but be grateful for my sister’s presence. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to make some eggs,” she said. “Want some?”

“I’m good. I just need coffee.”

“Suit yourself.”

I checked my email and quickly replied to my CFO. Penelope disappeared upstairs. I saw an email from my father.

I dreaded opening it, but I had to know just how bad my world was falling apart back home.

He didn't say much. His message was a forward from the family attorney. I skimmed the letter but didn't care to read into it. It was all about Ashley being the one responsible for breaking the engagement contract. Nothing said romance like contracts. I closed the laptop. I didn't want to deal with all of that just yet. If I was being honest, it hurt. More like a sting.

I stared out the window and thought about what I was going to deal with when I got home. I wasn't looking forward to it. There was going to be the bullshit with the lawyers and of course my parents. They were going to be pissed, even though it wasn't me that fucked everything up.

"So, what's the plan for today?" Penelope asked, coming back into the kitchen.

"I'm not sure. What are you doing?"

She was wearing another dress that flowed around her slim body and her extra-large hat. "I am planning to lie out and work on getting wrinkled."

I rolled my eyes. "Like you would ever let yourself get wrinkled. You spend enough on Botox and laser surgery with a plastic surgeon just waiting to cut your face up. I don't know why you wear that damn hat. It's not like a skilled doctor can't fix what you break."

She flipped me off. "You're a jerk."

"You're twenty-five," I said. "Your skin won't wrinkle if you get a little sun."

"Your face *will* freeze if you keep scowling like that!" She walked out to the deck and stretched out on a lounge. My sister was very invested in preserving her looks. Watching her stretch out covered in the dress with her face shielded by the hat, I couldn't help but think about Shiloh and the way she lay on the sand with nothing but a few pieces of strategically placed fabric to cover her most important bits.

As I sipped my coffee, I felt a sense of determination to enjoy every minute I was in Hawaii. Whatever was waiting for

me at home would be there whether I stressed about it or not.

I picked up my phone and called Shiloh, my self-appointed tour guide for my stay in Oahu. As the phone rang, I couldn't help but feel a mix of nerves and excitement. I wanted to apologize and spend some quality time with her, away from the distractions of a crowded bar.

"Hey," she answered, her voice bright and cheery.

"Hey, it's me," I replied, trying to sound casual despite the slight butterflies in my stomach.

"What's up?" she asked, and I could almost picture her smile through the phone.

"I was wondering if you'd like to go for a hike today," I said, my heart pounding a little faster. "You know, clear our heads and enjoy some nature."

There was a momentary pause. I panicked, thinking she was going to tell me to get lost. "Sure, that sounds like a great idea. I know a beautiful trail not too far from where you're staying."

Relief washed over me. "Perfect. Do you want to come here or should I pick you up?"

"I'll head over," she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

After hanging up, I felt a mix of excitement and nervousness. I was looking forward to seeing her, which surprised me. I wasn't sure why I was thinking about Shiloh as anything more than a tour guide. I was fresh off a breakup and couldn't deal with another woman.

I showered and dressed for a hike. There was a knock at the back door, which I knew was Shiloh. She was probably going to be wet and wearing a bikini. I knew she couldn't resist a dip in the ocean. To my surprise and disappointment, she wasn't alone. She'd brought Ryder along.

"Hey," I greeted her, feeling a little disappointed. "Ryder."

I had been hoping for some time alone with Shiloh, but that was cool. Ryder was a good guy, and honestly, a

chaperone would keep me from doing anything stupid.

“Come in.”

“Wow!” Shiloh exclaimed when they walked inside. “Check this place out!”

“This is awesome,” Ryder chimed in.

“Do you guys want some coffee?” I asked. “Espresso?”

“Espresso, please,” Ryder said.

I walked into the kitchen and quickly made two cups of espresso. Penelope sauntered inside. “Hello,” she said, smiling.

“Hi,” Shiloh greeted her.

“I didn’t know you were coming over.”

Ryder was sitting on the couch, his feet propped up on the coffee table. I saw the moment Penelope noticed him. She practically recoiled at the sight of him making himself at home in the living room.

“Uh, who are you?” Penelope asked in a tone I only heard her use when she was with her friends. It was haughty and full of disdain.

Ryder got up and walked into the kitchen to get his espresso. “Doesn’t matter who I am, but who are you, sweetheart?” He flashed a grin and winked at her.

Penelope’s mouth dropped open before snapping shut. She looked down her nose at him and stormed back outside. Ryder just grinned and sipped his coffee.

“Ready for this hike?” Shiloh asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I said with a chuckle.

“You sure? I thought you might be a little sore after surfing yesterday. You took some pretty good hits.”

“I’m fine.”

“I have a better idea,” Ryder said. “Let’s go to Hanauma Bay. It shouldn’t be too busy, given it’s the middle of the week.”

“What’s Hanauma Bay?” Penelope asked and casually made her way back inside.

I smiled and shook my head. She could pretend she wasn’t interested, but it was pretty clear she wanted to tag along. I didn’t know why she was playing coy.

“You’ll love it,” Ryder said. “Get your swimsuit.”

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do,” Penelope snapped.

“Fine, swim in your white dress. I wouldn’t mind.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Who are you?!”

“I’m sorry,” Shiloh said. “This is my friend Ryder. He’s housetrained, but that’s about it. Ryder, be good.”

“I’m always good.” He winked.

“That sounds good to me,” I said. “I am going to trust your judgment.”

“You’ll want to wear your trunks as well,” Shiloh said. “While it won’t be busy, there will be some people there and skinny dipping will get us in trouble.”

“I wasn’t naked,” I reminded her.

“No underwear either,” Shiloh said, laughing. “Not everyone appreciates a show.”

I liked that she suggested she did appreciate the show. “I’ll be back in a minute. I bet Penelope might be convinced to go.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Shiloh said. “Ryder isn’t as obnoxious as he lets on.”

SHILOH

S snorkeling at Hanauma Bay was one of my absolute favorite activities. The crystal-clear waters, teeming with vibrant marine life, made it a paradise for anyone who loved exploring the underwater world. And today, it was even more special because I had the chance to do it with Archer. Ryder thought I was crazy for wanting to do what was basically what I did every day, but it was different when I got to do it with friends and I wasn't being paid.

"I think I'll hang out right here and work on my tan," Penelope announced after we arrived.

"I thought you wanted to get in the water," Archer said.

"I might, but you guys snorkel. I want to enjoy the scenery."

"I'll hang with her," Ryder offered.

"I don't need a babysitter," Penelope shot back. "Go play."

"Sorry, Miss Thang, but I want to sit next to the pretty lady. And it's crowded. I was hoping it wouldn't be so packed."

It was crowded and I would have preferred to be somewhere with fewer people, but it was easy snorkeling and I was sure Archer would enjoy it. There was a lot to see just under the surface and the waters were very calm. It was perfect for a beginner. He pulled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes. I took a moment to appreciate his fine body. I was certain there wasn't an inch to pinch. He was a little pale, but

it didn't matter. He was chiseled and strong and it was very easy to fantasize about getting naked with him.

"I guess it's just me and you," I said to Archer.

"Works for me."

We put on our snorkeling gear, excitement bubbling within me. The sun was high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the bay. The gentle waves lapped against the shore as we waded into the water. "Have you snorkeled before?" I asked him.

"I've been a few times when we went to Mexico for vacation a long time ago."

"You know the basics about how to breathe and not breathe?" I asked. I didn't want to give him a tutorial if he didn't need it. I had a feeling that would tread upon his manhood.

"I do."

Together, we swam further out, the water becoming clearer as we ventured away from the shore. As we put our faces into the water, a breathtaking world unfolded before our eyes. Colorful fish darted between the coral, and I couldn't help but gasp in wonder at the sheer beauty of it all. I loved being underwater. I loved the freedom I felt. The water hid a secret world that only some people got to see. I loved that I was one of those people.

We floated on the surface, our masks allowing us to observe the underwater wonders without the need to come up for air constantly. It felt like we were in our own little world, a world filled with enchanting creatures and shared moments of awe. Archer was a different man. Whenever we came up, he was smiling. He looked years younger than he did when we first met.

"Ready to head in?" I asked him.

"Hell no."

I laughed. "Want to venture a little further out? Think you can handle it?"

"Are you challenging me?"

“Maybe,” I teased.

“Lead the way.”

I led him out to the outer reef with much fewer people. I was hoping it would give him a chance to really enjoy the scene below the surface. I pointed at a group of fish that swam by, and Archer smiled, giving me a thumbs-up in response. It was hard to look sexy with a snorkel in your mouth, but he pulled it off.

As we continued exploring, we spotted a sea turtle gliding gracefully through the water. It was a mesmerizing sight, and we followed it for a while, maintaining a respectful distance to avoid disturbing the majestic creature.

After a while, we decided to take a break and swim back to the shore along the rim of the cove. As we emerged from the water, our faces were flushed with excitement and happiness. Archer’s eyes sparkled as he turned to me.

“That was amazing,” he said, his voice filled with genuine enthusiasm.

I beamed at him, feeling a surge of affection. “I’m so glad you enjoyed it. It’s one of the things I love most about Hawaii.”

Archer reached out and gently tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch sending a delightful shiver down my spine. “I loved it, but I loved doing it with you even more.”

My heart skipped a beat at his words, and I found myself blushing despite the warm sun on my cheeks. Being around Archer always made me feel special, like I was the only person in his world. “Me too.”

I glanced down the beach and saw Penelope and Ryder sitting next to each other. Their body language said she wasn’t interested, but Ryder wasn’t a quitter.

“Penelope is engaged,” Archer said. “Ryder is barking up the wrong tree.”

“Ryder loves to bark,” I said, laughing. “He’s flirting. I don’t think she minds.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t.”

“So, she’s engaged, huh,” I said, hoping to get him to open up a bit more about his life back in New York.

“Yes, to a guy I don’t like,” he said. “Much like she didn’t care for my fiancée. In our world, it doesn’t really matter who we like or don’t like.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed and looked out over the cove. “You’re going to think I’m obnoxious.”

“I already thought that,” I joked. “Tell me anyway.”

“My family is very wealthy. It’s a generational wealth thing, which means my parents are used to a certain standard of living. They expect us to live up to their standards as well. That includes everything from the way we dress, how we interact with people, and who we marry.”

I was beginning to get a better picture. “Meaning you and Penelope both have to marry the right people.”

“Yes,” he said. “Not to say we don’t get a choice and the marriages were arranged for us, but there is a much smaller pool for us to choose from. If my parents disapproved of a woman I dated, it was made clear and basically they put their foot down. I don’t know why I listen to them. I’ve made my own money. I don’t need the family money, but dammit, Penelope and I are good little soldiers. I guess I feel lucky Ashley stood me up. My parents aren’t happy about it. They orchestrated the whole relationship along with her parents. Penelope is in a similar situation. She came with me on my defunct honeymoon to get away from her fiancé.”

“Is he a bad guy?” I asked with concern.

“Not bad, but I know she could do better. They fight a lot. My sister can be a little high maintenance, but I think she still deserves better.”

“And do you deserve better?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “I would like to think so, but honestly, maybe I don’t. I don’t know if I would make

a very good husband. My life is all about my calendar and my company. I don't do stuff like this."

"Snorkeling?"

"Snorkeling, vacationing, lounging on a beach without my iPad in my hand," he said with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You have all the money you could want, but you don't use it to see the world?" I asked with surprise.

He slowly shook his head. "No. I don't have time."

It was so crazy to me to think of anyone having the money to do whatever they wanted, but not taking advantage of it. He could go anywhere and see anything and he chose to stay inside his gilded cage.

"Thank you," he said.

"What?" I asked with confusion.

"Thank you for dragging my ass out of the house. You're forcing me to have a good time. You could have just let me wallow."

I smiled. "You're welcome."

Inside, I felt like a total jerk. The guy had no idea I wasn't doing this out of the kindness of my heart. I had to tell him about the money. As we lounged on the beach, enjoying the soft sand beneath us, I couldn't help but think about what it would be like if I met him without being paid to hang out with him. Unfortunately, I didn't think he would be interested in hanging out with me at all. I wasn't his type.

"We should probably go back," I said. "Ryder is going to make Penelope crazy."

"She can handle it."

We swam back over to where Penelope and Ryder appeared to actually be talking. I was surprised, but not really. Ryder had a way of getting anyone to talk to him. He was like an annoying brother. He kept talking until he wore someone down.

“Hey, I was just telling Penelope about Kona Brewing,” Ryder said. “You guys want to get drinks and dinner?”

“Sure,” I said, shrugging. “Archer?”

“I don’t know what that is, but sure, I’ll go.”

Penelope got up, showing off her perfect figure in the sparkling blue bikini she was wearing. I noticed Ryder noticing. Penelope obviously noticed as well. She pulled on her dress and put her big hat back on. “Lead the way.”

Kona Brewing was the perfect way to unwind after a busy day of snorkeling and exploration. As we entered the vibrant restaurant, I felt a sense of relaxation wash over me. The pleasant aroma of delicious food filled the air, and the cheerful chatter of other diners created a lively atmosphere.

Archer, Ryder, Penelope, and I found a cozy table by the window, and I couldn’t help but notice how Ryder had managed to get Penelope to relax and warm up to him. My best friend had always been a smooth talker but this was a new level for him. I felt like we should high-five.

“I can’t believe you convinced her to come,” I whispered to Ryder, teasingly nudging him.

He grinned mischievously. “Oh, you know me. I’ve got a way with words,” he replied, winking at me.

“I think it’s more about you know how to wear someone down until they give in.”

He chuckled. “Same thing.”

As we settled in, the waiter came over to take our orders. We decided to try some of the famous craft beers. The conversation flowed easily, with jokes and laughter punctuating the moments of silence. We reminisced about our adventures earlier in the day and talked about some of the other reefs they might want to check out.

Throughout the evening, I found myself stealing glances at Archer. His relaxed demeanor and the way his eyes sparkled when he laughed warmed my heart. There was something special about the way we connected, as if we were two pieces

of a puzzle that fit perfectly together. How in the world did I finally find a man I was truly interested in, but he was so out of my league? Life could be so unfair.

At one point, I didn't know what I was thinking, but my foot brushed against Archer's leg. His eyes met mine. They were full of heat and promise. I quickly pulled my foot back, like I had been burned. He hooked his foot around my ankle and pulled it back toward him. I almost forgot we were in a busy restaurant with two other people at our table.

"I'll be right back," Penelope said as she got up from the table.

I didn't bother offering to go with her. She was a big girl. Ryder excused himself to go to the restroom, leaving Archer and me alone for a moment. I took a deep breath, summoning the courage to speak my mind.

"I had a lot of fun today," I said to Archer, my cheeks flushing slightly.

He smiled warmly, reaching across the table to hold my hand. "Me too. Today has been amazing. I hope to do it again."

I felt my heart swell with affection, and I squeezed his hand gently. "We can. Anything you want to do."

Archer's gaze softened, and he leaned closer, his voice barely above a whisper. "Anything?"

Before I could respond, Ryder returned to the table, breaking the momentary intimacy. I jerked my hand back and grabbed the beer. Ryder saw. He flashed me a mischievous grin and I just knew he was up to something.

"Hey, did you think about that party?" he asked casually. "You have to come."

"Party?" Penelope asked and took her seat again.

"Yeah, there's this big party in two days. I'm trying to get Shiloh to go, but she's hesitating."

"I'll go!" Penelope blurted out. "Which means you have to go, Shiloh. I need a friend. I don't want to be a lonely tourist

amongst the locals.”

I looked at Archer. “Would you like to come along?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Then it’s settled!” Ryder exclaimed. “You guys are going to have the time of your lives.”

ARCHER

I hoped Shiloh wasn't mad at me for canceling our plans yesterday. The meeting I had was unavoidable, and I felt terrible for having to bail on her. She had been so excited about spending the day together, and I didn't want to disappoint her, but duty called. I had been so close to skipping the meeting but that little part of me that was still all about schedules and life plans wouldn't let me do it.

After the meeting, I was pretty sure I had made the wrong choice. My day would have been a million times better if I could have spent it with her. She wanted to take me on her boat, which was like she was inviting me over to her place. There was usually only one reason a woman invited a man over.

And I fucked it up. I was debating whether or not I should text her or wait for her to text me. I didn't want to foist myself on her. I knew she had things to do and acting as my personal tour guide wasn't likely to be high on her list of things to do. My disappointment was compounded by the fact that Penelope did get to go with her. She got back late and only said she had a great time and I really missed out.

I made myself coffee and went to sit on the deck and enjoy the morning breeze. The sound of the waves rolling in and out with the occasional squawk from a bird flying overhead was very relaxing. Since I left New York, I felt my typical stress level drop dramatically. This was why people took vacations. I never really gave myself the chance to truly unwind. Mostly

because it gave me time to think. I didn't want to think about shit. That only served to stress me out further.

My phone buzzed beside me. I felt a flicker of hope that it might be Shiloh reaching out to invite me for a ride on her boat. I eagerly picked up my phone, only to see that the text was from Ashley. That was disappointing. Part of me was tempted to ignore the message, to let go of the past and focus on the present. But curiosity got the better of me, and I opened the text.

How are you?

Reading those words brought back a rush of emotions, memories of a time when I had believed in forever with her. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. My first reaction was to laugh at the absurdity of her message. Seriously? How was I?

I put the phone down with no intention of answering her. She didn't give a shit about how I was. If she did, she wouldn't have left me standing at the altar like a dumbass. I knew Ashley. This was her rubbing salt into the wound.

The phone vibrated again. I rolled my eyes and snatched it up.

Can we talk?

“Woman, you are out of your damn mind,” I muttered.

If she wanted to talk, I did have a few things I wanted to ask her, like why the fuck she left me standing at the altar. If she wasn't ready to get married, she should have said so. It wasn't like I would have walked away. We could have postponed the wedding a couple of months. Why couldn't she have had the common decency to let me know the night before or the morning of? No, she had to make it a big deal. She had to humiliate my ass in front of everyone.

“Fuck off.”

I left the phone beside me. I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of replying. She wanted to play head games. I wasn't in the mood. I hoped she knew I was in Hawaii, living it up with a beautiful woman. Shiloh was never far from my

mind lately. Our connection had been instant. She was smart, funny, and adventurous—the complete opposite of Ashley. Shiloh made me feel alive and being around her felt like coming home.

But now, with Ashley resurfacing, I couldn't help but feel conflicted. Shiloh was in Hawaii and there was zero chance she would leave the place she loved so much. I couldn't very well pack and move here to be with her. My time with Shiloh was going to be coming to an end soon and I had to go home. Ashley and our failed wedding would be front and center. I was going to have to take the looks and ignore the whispers. People were going to wonder what I did. What was wrong with me? Why would a woman leave me hanging? I could only imagine the rumors that were already swirling about my failed attempt to get married.

“Fuck it.”

I got up from the chair. I couldn't sit around and get in my head about the bullshit. I could get myself worked up into one hell of a spiral if I didn't stay busy. It was one of the reasons I kept my life scheduled. Every minute of my day was planned. That way, I never had to stop and think and consider my life and my choices.

I grabbed my phone and Air Pods and walked down to the beach. I started to run, hoping the sound of crashing waves and the salty breeze would offer a momentary escape from my thoughts. I couldn't shake the frustration I felt about the Ashley situation. Running usually helped clear my mind, but today, it seemed to be clinging to me like a stubborn cloud. Why didn't I take more vacations? Shiloh chose to live doing what she loved while taking plenty of time to have fun. I was so focused on work, I wasn't living. Before I met Shiloh, that wasn't an issue.

Part of me had hoped I would see Shiloh while running, as if her presence alone could bring a sense of comfort. I wanted to see her bright smile. Maybe she'd be swimming. Unfortunately, she wasn't there. I didn't dare show up at her boat. That would be a little too stalkerish. If she didn't want to hang out with me, I couldn't force her to do it.

I turned back and ran toward the house. I tried to focus on my breathing and the rhythmic sound of my footfalls hitting the sand. My heart pounded and I could feel sweat dripping down my back. As I got closer to the house, I slowed down and walked the rest of the way. My mind was still racing, and I needed to calm down. I walked straight to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. My legs tingled. I felt better. Not great, but better.

Penelope was still asleep and I was still frustrated. The mansion was equipped with a gym, and I figured it might be a good way to channel my pent-up emotions. I needed to work through the frustration and come up with a plan for when I returned home. I needed to come up with a canned excuse to explain the situation.

I stepped into the gym, feeling the cool air-conditioned atmosphere embrace me. The familiar clinks of weights and the sound of upbeat music blasting in my ears helped shift my focus away from the negative thoughts. Every time I thought about how I was going to explain my failed wedding, I thought about Shiloh. I wondered how long that was going to happen.

I started my workout, pushing myself harder than usual. The tension in my muscles mirrored the turmoil in my mind. With each lift and each repetition, I felt a sense of release, a way to vent my emotions constructively. Back home, I spent a lot of time in my home gym. It was part of the plan. I had to keep myself in good shape. I didn't want to have a dad bod. Ashley and I were going to be the perfect couple with our perfect kids. When our picture was taken, people were going to look at us and think we were the perfect family.

Yes, it was superficial, but that's what I was brought up to focus on. We had to put on a show to prove that we were good, happy people. My parents were all about their images and I had learned to do the same. But then I met Shiloh and Ryder. They were two of the happiest people I ever met. They were who they were and they didn't make any apologies. They didn't have money or clout, but they were happy.

I moved on to floor exercises and tried to let go of the anger and hurt. The end of the workout was my chance to feel

a sense of accomplishment, a reminder that I was stronger than my emotions. I pushed myself to do more crunches than normal. My stomach muscles burned. That was the goal. I wanted to feel that pain. It distracted me from the stuff bouncing around in my head. I kept pushing. I didn't care about New York and Ashley. I was focused on the moment. I thought about what I wanted to do today. I didn't give a shit about tomorrow.

I was in the midst of my crunches, and my heart skipped a beat when the gym door swung open and Shiloh walked in. She wore workout gear, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and her bright smile illuminated the room like a ray of sunshine. I was so used to seeing her in shorts or a bikini, the yoga pants were a new look. One I really appreciated. I pulled out my Air Pods.

"Hey," she greeted me, her eyes lighting up when she saw me. "Sorry. Penelope said you were in here."

I tried to hide my surprise as the gym mat crinkled beneath my palms as I pushed myself up. "Hey, I was hoping to see you today. I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I had a meeting I couldn't get out of."

"No worries," she said, smiling. "Are you busy today?"

Sweat dripped down my face. I reached for my shirt and remembered I didn't have it on. "No," I said, slightly out of breath.

"I was hoping we could go out today, if you want. I'd like to show you something."

I smiled, nodding my head. "I'd love to. I need to grab a shower and then I'll be ready to go."

"Perfect. Penelope was making coffee. I'll wait."

If I wasn't a hot, sweaty mess, I probably would have kissed her. Something about the way she was looking at me had my libido kicking into high gear. Maybe it was the adrenaline after a long workout. "I'll hurry," I said.

I left the gym before I did something she may or may not have wanted.

As I took a quick shower and tried to calm down, I couldn't help but think about what Shiloh had in store for me. She was always full of surprises, and I was excited to see what she had planned for the day.

I put on some fresh clothes and walked into the kitchen. Shiloh was leaning against the counter, sipping on a cup of coffee. She looked up when she saw me, her eyes locking onto mine.

"Ready to go?" she asked, a mischievous grin playing at the corners of her lips.

I nodded, feeling a tingle of anticipation run down my spine. "I am. Are you coming with us, Penelope?"

"Not today," she said. "I'm hanging out on the deck with a book and a cold drink."

SHILOH

I was thrilled that Archer wanted to join me on my boat. It wasn't a luxurious yacht or anything extravagant, but it was my little slice of heaven, and I loved every bit of it. I could honestly say Ryder was the only man that had been on my boat. It was bringing someone into my private space and it made me a little nervous.

"I hope you don't mind that it's not a yacht," I said to Archer, a touch of nervousness in my voice. "It's nothing fancy."

He smiled warmly, his eyes lighting up. "Are you kidding? I think it's amazing! I've always wanted to experience life on a boat. I can't believe you live here and take this out on your own."

Relief washed over me, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in my quirky, cozy boat. It wasn't fancy, but it was home to me, and that made it special. As we stepped onto the deck, I gave Archer a little tour, showing him the small kitchenette, the compact but cozy living area, and the tiny cabin where I slept. His genuine curiosity and appreciation made me smile even more.

"So, you've been living on this boat since college?" he asked, his eyes wide with interest.

"Yeah," I replied, nodding. "After I graduated, I inherited some money from my uncle. It wasn't much, but it was enough for me to buy this boat. I've been living here ever since. It's my job and my home."

Archer's admiration was evident, and I felt a tinge of pride for the life I had chosen. It hadn't been easy, but it was a lifestyle that suited me perfectly.

"I think it's incredible," he said, his gaze lingering on me. "You've created an adventurous life for yourself. It takes a lot of courage to do anything unconventional. I don't think I could ever do it. You are the definition of a free spirit. You march to the beat of your own drum."

I blushed slightly, feeling a sense of warmth at his compliment. Not many people understood my choice, but Archer seemed to appreciate it. "Thank you, although most people think I'm just plain crazy."

As we set sail, the wind caught in our hair, and the sense of freedom was invigorating. I took him out to a reef I loved to explore. Few people knew about it. I dropped anchor and took two bottles of water out to the deck. I didn't have the big fancy couch like the yacht did. Instead, Archer and I sat on the deck, our legs dangling over the edge as the boat bobbed up and down on the waves.

"Do you ever go to the mainland in your boat?" he asked.

"No. I stick to the Hawaiian Islands. There's plenty of work here."

"You mentioned you wanted to follow whales?"

"That's the plan," I said, smiling. "I want to follow the migration from Hawaii to Alaska."

"What is that?" he asked.

I was more than happy to explain it. Most people didn't know anything about it. "Every spring, the whales move back to Alaska. Think of it as a circle. The whales travel back and forth between here and Alaska. In the winter, they come here to have their babies. When it gets warm, they head back to Alaska."

"No shit?"

I laughed. "Yep."

"How long does it take them to go that far? How far is it?"

“It’s about three-thousand miles,” I said. “They do it over a few weeks. They go to Alaska to eat and basically party. It’s their mating season. When winter sets in, they come back here. The whale-watching cruises they do around the Pacific Northwest in the fall and winter are at the height of the mating season. That’s when the males are showing off and jumping out of the water and stuff.”

“I had no idea,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’re going to follow them and do what?”

“Basically, just to study them,” I said. “In my community, we want to learn more about what they feed on and if they have any impact on the environments they travel through. There might also need to be some safety zones put into place, you could say. We want to make sure it’s a healthy population. My job will be looking for things we can do to make sure they are allowed to continue to thrive.”

He nodded as I talked. It was strange talking to someone about whale migration that didn’t hold a vested interest. It wasn’t exactly exciting stuff. Most people could care less about what a whale did or didn’t do.

“And you’ll do this with a team?”

“No.” I shook my head. “This will be a solo project. I’ll use my research to put together environmental impact studies and maybe do speeches or teach at the university.”

“Wow, smart and pretty,” he joked.

I laughed at the compliment. “Enough boring talk. Do you want to do a dive? There’s a reef I love to explore.”

“Scuba dive?”

“No, just a free dive. Snorkeling basically but a little deeper.”

He shrugged. “I could do that.”

“I’m sure you can,” I said, watching him pull off his shirt. “You’re a good swimmer and in great shape, so you can probably hold your breath for a while.”

“I haven’t timed it, but I think so,” he said, laughing.

I took off my clothes, revealing the bikini I chose with the intention of him seeing it. It was a little smaller than my usual choices with large rings on the sides. "Ready?" I asked.

He didn't hide the fact he was checking me out. "I am."

I was excited to share my knowledge of the reef with Archer. Snorkeling was one of my favorite pastimes, and exploring the underwater world with him made it even more special. Maybe I was kidding myself, but he did seem interested in what I did.

We jumped into the water, and the world beneath the surface opened up before us. The vibrant coral reefs stretched out in a breathtaking display of colors and shapes. Schools of fish darted around, their scales shimmering like jewels in the sunlight.

I led Archer through the underwater maze, pointing out different species of fish. It was a little hard to communicate underwater, but I felt like we were communicating without words. Archer seemed fascinated, his eyes wide with wonder. He had a natural ease in the water, and I found myself drawn to the excitement in his expression. It reminded me of my first time snorkeling when I was a kid.

As we swam deeper, I showed him hidden nooks where shy sea creatures took refuge. The deeper we went, the more the reef came alive, revealing its secrets. Archer seemed entranced by the beauty around us, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in sharing this magical place with him.

We moved with the rhythm of the sea, the sunlight filtering down and casting shimmering patterns on the coral below. Time seemed to stand still as we explored the underwater world, and for a moment, it was just the two of us.

After what felt like an eternity, we resurfaced, gasping for air but brimming with excitement. "That was incredible!" Archer exclaimed, his eyes still shining with awe.

"I'm glad you liked it," I said, smiling. "The reef here is like a hidden paradise."

We swam back to the boat, feeling a mix of contentment and exhilaration. As we dried off and sat on the deck, I considered telling him about my arrangement with Penelope. I didn't want to ruin the moment. It felt good to be with him.

"It's been a magical day," Archer said softly, his hand gently brushing against mine.

I smiled, leaning in closer. "It has. I can honestly say I haven't had this much fun in a long time."

"Really?" he asked. "You seem like you have fun every day."

"I do, but when I get to share what I love with someone else who seems to appreciate it as much as I do, it makes it so much better."

He squeezed my hand. "I'm glad I got to see it for the first time with you."

"Do you want a sandwich?" I asked him.

"Sure."

We headed downstairs. I never realized just how small my space was until I had a man of Archer's size in it. "Do you have a towel I could use?" he asked. "I don't want to sit down with my shorts still wet."

"I do."

I moved to step around him, but only ended up brushing past him. We were both wearing next to nothing and the skin-to-skin contact was a little much. I sucked in a breath and tried to keep from touching him, but that was pointless. Instead of moving and creating more friction, I reached behind him to the shelf with my towels.

Archer stood perfectly still as my breasts pushed against his bare chest. I could have sworn I heard a sizzling noise at the place of contact. He looked down at me and I just knew he was going to kiss me. I held my breath, waiting for the moment to happen. His blue eyes looked into mine. I could see him debating. I wasn't going to push, but if he kissed me, I wasn't going to push him away either.

Suddenly, the sound of a vibrating phone cut through the air. Neither of us moved at first. “Shit, that’s me,” he said and stepped away. His phone was on the small table. He picked it up and looked at the screen. “I have to take this.”

His voice was hard and the passion that was there evaporated. He looked pissed as he climbed the stairs and went on deck.

I stood there, feeling a little lost and disappointed. I couldn’t believe that something as insignificant as a phone call could ruin the moment we were having. I wondered what was so important that it had to be addressed right away.

I decided to give him some space and started making his sandwich. As I sliced the bread, I couldn’t help but replay the moment in my head. The way his chest felt against mine, the way his eyes looked at me, and the way his hand felt as it squeezed mine. I knew I wanted more.

That was a scary thought. I didn’t get to have more. He was not mine to have. He was fresh out of a shitty almost-marriage. His would-be wife was back home waiting for him. We would likely never see each other again. A torrid affair sounded appealing but an affair with Archer wouldn’t just be a one-nighter. I knew I would want more. The last thing I needed was a broken heart.

I finished making his sandwich. My intention was to stay on the boat a bit longer, but I changed my mind. If we stayed any longer, there was a good chance something would happen. I left his sandwich in the fridge and went on deck to pull up the anchor. Archer was standing with a hand on his hip and his other holding the phone to his ear. His broad back was already a shade darker than it had been when he first arrived. He looked even better than the first time I saw him shirtless.

I went through the process of getting ready to leave our secluded little area. Whoever he was talking to was not making him happy. I could see the tension was back. He glanced over at me with a scowl on his face.

And just like that, the fun Archer was gone.

My heart sank as I listened to my father's words on the other end of the phone. His timing couldn't have been worse. I had been seconds away from sharing a special moment with Shiloh—leaning in for a kiss that would have sealed our connection. But now, all I could think about was the bombshell my father had just dropped on me.

“Ashley changed her mind,” he said matter-of-factly, as if it was a simple matter.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my voice tinged with disbelief.

“She wants to get married. We're already working on rescheduling the wedding. Your mother is talking about scaling back a bit, but they still want to make it a memorable event.”

I couldn't help but laugh bitterly at the absurdity of it all. “No way, Dad. That ship sailed a long time ago. I'm not marrying her. We already had a memorable event. She left me standing at the altar and not only made a fool out of me, but all of us. Our whole family is a joke thanks to her.”

My father's voice turned stern and serious. “You need to think this through, son. Breaking the marriage contract won't be without consequences. Ashley will get five percent of your company and a ten-million-dollar settlement. You stand to lose a lot.”

I gritted my teeth, feeling anger and frustration bubbling within me. It wasn't about the money or the business. It was

about my life, my happiness, and my right to choose who I wanted to be with.

“I don’t care about the money, Dad,” I said firmly. “I care about my happiness, and I won’t sacrifice that for anything.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line, and I could almost imagine my father clenching his jaw in irritation.

“This isn’t just about you, son. It’s about the family reputation and our business ties.”

“I understand that but forcing me into a loveless marriage is not the answer,” I retorted, my resolve strengthening.

My father sighed heavily, and I knew he was trying to find a way to reason with me. But this time, I couldn’t be swayed. I had spent years trying to live up to his expectations and fulfill family obligations, but this was a line I couldn’t cross.

“You were more than willing to marry her a week ago,” he said. “She got a case of cold feet. She’s over it.”

“Do you actually expect me to put myself in that position again?” I scoffed. “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, I’m a fucking idiot.”

“We thought you might say that,” he said.

“Who? Who is we?”

“Your mother and I,” he said. “We’ve come up with a solution to that.”

“A ball and chain isn’t a real thing,” I muttered. “You can’t physically shackle her to me.”

“That’s not funny. We would have you guys get married in private, just the two of you and a judge. Then we would do the big wedding. She could run, but it wouldn’t matter. You would be legally married.”

“I can’t believe you actually think that’s a good idea,” I said with disbelief.

“It is a good idea. The contracts will be fulfilled. You’ll get to save face with another wedding. Her parents will put out a

statement taking full responsibility for the fiasco last week. They've come up with an excuse."

"Oh, this should be good. What?"

My father hesitated for a moment before answering. "They're going to say that she had a medical emergency and couldn't go through with the wedding."

I rolled my eyes. "That's ridiculous. No one's going to believe that."

"Maybe not, but it's better than the truth," he replied.

"And what's the truth?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"That she realized she didn't love you," he said bluntly.

I felt a pang of hurt and anger course through me. I had suspected as much but hearing it out loud stung.

"I don't want to marry someone who doesn't love me," I said firmly.

"I understand that, son. But sometimes in life, we have to make sacrifices for the greater good. And in this case, the greater good is our family's reputation and your future in the world we operate in."

I clenched my jaw. I hated the fact that my father was trying to control my life, but I also knew that he had a point. As the heir to a billion-dollar empire, my actions and decisions would always be scrutinized. And if I didn't marry someone soon, it would reflect poorly on my leadership skills.

"What if I don't want to be in that world anymore?" I asked. I didn't actually mean to say it out loud, but after being in Hawaii for a week and getting to see how Shiloh lived, it was like getting a chance to check out the other side of the fence. The grass was greener.

My father didn't say anything for several seconds. I knew that I had hit a nerve. "What are you talking about? This is your legacy, your duty, your responsibility. You don't just walk away from your family and your company. That's irresponsible. That is not how you were raised!"

“I know, but what if I want something else? Something more?” I asked, feeling a sense of freedom and rebellion rise up within me.

My father let out an exasperated sigh. “What is it that you want, exactly?”

“I don’t know yet. But I want to find out. I want to explore. I want to live a life that’s not predetermined by our family’s expectations and traditions.” I surprised myself with how honest I sounded.

“You set those expectations,” he shot back. “Your mother and I have always tried to support you.”

“Yes, you have,” I agreed. “I think I’ve been doing it wrong all these years.”

“Doing what wrong? Are you drunk?”

“Living,” I said. “I have spent my life living on a schedule.”

“If you break this contract, you’re throwing away a lot more than money,” he growled.

“She broke the contract,” I reminded him. “She stood me up. It’s over. I don’t have to pay her a dime. We never married.”

“No,” he said with exasperation.

“Yes, Dad. The contract stated she would have to give back Grandma’s ring. I gave her the six-carat ring as part of a contract. She broke the contract. She has to pay for half of the wedding.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, she wants to marry you. She’s ready to do it tomorrow.”

The words sank in. “Woah, woah, woah. She’s saying she wants to marry me knowing damn well I would never marry her after what she did! This is a shakedown. She wants the money! There is no way she would actually marry me.”

“Maybe, but we can’t take the chance,” he said.

“I’m calling her bluff,” I said.

“You can’t.”

“Dad, I can’t marry that woman.”

“It’s a good match,” he said.

“Dad, it’s not a good match, it’s a bad one. I don’t love her. I don’t even like her. I couldn’t stand the sight of her.”

“It’s a good match,” he repeated. “You need to marry someone with a similar background. Someone who understands. Someone who knows what it’s like to be in the public eye. Someone who knows what it’s like to be wealthy and have expectations.”

“That’s bullshit, Dad. I’m not marrying her.”

“You need to come home so we can work this out,” he said. “If you’re adamant you won’t marry her, we can work out a settlement.”

I couldn’t believe I had been so stupid to get caught in Ashley’s net. The bitch set me up. She never intended to marry me. The prenup was put together by our lawyers. It was supposed to protect both of us, but only now did I see how one-sided it was. I had been an arrogant fool to think there was zero chance she would back out of marrying me. I was Archer Ryatt. My family name and money made me a hell of a catch. I happened to know I was pretty easy on the eyes as well. Why wouldn’t she marry me? She knew she would be set up for life.

“Dad, you need to let our lawyers handle this,” I said. “She set me up. She set up our whole family. I have a feeling her parents were in on this as well. They dangle the perfect woman, get a contract signed, and then walk away ten million dollars richer. I would be interested to know if there were other jilted husbands.”

“And you know there is a clause in the contract that forbids us or them from talking about the contract,” he reminded me.

“Dammit. We got played, Dad. Do you see that? They did all of this on purpose.”

“Maybe, but it’s too late now. We’re in it. Just get home and let’s handle this.”

“I’m not coming home,” I said. “I’m on vacation. I’ve earned a vacation.”

“I thought you would be happy to know she wanted to go through with the wedding,” he said. “This puts you back on track and it will save you the humiliation of being stood up.”

“No. Not happy. Not even a little. I have to go. Don’t agree to any dates. I’m not going to marry that woman.”

“We need to move on with this,” he said. “If we delay, it will be our default.”

“She waited a week to warm up her feet, she can wait another week until I get back.”

I ended the call and took a moment to calm down. I felt the boat start to move. Shiloh was taking us back to shore. Whatever almost happened wasn’t going to happen now. Once again, Ashley was fucking up my plans.

Shiloh had put on her shorts and that was it. She stood barefoot at the wheel, steering the boat with total ease. The woman impressed me. I walked to where my shirt sat on the deck and quickly pulled it on.

The moment was over. My mind was a whirlwind of emotions, but one thing was clear—I couldn’t let my father’s ultimatum dictate my life. I wasn’t going to let Ashley coerce me into marrying her, not that I thought that was what she wanted. She would move onto the next guy and bilk him of a few million. Eventually, her little game would be exposed. If I had to pay her, so be it, but I wasn’t going to keep my mouth shut. No way.

I turned to see Shiloh looking at me, concern in her eyes. “Is everything okay?” she asked softly.

I forced a smile. “Great. Are we heading back?”

“Yes. Your sandwich is in the fridge.”

“Thanks,” I muttered and headed downstairs. It hurt to look at what I almost had but lost with a single phone call.

SHILOH

I knew what I heard. I tried my hardest not to listen, but I heard him mention Ashley several times. From the side of the conversation I heard, it sounded like they were planning a new date for the wedding. That surprised me. I couldn't imagine trying to marry the person who jilted me on my wedding day.

But that was just me. Maybe he really did love the woman. They said absence made the heart grow fonder. His bride got cold feet and left him at the altar, but now she changed her mind. Archer was a great guy. I couldn't really blame her for wanting to reclaim the man.

But it sucked. I liked the guy. He was too far out of my league. I had been fooling myself to think he would want me for anything more than a quick roll in the hay.

I tried my best to shake off the feeling of disappointment as I drove the boat back to Ryder's dock. I told myself that I shouldn't have expected anything more from him. After all, we had only spent a couple of days together. He never claimed to like me or want me. He showed interest, but that was a typical red-blooded male thing to do. As much as I tried to ignore it, the thought of him marrying Ashley still bothered me.

Archer came up just as I was pulling up to Ryder's dock. He easily hopped out and tied up my boat. "Do you want to get a drink or something?" Archer asked.

“Oh, sorry,” I said without meeting his eyes. “I have some things to do. I’ll see you at the party tonight, though.”

He looked at me like he wanted to say more. “Okay. I’ll see you there.”

“Hey!” Ryder was on the beach waving at us like an idiot. “I was wondering if you guys were ever coming back.”

Penelope was sitting in a beach chair with her feet in the water. She had on her sunglasses but not the hat. I was a little surprised to see her hanging out with Ryder.

Archer and I walked toward them. “What are you guys up to?” I asked.

“Hanging out, killing time until it’s time for the party,” Ryder answered. “I found this one looking a little forlorn on the beach and decided to take her under my wing.”

“You didn’t just find me,” Penelope said. “You were stalking me. I was enjoying the private beach in front of our house when he showed up.”

“Hang out with us,” Ryder said. “I was going to cook some hotdogs.”

“I can’t,” I blurted out. “I need to run some errands.”

“What?” Ryder looked confused. “Like what?”

“Stuff. Supplies. Oil. I need oil.”

“Okay. You’ve got the keys to the truck.”

“I’ll walk,” I said. “See you guys later.”

I quickly walked away before Archer could offer to come with me. I couldn’t be around him.

I had to sort out my feelings and figure out why the thought of Archer with Ashley was bothering me so much. As I walked into town, I tried to shake off the thoughts of Archer and focused on my errands.

I walked into the store and grabbed the oil I needed. As I paid for it, a familiar voice spoke behind me. “Hey, stranger.”

I turned around to see Max, my ex-boyfriend. I had not seen him in over a year. “Hi, Max,” I said.

“What brings you to this side of town?” he asked.

“Just running some errands,” I replied, trying to keep it as vague as possible. Max and I dated off and on through college but it just never stuck. He was decent enough, but we never really clicked.

Max leaned in closer to me, his breath hot against my neck. “You look good,” he whispered. “Better than ever.”

“Thanks,” I said with a tight smile.

Max moved in even closer, his lips dangerously close to mine. “Do you want to grab a drink or something?”

I pushed him away. “No, I don’t. I have plans.”

“Aw, you’re breaking my heart,” he joked.

“I’m sure your heart will be just fine. Bye, Max.”

It was strange because normally when Max and I had these chance encounters, we did get a drink and then other things happened. That was about the only thing good between us. But I didn’t want that. I wanted only one man, and I couldn’t have him. I spent another hour meandering around town killing time.

When I got back to Ryder’s place, Archer and Penelope were gone—thank God. Ryder and the guys were all getting ready for the party. I decided I was going to have fun. I was going to party like I was single and looking for excitement.

I took a quick shower and put on a black bikini with little fake diamond embellishments. It was more of a suit you wore to be seen in rather than swim in. The beach party might end up with some splashing in the water. The dress I was wearing wasn’t really a dress at all. It was a crocheted dress that landed mid-thigh with long, flowing sleeves. I put some product in my hair to tame the frizz and opted to leave it down for the night. To my surprise, I found myself actually putting on a little eye makeup. Nothing major, but enough to make me look different than I normally did.

“Knock, knock!” I heard Penelope call out.

“Down here!”

She came downstairs and took one look at me before letting out a whistle. “Damn, girl. You clean up very nice.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

“Seriously, you look hot.”

I smiled again and turned back to the mirror to put on my sheer lip gloss.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. “You took off pretty quick today.”

“Everything is fine,” I said, smiling.

“I know we don’t know each other well, but I can tell something is up. Did my brother do something?”

“No!” I shook my head. “Of course not.”

“He’s acting a little weird, too. Are you sure everything is okay?”

“Actually,” I said with a sigh. “I don’t want you to pay me. You guys feel like friends. I can’t take money from you. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Of course, it is,” she said. “I hired you. You’re doing your job. I want to pay you. You deserve to be paid. You’ve been a miracle worker with Archer. He’s acting so normal. He’s actually smiling and laughing.”

“I can’t take money from you,” I insisted. “I’ve enjoyed hanging out with you guys. I consider you guys friends. You can’t pay someone to be a friend.”

Penelope gave me a warm smile and put her hand on my shoulder. “You’re right. You can’t pay someone to be a friend. But you can pay someone for their time and expertise. And that’s exactly what we’re doing. We appreciate what you’re doing for Archer. You’re making a huge difference in his life. It’s only fair that you get paid for it.”

“He should at least know about the deal,” I said. “If he finds out, I think he’ll be mad and hurt. He’s not a bad guy. No one needs to be paid to hang out with him. I’ve been having a lot of fun with him.”

“Until today?” she asked softly.

I wasn’t about to tell her I was falling for her brother that was off limits. Archer had a messy relationship back home. He would end up marrying Ashley and his time in Hawaii with me would quickly be forgotten. I didn’t want to get involved in something that could make me the other woman.

“He’s a good guy and I just don’t like lying to him,” I said.

“Okay, we’ll discuss this later, but don’t tell him tonight. He’s excited for this party. I’ve never seen him excited about anything.”

“Except for his wedding,” I said.

She snorted. “He was as excited for that wedding as a man on death row walking to the electric chair.”

“Really?” I asked with surprise.

“Really. He didn’t want to marry her. He’s lucky she ran out on him. Let him have fun tonight. It’s not going to hurt anything.”

“I feel so guilty.”

“Don’t feel guilty,” she said and stepped in front of the mirror. “I’m the one who did it. If he gets mad at anyone, it will be me. But I don’t think he’ll be mad at all. The money I’m paying you is worth every penny. It showed him how to let go and have a good time. That’s more valuable than gold.”

It sounded good, but it still didn’t sit quite right. “Okay. We’ll let him have tonight and talk about it tomorrow.”

We went up on deck. Archer, Ryder, and the guys were all waiting to go. Archer was wearing shorts and a black button-up shirt. He seemed to be in a much better mood than he was earlier after the phone call.

“Are you guys ready?” I asked.

“Let’s go!” Ryder hollered.

“Alright, ground rules,” I said, knowing Ryder’s buddies and their tendency to party hard. I planned on letting loose myself, which meant there needed to be some rules.

“No rules,” Ryder groaned.

“No one touches the boat,” I said, holding one finger in the air. “All of you better plan on sleeping on the beach. You’re not sleeping below deck. That’s where I’ll be. No one touches the keys or my scuba gear. Kane, I’m looking at you.”

There had been an incident with him getting drunk and trying to put on my wet suit.

“I won’t touch anything,” he promised.

“If you want to get a blanket or something, go get it now. You can’t have mine,” I said firmly. “You guys want to do the nasty with some girl you pick up, do it on the sand or your own blanket, not on mine.”

Archer had a goofy grin on his face. He probably thought this was all really silly, but he didn’t know the guys like I did. Every rule was established after an incident occurred that required such rules to avoid further disaster.

Ryder looked at his buddies. “Go,” he said to Kane. “You better bring a couple.”

There was some joking and laughing as Kane hopped off the boat and ran up to the house. Penelope and Archer both looked confused. “Is that what this is?” Penelope asked.

“You’ve never been to a beach party?” Ryder questioned.

“I’ve been to parties and some included a beach, but there was never a need for blankets,” she said with a hint of condemnation.

“She’s talking about partying in the Hamptons,” Archer said. “No one needed the beach because the houses all have twenty bedrooms and pool houses.”

It was another reminder of the differences between us and them. Kane returned and jumped on the boat with three

blankets. “Ready!” he declared.

I started the engine while Ryder untied the boat.

As we pulled away from the shore, the wind whipped through our hair and the smell of saltwater filled our nostrils. I felt the rush of adrenaline as I guided the boat out into the open sea.

We cruised along the coastline, the moonlight casting an ethereal glow on the water. The boys were whooping and hollering, their laughter echoing across the waves. Penelope, on the other hand, was quiet, lost in thought.

“You okay?” I asked her, my eyes flicking over to her for a moment before focusing back on the horizon.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, forcing a small smile. “This is crazy.”

“It’s not that bad,” I assured her.

“No, I mean, I’ve never done anything like this and I have to admit, that makes me a little sad.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” I said, grinning. “I’ll make sure to keep an eye on you tonight. Just don’t go sneaking off with any boys.”

She giggled and gave me a side hug. “Thanks for being a good friend.”

ARCHER

The bonfire on the beach was a sight to behold. The flickering flames illuminated the night, casting a warm glow over the gathering. Music filled the air, and laughter mingled with the crashing waves in the background. It was a lively party, with plenty of alcohol flowing and people dancing joyously. I sat on a log with a cold bottle of beer in my hand. I was content to observe. It was a totally different culture. Shiloh and Ryder blended right in. It was very much a part of who they were.

It was hard not to look at Shiloh. The dress she was wearing showed off her tanned legs while teasing the bikini she wore underneath. I could practically feel her breasts pushed against my chest. The brief contact we enjoyed in the galley of her boat had nearly set me on fire. I would have kissed her had my phone not rung. I was pretty damn sure she would have let me.

When she came up from below deck earlier, the sight of her took my breath away. She always looked so alive. The tiny bit of makeup she put on enhanced her beauty instead of masking flaws. When I first saw her, my inner caveman nearly sprang into action. I wanted to push everyone off the boat and drag her right back downstairs to have my way with her gorgeous body.

But I knew better than to act on such impulses. Shiloh was not the type of woman to be claimed so easily. She was a free spirit, and I respected that about her. So, I just sat there, watching her dance with Ryder, her body moving fluidly to the

beat of the music. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as I watched the way Ryder looked at her. But I knew that jealousy was unwarranted. Shiloh was not mine to possess. And Ryder was her best friend. There was nothing sexual between them.

“Shots!” Ryder shouted and held up a bottle of tequila.

Shiloh grabbed Penelope's arm. “Come with me!”

I watched them do shots with some of the other guys. Shiloh was a little drunk and having the time of her life. She knew everyone and it seemed like everyone loved her. I understood why. To know her was to love her.

“Your turn,” Ryder said and handed me a plastic cup. There was definitely more than the typical shot in the cup.

I took the shot, feeling the burn and coughing once. “Damn. You know that's like two shots, right?”

Ryder laughed. “Yep.”

Shiloh, with her carefree spirit and infectious energy, was the life of the party. She moved gracefully to the rhythm of the music, her laughter ringing through the air like a melody. Ryder's friends and some of the other guys all took their turn dancing with her. She wasn't necessarily dancing with any of them, but dancing in general. Her head was back and her arms spread wide as she looked up at the stars dotting the dark sky. As I watched her from afar, jealousy gnawed at me, tugging at my emotions like a relentless undertow.

Part of me wanted to join in the fun, to dance with her, and be swept away in the euphoria of the moment. But another part of me was held back by insecurity and self-doubt. I felt like an outsider amidst her circle of friends, and it made me question whether I truly belonged in her world. I was a few years older than she was and not quite like them.

As Shiloh's laughter reached a crescendo, my jealousy intensified. Why couldn't I be as carefree and uninhibited as her? Why did I let my insecurities get the better of me? I tried to shake off the envy, taking a sip of my drink to distract

myself. But no amount of alcohol could drown out the nagging feeling inside me.

Ryder pulled Penelope into his arms and danced around the beach with her. My sister was laughing and clearly enjoying herself as well. I could honestly say I had never seen her laugh quite so hard in all my life. Shiloh's influence was contagious. Soon, Shiloh was dancing with Penelope.

Ryder came to where I was sitting and handed me a fresh beer. "You should dance," he said.

"I'm not much of a dancer."

"Dude, do you see us out there," he said, laughing. "None of us are good dancers. It's like being in the water. You just let the music speak to you. Your sister is a hell of a dancer."

"Ryder, you do know Penelope is engaged, right?" I asked gently.

I could tell he liked her and didn't want him to have his heart crushed. My sister had that effect on men.

"Shoot, man, it don't matter. She doesn't even like me. She tells me I annoy the hell out of her. I think she's just tolerating me to be nice."

We both knew that was a crock of shit. Penelope was putting out the vibes. I was her brother and even I was picking up on it. I had to admit, Ryder was a poor dude with no real career and no home, but he was ten times the man Matthew would ever be. And he made Penelope laugh. That alone made him a good guy in my book.

"She's only nice to people she likes," I said. "If she doesn't like someone, they know it."

I quickly downed the beer for a little liquid courage and then got to my feet. "No one better be taking pictures or filming this," I said to Ryder.

"Dude, look around. No one has their phones out. Hell, I bet half of them don't even have their phones here. When we party, we party to have fun and make memories. We don't need to see our fun through a two-inch screen."

He was right. I never realized it before now. They weren't on their phones. They were living in the moment. That was something I needed to learn to do. I put on a smile, trying to match the enthusiasm around me, and walked toward Shiloh.

Shiloh noticed me and gave me a bright smile, inviting me to dance with her. Despite my inner turmoil, I couldn't resist the pull of her charm. As we moved together, her laughter contagious, I felt a momentary respite from my jealousy. She was in my arms. She was dancing with me, not around me.

I twirled her around, feeling the heat of her body against mine. She smelled of lavender and the ocean. I breathed in deeply, savoring the scent. As the music slowed, she leaned in closer, her lips brushing against my ear.

"I need to talk to you," she whispered, her voice husky and low.

I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through me at her words. I knew what she was saying, and my body was already responding. I couldn't deny her, not when I wanted her just as badly.

"Didn't you warn Penelope about sneaking off with boys?" I teased.

She playfully pushed at me. "I'm not engaged to be married."

She took my hand and led me away from the party. We were far enough away from the more populated areas on someone's private property. Apparently, Ryder's friend's dad was filthy rich and owned a huge chunk of property. I could see myself enjoying something like this.

We could still hear the music and the laughter in the distance, but it was just us. She led me to a spot up the beach, nestled between tall palm trees and giving us plenty of privacy.

We sat down with our shoulders touching. "What's up?" I asked when I noticed she suddenly looked very serious.

"I just thought we should clear the air," she said.

"Clear the air?"

“Yes, earlier today, I think I might have sent the wrong signal,” she said.

“You’re going to need to be a little more specific,” I teased.

I wanted to lighten the mood. She had been so lighthearted a few minutes ago. I didn’t want to kill the mood.

But she didn’t laugh. Instead, she looked at me with a mixture of vulnerability and determination. “I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea about us. We can’t fall for each other. More like I can’t fall for you. You’re going to be leaving soon. I’m not the kind of person that does the vacation fling thing.”

I felt a pang of disappointment at her words. I had been hoping for something more between us, something that could last beyond this trip. But I couldn’t blame her for being practical.

“I understand,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “I don’t want to pressure you into anything you’re not comfortable with.”

She smiled, relieved. “Thank you for understanding.”

We sat in silence for a few moments, both lost in our thoughts. She stared out toward the water like she was thinking about diving in and swimming away from me. I couldn’t help but steal glances at her, admiring the way the moonlight played off her features. I was happy and disappointed at the same time. I thought my feelings for her were one-sided. Now that I knew she was putting the brakes on, that meant she was feeling the same thing.

Where there was smoke, there was fire. “Shiloh,” I whispered.

She turned to look at me and I took a chance. I grabbed the back of her head and kissed her. Her lips were soft and warm as they met mine, and I felt an electric jolt shoot through my body.

We continued kissing for what felt like hours, our bodies pressed up against each other as we explored each other’s

mouths. I could feel the heat emanating from her body, and I knew that I wanted her more than anything I had ever wanted before. It was the craziest feeling. I had kissed plenty of women and none of them caused this reaction. I thought I cared about Ashley, but she didn't do this to me. I felt the gate I kept locked around my heart break open.

As we pulled away from each other, breathing heavily, she looked into my eyes with a fierce intensity. "I want you," she said, her voice low and husky. "But I don't want to regret this in the morning."

I knew what she meant. I wanted her, and I knew I would regret it if I didn't sleep with her, but I didn't want to make her feel pressured into it either. I thought there was something between us, something real, and I wasn't just going to throw that away. "I don't want to do anything you're not comfortable with," I said, trying to reassure her. "I'm happy just kissing you."

"Then kiss me."

She lifted her chin and closed her eyes. I grabbed her by the waist and pulled her against me. I could feel her hands moving under my shirt. I let her explore at her pace. She pushed it off my shoulders and left it to me to do the rest. It was my turn to run my hands over her body, and I savored the feeling of skin against skin. My hand slid up her leg, hiking the dress with it. I paused when my hand hit the waistband of her bikini. I looked into her eyes, silently asking if she wanted to keep going or if we were going to stop. I didn't want her to have regrets.

"Yes," she whispered.

SHILOH

Screw regrets. I wanted the man. I wanted to know what it was like to be with him. I needed to feel his hard body over mine and deep inside me. I sat up and let him pull the dress over my head.

“Hold on,” he said.

He smoothed the dress out on the sand and grinned. “I mean, it’s not a blanket, but it’s better than the alternative.”

I laughed and stood up to dust off my butt before I sat on my dress. He was on his knees, his face inches from my core. I looked down at him and felt my breath catch in my throat. He peeled my bikini bottoms slowly down my legs.

“Perfect,” he said, and his voice was like honey.

He kissed my thighs, and I felt my knees start to weaken. I grabbed his shoulders for support. He spread my legs and slipped a finger inside me. I groaned.

“You’re so wet,” he whispered.

“All for you,” I said. I thought I was going to die from the pleasure.

He kissed my inner thigh before moving his mouth to my heated core.

“Oh, my God,” I said. The waves crashed around us, and I felt the cool sand under my feet. “Oh, my God.”

His tongue slashed over my clit, causing me to cry out. My knees buckled and I nearly fell once again. I dug my fingers

into his hair as he lapped at my wetness. I moved my hips in time with his tongue, feeling the pleasure build inside me. His tongue and teeth expertly traced my slit. I felt the tension inside me start to build.

I didn't think it was possible, but I felt myself start to shake. "I'm going to come," I said.

He groaned against me, the vibrations sending chills up and down my spine. I felt his tongue circle my clit again. The tension inside me started to rise. I could feel my body start to tighten. I was going to orgasm any second. Then I was gone. My body exploded as I gripped his hair. My clit was on fire as I came. I shook and twitched as the orgasm surged through me. When my body finally settled, I was left breathless and covered in a sheen of sweat.

He leaned back on his haunches as my body crumbled boneless to the sand. He smiled at me with the look of a man that had just taken home the gold medal.

"Damn," he said, grinning. "That was fucking amazing."

"Yes, it was." I reached behind me and unhooked my top, letting the bikini fall to the sand.

He leaned forward and grabbed one breast. He massaged and tweaked my nipples while I reached between us and grabbed the erection straining through his shorts. "My turn," I said in a throaty voice.

I pushed him, knocking him off his knees and onto his back. He lay in the sand and laughed. I crawled my naked body over him, kissing him deeply and wiping away the grin on his face. Once I had kissed him speechless, I pulled away and quickly undid the button on his shorts. I jerked them down his body before going back for the briefs. His erection sprang forth from the trappings of the briefs. I gnawed my lower lip, very excited to get a taste of him.

"Oh my, you are a big one," I said in my best sexy voice. I didn't know where it came from, but I was suddenly very confident. I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew what to do

and couldn't wait to give him the same pleasure he had given me.

"Let me see." I grabbed his cock and held it in my fist, wrapping my fingers around the thick shaft. I looked up at him and smiled. He was staring at me with an intensity I had never seen before.

"Do it." He sounded like he was in pain.

I smiled and lowered my mouth to his cock.

"Suck me off," he said again. It wasn't a plea this time. It was a demand.

I grabbed his cock by the base and started to move my mouth down his shaft. I lapped at him, swirling my tongue around him and savoring every groan I pulled from him. I sucked him deep into my throat. The sounds of his pleasure mingled with the sound of the ocean and the music in the distance. I felt myself getting more turned on by the second. I could feel his pleasure, which heightened my own.

"Yes," he said. He pulled my hair and thrust his hips forward, his cock went deeper into my mouth. I gagged, but I didn't let go. I wanted him to feel pleasure. I wanted him to feel it all.

I bobbed my head up and down faster and faster. His hand tightened in my hair. His gasps for air and the tension I felt in his body told me he was close. A long, low groan escaped his throat as he drove his cock into my throat one last time. He exploded down my throat.

"You're incredible." He reached for me and kissed me hard.

"I'm thinking we should finish this at the boat," I said.

"Worried someone is going to come looking for us?" he teased.

"Yes!" I laughed and rolled off him. "We'll have to swim to the boat. I don't want anyone to see us. They'll know and that would be a big can of worms I don't want to open."

"You're serious."

I pulled on my bikini bottoms. “Very serious.”

“Woman, I don’t know if I can move yet.”

I stood over him and cupped my breasts. “What if I told you I’m tingling and twitching inside? I’m wet and ready to feel you inside me. I want to lay on my bed while you fuck me. I don’t want to worry about sand getting into places sand should not be. I want to ride you and rock the boat.”

He quickly sat up and grabbed my hips. He kissed the outside of my bikini. “Sold!”

We both got dressed. I left my dress off, opting to carry it. We walked along the sandy beach holding hands. My boat was anchored about twenty feet off the shore. We had used the little inflatable boat to get to shore. Twenty feet was nothing.

“Ready?” I whispered.

“I can’t believe we’re sneaking around in the middle of the night like a couple of Navy Seals.”

I giggled quietly. “Shh. No splashing.”

“Lead the way.” He gestured.

We both waded into the water without making a single splash. Archer was a strong swimmer. We made it to the boat in no time. I was breathless when I reached the side, mostly from the anticipation of what was to come. I went up the ladder first. He was right behind me. He grabbed me in his arms and kissed me hard enough to knock me back a few seconds. I wasn’t worried anyone could see us from the shoreline and gave into the passion. His hands roamed my body like he was feeling me for the first time. I slid my hands down to his chest, something I had been dying to do since I first saw him pull off the shirt that time on the yacht.

“I can’t believe we are doing this,” he whispered.

“My thoughts exactly.”

I grabbed his hand and practically dragged him downstairs. “We have to leave the lights off,” I told him. “If they see them come on, they’ll know.”

The cabin lights were just enough to see by and would have to do. "I don't care," he groaned.

He kissed the back of my neck.

"Damn, girl, you have no idea how bad I want you," he said, running his hands down my back. "That first day on the yacht when you stripped down to a bikini very similar to this one, I thought I was going to have to excuse myself to the bathroom for five minutes of me time."

I laughed. It was one of the sweetest compliments I had ever gotten. "You're the one that stripped down to your underwear."

He flashed a grin. "I might have been trying to entice you."

"You definitely did."

He kissed me again, backing me against the wall. His hard body pushed against mine. I groaned and ran my hands down his hard biceps. "Now that I've seen your workout, I understand how you stay in such good shape."

"Now that I've seen how much time you spend in the water, I understand how you are so fucking perfect. And tan. You're my little mermaid."

"I always wanted to be a mermaid."

"I think you are," he whispered against my ear. His teeth tugged at my lobe.

"Are you envisioning me wearing seashells?"

"I'm envisioning you naked," he replied. "We're going to have to do this again when I can get a good view of you."

I laughed. "I think you've seen most of it."

"Not the best parts," he replied.

He kissed my neck, nibbling and sucking at the sensitive flesh. "You have no idea how much I want to fuck you. Your body makes me so hard."

"Then do it."

His eyes flashed a mischievous look. “I like when you’re aggressive.”

I reached down and grabbed his erection. “I can be aggressive, but I know what I really want.”

He purred like a big cat. “And what’s that?”

“This, inside me, but hold on, I have something I’ve been saving.”

I slipped away from him and went to the fridge. I pulled out the bottle of champagne I got from one of my clients. “Want to open it while I get the glasses?”

“Absolutely, if you promise I can pour a little on you and lap it up,” he added with a cheesy smile.

“You can lick anywhere you want to.”

“I already did, but I could definitely go back for seconds,” he said, grinning.

I didn’t mind the idea at all. I opened my cupboard and grabbed two coffee cups while he popped the cork. “Sorry, I don’t have fancy flutes.”

“I don’t care,” he said, smiling.

We took a few drinks but the champagne was not what either of us was craving. He grabbed me against him and kissed me again. I barely managed to put my cup down when he backed me through the narrow door into my bedroom. My legs hit the edge of the bed. I fell backward with him coming over me. His body moved against mine, giving me a glimpse of what was to come.

I bent my legs, bringing them up against his butt. I thrust my hips up and his cock swelled. He was hard and ready. I reached down between us and stroked him. He let out an approving moan. I pulled him against me and kissed him.

“Do you have a condom?”

We both froze. “Fuck!” I said. “Maybe. Hold on.”

I dug through the little drawer where I kept phone chargers, chapstick, and whatever. I saw a blue wrapper and

grabbed it. “Yes!”

He jerked it from my hand and tore it open while I jerked his shorts down for the second time that night. He rolled it on and then jerked my bikini bottoms down. He lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me with a little less urgency. He took his time, swirling his tongue around mine. My hands ran down his back and reveled in the feel of his corded muscles.

He leaned back and looked down at me. I reached up and touched his cheek. In that moment, I felt completely connected to him.

Out of nowhere, the sound of a shrieking bird cut through the moment.

“Fuck!” He shouted and hopped off me.

“What the hell?” I asked.

I wasn’t sure if we were being invaded or what the hell was happening.

“My phone,” he said. “I left it on board.”

He walked out of the room and to the couch where everyone tossed their keys and stuff. I stared at him in disbelief. He was standing naked in my kitchen with a condom hanging on to what had been a beautiful erection.

ARCHER

I was lost in the moment, my body anticipating what I expected would be one of the best sexual experiences of my life, when the ringtone I set for Ashley shattered the silence. My heart lurched as I pulled back from Shiloh. The look of shock on her face pissed me off even more than the shrieking bird sounds coming from my phone. My erection was gone just as quickly as it had come on.

I dug through the jackets and blankets and found my phone. I took a deep breath, preparing myself to answer the call and still my anger.

“What?!” I shouted into the phone. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Archer?” Ashley’s voice came through the phone, soft and hesitant.

The anger I had been holding back bubbled up inside me and I felt my grip on the phone tighten. Ashley had ruined the moment, the perfect moment I had been hoping for since I first laid eyes on Shiloh.

“What do you want?” I spat out, unable to keep the anger from my voice.

“I... I wanted to apologize. I know you’re angry, but I still feel terrible for what I did, for just leaving like that. I know it must have been very hard on you.” Her voice cracked and I could tell she was trying not to cry. It was bullshit. It was how she manipulated people.

“The fuck you are,” I spat.

“I want to fix this,” she said. “Please, Archer. We planned a great life. I panicked but I’m ready to commit now.”

“The hell you are. You just want my money. You humiliated me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I just wanted to tell you that I still think about you every day and how much I still care.”

“You don’t care about me,” I said.

I looked into the room and saw Shiloh jerking on clothes. Her anger was written all over her face. I didn’t blame her. The phone call came at the worst possible time. The one time I didn’t leave my phone on vibrate.

“I do care,” Ashley said.

“I know what you’re doing,” I told her. “You’re still playing games.”

“Look, we can work this out or you can get used to seeing me in your boardroom.”

The barb hit hard. If she got on my board, I would never be free of her. That was a fate worse than marriage. Screaming over the phone would solve nothing.

“That’s never going to happen,” I said.

“There’s an expiration date on this,” she reminded me. “If you don’t marry me, I will enforce the contract.”

“I’m sure you will,” I muttered. “We’ll talk when I get home.”

I ended the call and walked back to the bedroom just as Shiloh was jerking back her blankets. She had put on a pair of shorts and a tank top. The dirty look she shot me made it pretty clear sex was off the table. I took off the condom and tossed it in the trash.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“That was your fiancée, right?”

“She’s not my fiancée,” I corrected.

“Yes, she is. You’re going to go back and marry her. I’m not an idiot. I knew you were just using me for sex. Well, sorry, I’m not a pin cushion. You don’t get to fuck me and walk away to get married.”

“It’s not like that,” I said.

I was feeling pretty vulnerable having an argument in the buff. I quickly pulled on my briefs. She threw my shorts at me, hitting me in the face. I snatched them up and put them on as well.

“You better get out of here,” she said. “I refuse to be the other woman. How dare you put me in that position? Just get the hell out of here!”

“Shiloh, you are not the other woman. Never. I’m not getting back with her.”

“Yes, you are. I heard you on the phone earlier and now she’s calling you. I am not interested in getting in the middle of something. You need to go home and handle your shit.”

“You don’t understand,” I tried to explain. “She doesn’t mean anything to me. You do!”

“Bullshit!”

“I’m serious,” I told her. “I’m falling for you like I have never fallen for anyone else. I have never felt like this about anyone! I swear to you I am not going to go back to her.”

“That’s what they all say,” she said.

“I’m going to make you believe me,” I said. “I’m going to prove I’m not going back to her.”

“Don’t bother,” she said. “You’ll be gone and that will be that. I guess her timing was pretty perfect. I can’t believe I almost had sex with a married man.”

“I’m not married,” I corrected.

“Basically.”

“No, not basically. I didn’t love her. I haven’t been with her in months. She means nothing to me. You were the first woman I wanted to have sex with in a long time.”

I took a step toward her and she took a step back. She was near the end of the bed, with me stuck in the doorway.

“I don’t care,” she said. “This was nothing. Penelope paid me to hang out with you.”

“What?” I was convinced I didn’t hear her correctly.

“All of this between us wasn’t real,” she said. “You’re not falling for me. You’re on the rebound. You got jilted and you’re just looking for a way to get back at her. You’re going to have to find someone else to take to bed.”

“What do you mean my sister paid you?” I asked.

“Just what I said,” she said, shrugging. “We met at a cafe the day before your yacht trip. She asked me to hang out with you and show you a good time. Sex was never part of the equation.”

“Bullshit,” I hissed.

“It’s true. Ask her. Now, go away. I want nothing to do with you. Tell Pip to keep the money. I never want to see you again.”

She pushed me back and slammed the door in my face. I stared at the closed door for several seconds. I was confused and hurt. I walked on deck and stared at the bonfire on the beach. They were all still partying. I put a hand to my chest, realizing I left my shirt in her room.

I grabbed one of the Ziploc bags I knew Shiloh kept in her gear bin and stuck my phone inside. I stuffed it in my pocket and jumped overboard, making a very loud splash. I swam back to shore.

“What the hell?” Penelope asked when she saw me emerge from the water. “Where did you come from?”

I was pissed at her. “The boat.”

“Where’s Shiloh?”

“On the boat,” I replied and walked past her to one of the ice chests. I grabbed a beer and went to sit on the log I’d been on earlier.

“What the hell happened?” Penelope asked. “When did you guys go to the boat?”

“We swam out there without you guys knowing because we wanted some time alone.”

Her face lit up. “Oh really. Is she going to be coming back or did you leave her exhausted?”

I glared at her. “She’s not coming back. And she won’t be talking to me again. She told me to tell you to keep your fucking money.”

“What?” she gasped.

“Please tell me she was lying,” I said. “Tell me you didn’t pay her to hang out with me.”

“I paid her to be your personal tour guide,” she said. “But not to sleep with you. The connection you guys have is all you.”

“You think so?” I scoffed. “You paid a woman to spend time with me. Do you think I’m that worthless I can’t get a woman without paying her?”

“That’s not what it was,” she said. “I paid her to show both of us around the island. It’s no different than paying those sightseeing tour guides.”

“Were you trying to push me toward her?” I asked. “Did you think I would have sex with her and everything would be all better?”

“Not at all.” She shook her head. “I never expected you guys to do anything, but the first time we were together, the chemistry between you was obvious. Why not have a little fun?”

“You paid her!”

“Technically, I haven’t paid her anything,” she said.

“Just leave me alone,” I muttered. “You went too far.”

“What happened?” she asked gently.

“What happened is Ashley called,” I said. “She’s not going to leave me alone. Shiloh overheard me talking to Dad earlier and now Ashley. She kicked me out but not before she told me about your little arrangement with her. I can’t believe you did that. You’re supposed to be my sister, not my fucking pimp.”

“I wasn’t pimping you out.”

“Fine, you were pimping her out,” I shot back. “Same thing.”

“The only reason she’s pissed is because she likes you but you still have one foot in New York.”

“So, you decided to have her sleep with me to prove I have options?”

“No,” she said. “Yes, I wanted you to get the hint, but I had no intention of having her sleep with you. I just wanted you two to spend time together. I thought you’d have a good time.”

“I was having a good time,” I said. “Pip, you don’t understand what you did.”

“Okay, I should have known that would happen,” she said. “You fell for her. I never thought I would see the day. I’m sorry. I’ll talk to her.”

“You’ve done enough. Please, just leave me alone. I want to get really drunk and pass out right here.”

“Why don’t I have Ryder take me back to the boat and we’ll get some blankets?”

“I don’t need a fucking blanket.” I got up and walked back to the ice chest to get another beer.

I planned on dulling the pain and anger with enough alcohol to drown an elephant.

I was so angry I was trembling. Not only was I furious with Ashley, but I was angry with myself for being so stupid. Ashley used me. She was fucking with me and loving every minute of it.

I knew better than to get involved with Shiloh. I didn't think I could ever trust another woman. Whatever I thought I felt for Shiloh couldn't be trusted. I honestly didn't know if any of it was real. Was she going to sleep with me because she was being paid? Maybe she didn't understand what my sister asked her to do and was going to fuck me to make sure she earned her paycheck.

"How much?" I asked Penelope.

"What?"

"How much were you paying her?"

She looked down. "Thirty thousand."

"Damn, you were making sure she kept me very happy," I said and walked away.

"Archer!" Ryder called out. "Where are you going? Let's party!"

"I'm good," I said and walked toward the hiding spot Shiloh and I had used.

I was so fucking tired of feeling like I was always swimming upstream. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone. I just wanted to be alone. I flopped onto the sand and finished the first beer before opening the second.

SHILOH

I turned the knob to lock my cabinet door in the kitchen. Then it was securing my toiletries. I rarely encountered rough water, but even a small wave could knock stuff over and make a mess. With everything secured below, I went on deck to go through my usual checklist.

It was time to get back to work. It had been two days since the Archer situation. I was ready to get the hell out of Dodge. I hated sitting at the dock knowing he was just down the beach. I wanted to get as far from him as possible. Thankfully, I had a boat and the wide-open sea.

Penelope had tried to reach out a few times. She called and left a voicemail asking me to get coffee, but I didn't call her back. I didn't answer her text messages either. I felt a little bad for blowing her off, but she would be gone in a week and it would all be over. In one of her messages, she asked for my Venmo information because she wanted to pay for the days I hung out with Archer.

The very idea of getting paid to spend time with a man made my skin crawl. I never should have agreed to do the job in the first place. I wouldn't have accepted the offer if I had known it was him. The whole thing was a bad idea from the very beginning and I let it get out of hand. The fact he had not even attempted to call or come by to explain or talk spoke volumes.

He was going home and getting married. I would have been a fling. It wasn't like I didn't have a few of those in my

past, but it felt different with Archer. I didn't want to be a fling in his world. It felt wrong.

I tried to push the thought of Archer out of my mind and focus on the task at hand. As I went through my checklist, I noticed a strange sound coming from the engine. It was a slight rattling noise that I hadn't heard before. I frowned, trying to determine the source of the sound.

“Not what I need right now.”

My years of running my own boat had given me plenty of hands-on learning. The diesel engine was my specialty, and so I got to work investigating the rattling noise. It didn't take long before I found the problem—a loose bolt in the engine mount. It was a relatively easy fix, but it was time I didn't want to waste.

I groaned, frustrated at the prospect of losing a whole day's worth of travel time. But I knew that fixing it was necessary if I wanted to make it to my destination safely. So, I set to work, pulling out the tools and getting to work on the engine.

As I worked, my mind wandered back to Archer. I couldn't help but wonder what he was doing at that very moment. Was he packing for his wedding? Was he second-guessing his decision to marry someone else? Or was he already on his way to the airport, ready to jet off to his new life?

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. It didn't matter what he was doing. What mattered was that I finished fixing the engine so I could get back on track with my own journey.

After about an hour, I finally tightened the last bolt and wiped my hands on a rag. I turned the key in the ignition and the engine purred to life, the rattling noise completely gone. I smiled in satisfaction, feeling proud of myself. I loved being independent. I didn't need to worry about Archer. He was nothing more than a blip on my radar. He was my past.

“Shiloh!” Ryder's voice called out.

I walked upstairs to see him standing on the dock. “What?”

“There you are.”

“I’m right where I’ve been.”

He climbed on board. “Penelope has been trying to reach you. She said she’s been calling and you’re not answering or replying to her texts.”

I shrugged. “So.”

“So, what gives?” he asked and flopped down on one of the seats. “What happened that night? You’ve been hiding out and not talking to me and apparently not talking to her.”

“It’s nothing. I have work to do. It’s not like we were best friends.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “What happened with you and Archer? Do I need to kick his ass?”

“No. It’s not a big deal.”

He studied me for several seconds. “Are you okay?”

I blew out a breath. “No.”

“What the hell?” he asked. “What is going on?”

I debated how much I wanted to tell him, but then figured it didn’t matter now. “Penelope was going to pay me thirty grand to be their personal tour guide.”

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah, exactly. I thought the money was worth it. It would give me plenty of money to fund my trip next year. I only met Penelope. She told me her brother was sulking and she wanted to get him out of the house. I agreed without knowing who he was.”

“Why does it matter who he is?”

“Not who, but him. I’m not going to lie, I found him to be very attractive. We flirted and kissed and things got a little carried away the other night. Then his fiancée called. He’s going home and he’s going to get married. I thought—well, I don’t know what I thought.”

“You like him,” he said.

“I do. I don’t know why. He’s nothing like anyone I’ve ever dated or even been interested in. He’s this rich, yuppie guy. We’re polar opposites.”

“And he’s crazy about you,” Ryder said quietly. “Don’t try and deny it. You two have chemistry. It sizzles.”

“Sexual chemistry is not real chemistry. He’s going to marry some rich socialite with blue blood running through her veins. That’s not me. I don’t know what I was thinking letting myself fall for him. It was stupid.”

“It’s not stupid to fall in love,” he argued. “In all the years I’ve known you, you have never taken a chance on anyone. You’ve never let yourself fall in love. Max was the closest thing to a relationship you’ve had and that was not a relationship. That was a pit stop to scratch an itch.”

“My job and lifestyle don’t really allow me to have relationships.”

“Bullshit,” he said, snorting. “You’re scared.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re afraid you’re going to get your heart broken,” he said. “You’re holding back because you don’t want to get dumped. You’re never going to find love if you don’t let yourself look for it.”

“Who said I was looking?”

“You don’t look for love, it finds you,” he said. “And I think it found you.”

“Ryder, he’s engaged to be married. He is going back to New York to marry a woman. Even if he wasn’t, he lives there. His life is there and mine is here. It was stupid to even get tangled up with him. It was never going to go anywhere. It’s better it’s done. It was stupid.”

“You’re wrong. I saw the two of you together. You liked him, like really liked him. You’re a happy person in general, but you were different with him. I only got to see a glimpse of it, but I liked what I saw. And he was really into you. Penelope told me she’s never seen him so happy. Back in New York, the

guy is a real stick in the mud. You changed him. When you meet someone that changes your life in a positive way, that's special. That's a big deal. Don't you think it's kind of weird that you guys met?"

"No. I meet people all day every day."

"You meet fish," he said, scoffing.

"When I'm in town, I meet people all the time," I said. "I make people smile. They make me smile."

"I think it's fate," he said. "You met Penelope by chance and she immediately saw you were the perfect person to help Archer get through a rough time."

"Doesn't matter," I muttered. "He goes home and I go back to my life. I'm not going to waste any more time on it. I have a life. He has a life. It's done. Please, for the love of God, leave it alone."

"I think you should talk to him before he leaves," he said quietly. "You need to have some kind of closure. Don't tell me you're okay because I know you're not. It's not going to kill you to say goodbye."

"Why?" I asked. "What's the point? I said what I needed to say that night."

"Because you're going to regret not saying goodbye," he said. "You're going to regret not giving the guy a chance. I don't think it's what you think it is."

"Whatever."

"Penelope called me. They're leaving tomorrow. This is your last chance."

"What? Tomorrow? I thought they were going to be here another week?"

He shook his head, and for the first time, I saw his disappointment. "They're leaving early."

"That's probably for the best," I said, sighing.

"No, it isn't. Be the bigger person and give him a chance to explain. Tell him how you feel. Maybe if you take a chance

and tell him how you feel, he'll kick that other chick to the curb and be with you."

"No way."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine, at least say goodbye."

"I am saying goodbye," I said. "To you. Get off my boat. I need to get to work."

"No."

"Ryder, I'm leaving. Get off or you're going with me."

I hopped off the boat and quickly untied it before jumping back in. "Last chance," I warned him.

"If you don't go talk to him, you're going to regret it."

He didn't get off the boat. I pulled away from the dock. I warned him. I focused on navigating the boat and chose not to respond to Ryder. It was pointless. I didn't know the whole story with him and Ashley. Maybe she got cold feet. Maybe Archer was a shitty boyfriend and Ashley panicked a little. That didn't mean they didn't love each other. They were going through a rough patch. I didn't want to be a homewrecker. I didn't want to be the woman that distracted Archer and caused more problems for their relationship. Everyone lost. Everyone got hurt.

"Maybe you should go talk to Penelope," I suggested. "It sounds like you're looking for an excuse to see her. Just go."

"I'm not looking for an excuse," he said, laughing. "I am going to say goodbye. You are too."

"Nope."

"Yep," he retorted. "I'm bigger than you. I will lock you downstairs. We are going to their rental house and we are saying goodbye. Period."

"You're not the boss of me."

He burst into laughter. "That's mature."

"I'm not going to see them. I want to forget this whole week happened. I'm over it."

“You are not and we are,” he reiterated.

I ignored him and checked the coordinates to find my way to my dive spot. I knew Ryder could be just as stubborn as I was. He would keep pushing me until I finally gave in. I probably needed to accept my fate. I was going to have to see him again. It was going to be a curt goodbye. I had to brace myself to see him again. Our last minutes together were not my finest.

ARCHER

I tried to ignore Penelope as she followed me out of the kitchen, but she was persistent. All I wanted was to be alone.

“I can’t believe you paid her to pretend to like me,” I spat out.

Penelope remained silent. She had been strangely quiet since I had found out her terrible secret. We argued and she had nothing more to say.

Until now.

Now, she seemed to think it was a good time to air out all our grievances. “I didn’t pay her to pretend to like you. She does like you. I paid her to be our personal tour guide. There is nothing wrong with that.”

I shook my head with disgust. “If she was just a tour guide, you would have told me. You chose her because she’s a beautiful woman and you knew I would be attracted to her.”

“I chose her because she lives here and is very upbeat and fun. Don’t try and pretend you didn’t have fun. She showed us a lot of cool stuff. You had a great time.”

“Don’t you understand, I’ll never know if she liked me for me or if she liked me because you were dangling a fat payout in front of her nose.”

“You know Shiloh,” she insisted. “She’s not like that. You’re pissed at me because of this nonsense with Ashley. You want to be with Shiloh but you won’t allow yourself to be

happy because of Ashley. You're using this little thing as an excuse to walk away while blaming me for it not working out. You need to kick that woman to the curb and leave her alone."

"You don't think I want to do that?" I said. "I'm screwed. Ashley is forcing my hand. If I don't marry her, she's going to be on the board. She gets a huge chunk of my money. I have to marry her and wait the three years before I can divorce her."

"Those contracts were stupid," she muttered. "I told you not to sign them. I knew she was going to pull something like this. You let our parents push you into something you didn't really want. Quit trying to make them happy and do what makes *you* happy."

"You failed to mention your clairvoyance to me. If you knew, you should have done a better job warning me."

"I tried," she muttered.

"Then let me warn you about Matthew," I said. "Don't sign a prenup with him. Hell, don't marry him at all."

Her face fell when I mentioned his name. "This is not about Matthew."

"Isn't it?" I asked. "You're here with me because you wanted to get away from your lovely fiancé. You're marrying him because Mom and Dad think he's a good match. Why *are* you here? What is going on with you two? You're flirting with Ryder but you're engaged to him."

Her lower lip quivered and I saw tears shimmering in her eyes. I immediately felt guilty for bringing it up. I knew there was something going on between them, but I assumed it was Penelope making a mountain out of a molehill.

"I think he's cheating on me," she said.

"What? Why?"

"I found a lipstick in the apartment a couple of months ago. It wasn't mine, but he insisted it was or one of my friends left it. He goes out of town for work a lot. Another time I came home after a weekend spa trip and I found pantyhose, like thigh highs. They were not mine. He played it off but he's

been acting off. He never used to travel for work so much. He went to LA for the weekend and said it was for work. When he came back, I swear he had a hickey. He told me it was from his seatbelt. I know he was with a woman.”

“When did he go to LA?” I asked.

She looked thoughtful. “It would have been three weekends ago. It was strange because he left on a Wednesday and didn’t come back until Monday morning.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Ashley had gone to LA that exact same time. She came home acting odd as well. It was probably just a coincidence, but it was odd. I wasn’t going to tell Penelope until I knew for sure, but it was strange.

“Is the business doing any better?” I asked her.

It was a well-known fact Matthew’s father’s business was tanking. He made some bad investments and it was coming back to bite him in the ass. The family name was keeping them afloat, but the marriage to Penelope would secure the business. Her inheritance was the influx of cash they needed to right the ship. It wasn’t exactly a secret he was marrying her for her money. When they first started dating, Matthew was a very wealthy man as well. It was an advantageous marriage, just like my marriage to Ashley.

“I don’t know,” Penelope answered. “Matthew says he’s doing all this traveling to try and save it. I offered to go with him on one of the trips but he was adamant I stay home. He said he didn’t want the distraction.”

“If you don’t love him, don’t marry him,” I said. “You haven’t signed anything, right?”

“No, but we’re engaged.”

“Engagements are easier to break off than a marriage,” I told her. “If he’s not treating you right, walk away.”

“I could say the same to you,” she said.

“I’ve signed contracts,” I reminded her. “I’m stuck.”

“You’re a smart man, Archer Ryatt. You can get out of this.”

“It’ll cost me a lot of money to get out of this,” I said. “I’m in deep. Not to mention our parents. Dad is pushing me to marry her. I think they’re worried about the humiliation.”

“Screw that,” she said, snorting. “They’ll get over it. Archer, your whole life has been by the book. You don’t break the rules. You don’t do anything fun or exciting. You show up to family dinners on time wearing a good suit. You say all the right things at dinner parties. You started your own company and made it hugely successful. You have everything except happiness. I think you need to start living for you. So what if you have to pay Ashley off? It’s not like it’s going to make you go broke.”

“I don’t know. It’s a huge amount of money.”

“So is the reward if you get out of it,” she said. I could tell by the look in her eyes she was getting frustrated with me. “Just do it. You’re not going to be happy being forced to marry someone you don’t love. It’s a mistake and we both know it.”

“I can’t have her on my board,” I said.

“Buy her out,” she said, shrugging. “That’s all she wants.”

“I thought that, but I think she’s trying to fuck with me. I think she likes the idea of controlling me through my company. It gives her power.”

“I don’t want to see you unhappy,” she said. “That’s why I hired Shiloh. For both of us. I wasn’t trying to create a love connection. I had lunch with her and she was so easy to talk to. You have to believe me when I tell you I never asked her to be your friend. I just wanted us to have a good two weeks. You’re reading into this way too much. Shiloh is a nice lady. I liked her. I’m bummed she’s not talking to me. I hoped we could be friends.”

“Yeah, me too,” I muttered.

“I’m going to lay down,” she said. “Maybe I’ll just call it a night. I don’t feel like going out.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

We planned on going out to a nice dinner for our last night in Hawaii. We were cutting our trip short. I needed to handle the shit with Ashley sooner rather than later before it got any messier.

“I’m sure. I’m exhausted. I didn’t get much sleep last night and I need to have my game face on when we get home.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Night,” she murmured and walked to her bedroom.

I poured myself a drink and pulled out my phone. I wanted to check my calendar to make sure I had the right dates concerning Ashley’s sudden trip to LA. I kept everything in my calendar. There was a bonus to being obsessive compulsive. I scanned my calendar and noted other weekends she was away. I would be very interested to know if they lined up with Matthew’s absences.

I sipped my drink and did a very slow, thorough mental crawl through the last few months. There had been a noticeable change in Ashley, but I chalked it up to wedding jitters. I assumed she was busy with dress fittings and making sure everything was perfect.

But what if she was having an affair? Matthew and Ashley knew each other. The four of us often attended events together and went out to dinner all the time. They always got along very well. The day of the wedding, Matthew was the one to talk to Ashley and explain she was gone.

Matthew and Ashley could be working together. She pulled out of the wedding at the last minute knowing I would never marry her when she changed her mind again. She would get my money and a share of the company, which meant Matthew would get the windfall of cash he wanted and needed. They were playing a game they expected to win. Once Ashley got my money, Matthew would break it off with Penelope. He wouldn’t need her. If Ashley married the asshole, he would end up on my board if she gave him her shares.

It was a wild story, but there were just enough little details that made it plausible. Before I did anything, I would do a little more investigating. I would string Ashley along and hire a private investigator to follow her every move. I couldn't help but smile thinking of the satisfaction I would get if I could blow up their little scheme. The look on her face would be worth ten million dollars.

I finished my drink and leaned back in my chair. I couldn't believe that I had been so blind all this time. How could I have missed the signs? The late-night phone calls, the secret emails, the way Ashley had been acting strange lately, it all made sense now. I felt stupid for not seeing it sooner.

I wasn't jealous. I wasn't even all that upset she was cheating on me. It was a way out. That's what was important. I thought about calling an investigator to get the ball rolling but held back. I needed to do my own investigation. If it looked like it was going that way, I would get the evidence. I had to consider Penelope. It would devastate her to know her suspicions were right. If it wasn't true, I didn't want to worry her with it. She loved Matthew for some stupid reason. She could do better. In a way, I hoped it was true. Once I exposed Ashley and Matthew, there was no way our parents would allow Penelope to marry the prick. It was two birds with one stone.

After musing about how good it would feel to blow up Ashley's little plan, I decided to call it a night as well. I locked up and was on my way downstairs to the room I was using when there was a knock on the front door.

When I opened the door, I was stunned to see Shiloh standing there looking very nervous. I couldn't explain what happened in that moment. I grabbed her and pulled her inside, shutting the door behind her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I honestly didn't know what I was doing. For the first time in my life, I didn't have a plan.

SHILOH

I didn't know what he was doing. He dragged me downstairs. "Archer, what are you doing?"

He led me into a bedroom with a wall of windows facing the ocean. I barely had a chance to take in the view when he turned me to face him. His eyes searched mine. I saw turmoil in his gaze.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "I shouldn't have said what I did. Your sister didn't pay me to be your friend or like you. It wasn't like that."

"I know."

"I—"

He grabbed my face and kissed me. The kiss was hungry and desperate. I could feel the passion radiating off him. His hands roamed my body, pulling me closer to him. I melted into him, unable to resist his advances.

Then I remembered why I came over. I pushed away from him. "No. I'm not here for that. I can't get involved with you. I will not be the other woman. I'm not getting between you and your fiancée."

"You're not," he said and reached for me again.

"No." I moved further away. "No. I came here to say goodbye. I just wanted to tell you I was sorry for blowing up at you. For what it's worth, I had fun showing you around. I hope you were able to relax a little. I just—well, good luck."

“Good luck?” he repeated.

“With your marriage,” I said.

“Shiloh.” He stepped forward and grabbed my hand.

I pulled it away and walked to the door. “Goodbye.”

“Wait, please. Stay.”

He tried to kiss me again. Being so close to him was killing me. I wanted him more than I wanted fresh air. “I can’t,” I whispered. “I can’t be a fling. I respect you too much to do that. And I have too much respect for myself. I don’t want to add any more stress to your already strained relationship. It isn’t fair to anyone. I care about you too much. It would hurt too much to see you marry another woman. I can’t do it.”

“I’m not going to marry her,” he said.

“I don’t know your whole story, but I know you’re being pressured to marry her,” I said with my heart aching. “I’m not getting involved. Go back to New York and marry her. Or don’t. I can’t be a part of that.”

“I’m not going to marry her,” he said. “Yes, I have to handle things, but I’m not marrying her. I want you. Please, you know you want me. That night, I felt how much you wanted me. I’ve never felt like this with anyone. I’m not just saying that. It’s real.”

He was melting my heart. My usual reaction would be to guard my heart and shut down any chance I might fall in love but then I remembered what Ryder said. A broken heart was the risk, but the reward of getting to be with him was far more enticing.

“Archer, I don’t want to get involved with someone I can’t have.”

“You have me,” he said and reached for me once again. I didn’t pull away.

As his lips met mine, I felt my heart skip a beat. The taste of his lips was addictive, and I couldn’t resist him any longer. I kissed him back with the same urgency, my hands reaching up

to pull him closer to me. The chemistry between us was undeniable, and I knew I was falling for him fast.

“Stay with me tonight,” he whispered against my lips. “Let me show you how much I want you.”

I hesitated for a moment, but the thought of being with him was too much to resist. “Okay,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

He reached for my shirt and pulled it over my head, tossing it to the floor. The heat between us was palpable as he kissed my neck, his hands exploring my body. I moaned softly as he found my breasts, his fingers teasing my nipples until they were hard and aching for more. With one quick flick of his fingers, my bra was undone and dropped to the floor.

“Fuck yeah,” he groaned. “I’ve been dreaming about this moment. You’re beautiful. I want to see all of you.”

He undid the button of my shorts and pushed them down my hips. Cool air blew across my flesh, sending a shiver down my spine. His thumbs hooked in my thong and jerked it down.

I was standing in front of him completely naked and exposed in the light, just like he said he wanted. I could feel the arousal between my legs. I wanted to feel him inside me.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed my lips once again. His hand reached down between us and found my wetness. I moaned softly into his mouth as he stroked my clit. I could feel how hard he was and wanted to feel him.

“I want you,” I said. “Now.”

I reached for his belt and undid it, then unbuttoned his pants. His cock was hard and throbbing as I pulled it out of his pants. I wrapped my fingers around it and squeezed gently. His fingers pushed deeper inside me. My knees buckled. I fell against him, my hands hanging on his shoulders.

Before he lifted me up and carried me to the bed, laying me on the soft sheets, he removed the rest of his clothes that were in our way. He kissed down my throat and over my breasts. He tugged at one nipple with his teeth. His mouth slid lower with his hands stretching up to grab my breasts. I

gasped, my back arching as he kissed down lower. His tongue found my clit and swirled around it as my hips bucked against his face. He sucked gently on my clit, sending shockwaves through my body. I was already so close.

“I’m almost there,” I moaned. “Don’t stop.”

He slowed his lips and slipped two fingers inside me. I let out a soft moan as my orgasm took over. My body convulsed over and over as the ecstasy held me tight in its grip.

“Oh my,” I murmured as he kissed his way back up my body. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Do what?” He kissed the inside of my arm and over my breasts.

“Make me come so hard.”

He rose above me before getting off the bed and going to his suitcase sitting on the dresser. “Because I know what you like,” he answered.

He ripped open a box of condoms and quickly put one on. He grinned when I questioned him with my eyes. “I’m not going to say I’m an optimistic person, but I was hopeful there would be a chance for us. I wanted to be prepared.”

I extended my hand, beckoning him to come back to bed. He crawled over me, supporting his weight with his arms as he looked into my eyes. I smiled up at him feeling no hesitance at all. I wanted him and that was all that mattered.

“I want you,” I said. “Please, don’t stop.”

“There’s no stopping this now,” he murmured.

He leaned down to kiss me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to me. He ran his hands down my sides and slid under me, cupping my ass and lifting me to him. I groaned when he pressed his hard cock between my legs, sliding it against my wet pussy. I moaned without trying to hide my pleasure. I deepened the kiss and pulled at his shoulders to pull him against me. I wanted to feel his weight against my body. He thrust his hips, sliding his cock against me.

“I am almost afraid to have you,” he whispered.

“Why?”

“Because I know I am never going to stop wanting you,” he whispered against my lips. “I know I’ll never get enough of you. You are the kind of woman that a man gets addicted to.”

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked with a smile.

“If it’s bad, then I don’t want to be good,” he whispered.

His hand slid between us, and he pressed his thumb against my clit. He continued to thrust his hips, and I felt the urgency take over. I moaned as his lips traced my jawline and ear. I inhaled a shuddering breath and dug my nails into his back.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered. “I’m so hard and turned on. I feel out of control. I want to ravish you.”

“I love it. I love how you make me feel.”

He groaned against my neck and bit gently. I smiled against his lips and pulled him into a kiss. I heard his breath hitch. He reached between us and guided the head of his cock to my opening.

His gaze met mine. We both held our breath as he slipped the tip inside me. I gasped and he held still for a moment. He groaned and grunted as he slid the rest of him inside of me. My body stretched to accommodate him. I moaned as he buried his head in my neck. “Fuck, you’re so tight,” he whispered.

He pulled out of me and then slid back in, my pussy stretching to accommodate him. I buried my hands in his hair and held on. He slid his hands under my ass and lifted me to him, thrusting deeper into me. I moaned as his cock filled me, and I felt his fingers digging into my hips.

“You feel so good,” he whispered. I moaned as he continued to thrust into me. I tightened around him, and he let out a moan.

“I’m going to come,” I said softly.

“Come for me, baby,” he whispered.

I cried out as he increased his tempo, his cock hitting my deepest spots and drawing my orgasm from me. He moaned against my neck before sucking my flesh between his teeth and tugging. His breath hitched and he started to move faster. His thrusts became erratic as he chased his orgasm. He moved one hand from my hair and tugged on my nipple, sending shocks of electricity through my body. I cried out as another orgasm ripped through me. He groaned and buried his face in my neck. I felt his cock pulsing inside me as he let go of the release that had been building for days. I smiled against his skin as he came, his cock filling me. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. He laid his head on my shoulder, and I held him as we both tried to catch our breath.

“I knew it,” he said.

“What was that?” I asked breathlessly.

“I’m addicted.”

I laughed softly. “Right now, I can’t think of a reason why that’s a bad thing.”

“Damn, I want you again.”

“You asked me to stay the night,” I reminded him. “We have some time.”

He rolled away from me and walked out of the room naked. He came back a few seconds later carrying two bottles of water. “I think you’re the one that told me I needed to stay hydrated. We’ve got a busy night and I would hate for us to get cramps.”

I sat up and took a bottle. We both guzzled it down before he climbed back on the bed. His hands roamed over my body like he was trying to memorize every curve. “I love your body,” he said with reverence in his voice. “You’re so perfect. I want to kiss every inch.”

“Better get started,” I teased.

He did exactly that. The spot behind my knees was excruciatingly sensitive. By the time he finished his very thorough perusal of my body, I had orgasmed twice without

him ever entering me. It was a sensual experience I would never forget.

“I love how responsive you are,” he said as he kissed me. “I love making you orgasm. I love the way you taste. I love the way you feel against me. I love the way you smell.” He kissed me again before he made love to me with painstaking care and attention to every gasp and murmur that escaped my lips. He was learning my body in order to give me maximum pleasure.

ARCHER

I woke up earlier than usual. We only slept a few hours but I wasn't the least bit tired. Making love to her was a life-altering experience. I would never be the same again. There was no way I would ever be able to have sex with another woman. She ruined me. I was on my side with her beautiful body tucked against mine. She fit perfectly against me. My crotch nestled against her soft ass. I buried my face in her mass of curls and inhaled. She smelled just like the ocean.

I never wanted to move from right where we were. I could easily stay in bed with her for weeks. It was a strange feeling. Ashley and I slept in the same bed together hundreds of times, but usually, I was riding one edge and she was on the other. We didn't snuggle. Neither of us cared to. Sex between us was very mundane, like we'd been married forty years. There was no love between us. No anything. It was cold and clinical.

With Shiloh I felt alive. I felt like the colors were brighter and everything smelled better. I had never felt this kind of connection before. This was the kind of passion Penelope read about in her books. I honestly thought it was nothing more than a fairytale. Now, I knew it was very real. It was special. I doubted everyone found something like this. I wasn't about to let it go. I didn't care if I had to sign over my entire fortune to Ashley to be rid of her. I would be perfectly content to sail around on Shiloh's boat and act as her assistant.

Footsteps overhead pulled me from my thoughts. The footsteps sounded a lot heavier than Penelope's. I doubted it was the cleaning crew coming in this early, which meant

someone had probably come up from the beach. I carefully extracted myself from Shiloh's sleeping body. I pulled on a pair of shorts and tiptoed up the stairs, hoping to surprise the burglar.

"Son of a bitch," I heard someone mutter.

I rounded the corner and spotted Ryder trying to work the espresso machine. He was wearing a pair of shorts, just like me. Considering the time, I had to assume he had spent the night.

"Ryder."

He spun around and took one look at my shirtless appearance and grinned. "Good morning."

"Yes, it is. What are you doing?"

"I was trying to make some damn coffee," he said. "What the hell is this thing?"

"It's an espresso machine."

"Don't you just have a normal coffeemaker? Penelope said she wanted coffee."

That confirmed my suspicions. "I'll do it."

I grabbed the container of coffee and went about making two cups. One for him and one for myself. I knew Penelope a little better than he did. She wasn't going to get out of bed this early.

"Come sit with me," I said.

"Pen—"

"Is passed out cold," I said, laughing. "She doesn't get up before eight and that's only if there is a serious need."

He grinned. "I'll take your word for it."

We went out on the deck with the sound of the ocean greeting us. We settled into the deck chairs and sat quietly listening to the soothing sounds.

"Penelope says you guys are leaving today," he said.

"Tonight," I said.

“Said you had a situation back home that required your attention.”

I was pretty sure Shiloh told him all about that situation, or at least what she knew of it. “I do.”

“I had to convince Shiloh to come over here last night,” he said. “She didn’t want to see you.”

“Thank you for convincing her to come over,” I said.

“She’s a good person,” he said. “She doesn’t trust easily. She has never had a real relationship. I encouraged her to take a chance on you. I hope you don’t make me regret convincing her to give you a chance.”

It was a warning. A very cool, casual warning but he was making it clear he would not be happy if I hurt her. “I have to go home to handle things, but that’s it. There’s nothing I want back there.”

“What is waiting for you in New York?” He was asking without asking.

“I’m sure Penelope has told you a little about who we are.”

“Nope. I don’t care who she was there. I know who she is here and that’s what counts.”

He also knew she was engaged. I didn’t know how I felt about that, but I knew he was better for my sister than the asshole Matthew, especially if he was fucking around with Ashley.

“Our family is wealthy. My great-grandfather was one of the original oil tycoons. My grandfather and my father grew the wealth. With that kind of money, the name comes with expectations. Penelope and I were both raised to remember we had to make sure the family name was never dishonored. We are supposed to continue to grow the wealth. That requires smart marriage decisions.”

I hoped he didn’t think I was insulting him. “I suppose if billionaires need more money, that’s a smart move.”

“Our parents were very particular about who we married. I was engaged to a woman named Ashley. Her parents and my

parents are old friends. Ashley and I got together because it seemed right.”

“Like an arranged marriage?” he asked.

“It wasn’t necessarily arranged but it was coerced,” I answered. “Because there is so much money involved, there were contracts drawn up. Prenuptial agreements with some extra stuff.”

“Like?”

“Like if one of us broke the engagement,” I explained. “If she broke it off, she had to pay for half of the wedding cost and return my grandmother’s ring, which is worth a lot of money. If I broke it off, I agreed to pay her ten million dollars and give her a five percent share of my company.”

“She left you at the altar, right?”

“She did,” I said. “I wasn’t going to hold her to the contract. I really didn’t care. It wasn’t like I loved her. She was a means to an end. She fit in nicely with my family. She understands the world I come from and would know what to expect. I never really imagined I could find true happiness. I didn’t believe in it. I was resigned to accept a marriage with someone I could be compatible with. Someone that would give me a couple of kids and that would be that.”

“That sounds romantic.”

“Yeah, romance was not a factor,” I said, laughing.

“I guess I don’t understand what the problem is,” he said. “She’s gone. Congratulations.”

“It’s not so simple. She’s decided she wants to go through with the marriage. She had a change of heart. My parents are pushing for a quickie wedding. It will still be a grand event but it’s not going to be six months of planning. Everyone wants the signatures on the paper.”

“So, she does want to marry you?”

“No.”

He looked thoroughly confused. “I don’t get it.”

“She’s saying she wants to marry me because it puts it on me,” I explained.

“Ohhh, shit,” he said. “She’s making you break the deal and she gets your money.”

“Yes. It’s not just that. Having her on my board could cause some serious drama. I honestly didn’t pay a lot of attention to the contracts. My dad and our team of lawyers took care of all of it. I just signed my name. My dad is pushing hard to get me to go through with the wedding. My parents were left humiliated by her little stunt. They want to save face within their social circles. My parents and Ashley’s parents already have a plan in place. They’ve come up with some bullshit excuse about Ashley having a medical emergency. They want me home because it doesn’t look good for me to be on vacation while my bride is suffering from some mystery illness.”

“Damn,” he said. “That’s a lot of pressure.”

“No shit.”

“When you go home, what happens?” he asked.

“I’ll meet with my dad and the lawyers.”

“Will you see her?”

“Not if I don’t have to,” I replied. “I don’t want to.”

“Where does Shiloh stand in all of this?”

I appreciated the fact he was looking out for her. “I don’t know. My goal is to extract myself from the marriage contracts.”

“You make it sound like you can’t just say no,” he said.

“It’s tricky. My dad has implied I stand to lose a lot more than just ten million.”

“What if you stand to lose your entire fortune?” he asked. “Does that mean you’re going to marry the woman to avoid losing?”

“I don’t want to.”

“But you’re not saying you won’t,” he said with an edge to his voice.

“I’m saying I have to go home and figure this situation out,” I said. “If Ashley does get a controlling stake in my company, that shifts the dynamics. It’s not just my personal fortune at stake. There are people in my company that are not going to be happy to have her sitting at the table. She could be a tiebreaking vote that has some serious repercussions. And I don’t want that to happen.”

The thought of Ashley having any control over my business made my blood boil. I’d worked too hard to let her take it all away from me. But at the same time, I couldn’t deny that the idea of marrying her was tempting. It would solve all of my problems, at least for now. But what about the long term? Could I really spend the rest of my life with someone like her?

“If you’re going to marry her, you need to be straight with Shiloh,” he said. “Don’t lead her on.”

“My goal is to get back here to her,” I told him.

“And then what?” he asked. “One of her concerns is geography with the two of you. You’re in New York and she’s here. You cannot take Shiloh away from here. This is where she gets her strength. She loves the ocean. I know you have your own ocean, but it’s not the same.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m not sure what the future holds. I can’t even think about the future until I figure out what’s happening in the present.”

He nodded slowly. “I get it.”

“You want to tell me what’s going on with you and Penelope?”

“Nope. That’s her business.”

“I hope you understand she’s in a similar situation to mine,” I warned him. “My parents can be pretty aggressive. They’ve approved of the match and are all for it, even if the guy’s family is on the verge of being broke.”

“I’m just a guy trying to live his life,” he said. “I’m not putting any expectations on anyone. I’m all about living in the moment. Right now, that moment includes Penelope and I’m pretty cool with that. She’s an amazing woman. I’m bummed you guys are leaving, but I make no demands on her. She has to make her own choices. I want her to do whatever makes her happy.”

“Cool,” I said. “Good. I just wanted to make sure you understood that no matter how much she might like you and how happy she is with you, it would be very difficult for her to walk away from her life back home.”

“I get it,” he said, shrugging. “No pressure.”

I couldn’t help but feel a pang of envy. He seemed so carefree and unburdened, living in the moment without a care in the world. Meanwhile, I was struggling with the weight of my own thoughts and emotions, torn between my desire for Shiloh and the reality of our situation. The more I thought about it, the more I was willing to tell Ashley to kiss my ass. It was my pride that was trying to keep her from getting even a penny of my money. I hated the idea she would get a single penny, but if that’s what it took to close this thing, I would have to swallow my pride and remind myself of the happiness I felt last night.

SHILOH

I woke up alone in Archer's bed. I took a moment to take a quick survey of what I was feeling. It wasn't regret. Last night was incredible. I was glad it happened. I knew there was a very good chance it would be our one and only time together. I had come to terms with it. I wanted one night to remember.

I didn't think I could handle the what-ifs that would plague me if I didn't take advantage of the time I got with him. If he married the woman, that was his choice. I couldn't change his mind. I wouldn't call him or bother him ever again. I would let him live his life the way he chose.

Of course, that was a lot of bravado. In truth, I knew I had fallen for him and it was going to suck like hell trying to get over him. It would be easier with him halfway around the world. I would never have to worry about running into him. I would never Google him. I didn't think I could handle seeing pictures of him living his life with another woman. It would gut me.

It was time to face the music. I wanted to get the awkward morning-after stuff out of the way. I climbed out of his bed and pulled one of his T-shirts out of his suitcase. I put it on along with my panties and shorts, just in case Penelope was up.

I slowly walked upstairs. I wasn't embarrassed for Penelope to see me but it was a little awkward.

As I stepped into the kitchen, I saw Ryder and Archer sitting out on the deck. They were talking and looked like they'd known each other forever. I was surprised to see Ryder so early in the morning but then I remembered he had come over with me last night. I kind of forgot about him when Archer dragged me down to his bedroom.

I walked out to the deck and offered a shy smile. Ryder took one look at me and grinned like a damn idiot. Archer looked at me and smiled. I knew my hair was a mess, and I probably had a few visible hickeys.

“Good morning,” I said, trying to sound casual.

“Morning,” Ryder replied. “Sleep well?”

“Yes. You?”

He nodded. “Yep.”

I frowned and realized he wasn't wearing shoes or a shirt. He'd spent the night!

“I'm going to try and work that stupid machine and make Penelope her coffee,” Ryder said and got up from the chair.

It was an excuse. He was giving me and Archer time alone. Archer reached up and pulled me down to his lap. He kissed me and tugged at the shirt. “This looks a lot better on you than me.”

“I saw it in your suitcase and didn't want to bother with a bra and all that.”

“Don't apologize,” he said. “I like it. I like seeing you wear something of mine.”

My concern he was going to be cold the morning after a beautiful night was quickly dismissed. He was loving and sweet.

“Did Ryder stay the night?” I asked him.

“He did.”

“Wow,” I said, laughing. “I forgot about him. He was in the car on the phone when I knocked. I guess he let himself in.”

“I don’t think Penelope minded,” he said with a small laugh. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, why?”

“I didn’t want you to feel weird about last night,” he said.

I looked at him, confused. “Why would I feel weird?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes after a night like that people can feel embarrassed or regretful. I know I pushed you. I want you to know I don’t regret any of it. I’m glad you stayed. I’m glad you came over.”

I shook my head. “No way. I don’t regret a thing. I had an amazing time with you, Archer.”

Relief flooded his face and he leaned in to kiss me again. “Good. Because I definitely don’t regret it either.”

We sat there for a while longer, just enjoying each other’s company. I stared out at the water. “You have a pretty amazing view from up here,” I told him.

“I know,” he said, smiling. “And I hate to leave it.”

Just like that, reality came crashing down. “But you’re leaving.”

Archer sighed and held me tighter. “I know, but it’s only until I can work this thing out.”

I looked up at him, my heart clenching with sadness. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

He brushed his thumb over my cheek. “I’ll miss you too, but we’ll talk every day, and before you know it, I’ll be back in your arms.”

I leaned into his touch, wishing this moment could last forever. “I understand what this was,” I said. “I accepted reality last night. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything. I came into this situation with my eyes wide open. I know you have a life and you might even have a wife when you get home.”

“No.” He shook his head.

“Hey, don’t. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything. Like I said, I knew what I was getting into when we talked last night. Don’t make me any promises. I’ve come to terms with the fact I only got to have you one night. It’s a night I won’t forget.”

It was killing me to say the words, but I didn’t want him to feel like I was guilting him into anything. If he came back, great. If not, that was life.

When he didn’t protest and tell me not to worry, it hurt a little. He rubbed his thumb across the back of my hand. “I won’t make promises I can’t guarantee, but I am going to try to find a way back to you.”

I forced a smile though my heart felt like it was shattering in my chest. “When do you leave?” I asked.

“Tonight,” he answered with no enthusiasm. “I don’t want to go. This has seriously been the best week of my life.”

I smiled and touched his cheek. “Me too.”

“You’re just saying that,” he joked. “You’re here every day.”

“I am, but it’s so much better when I have someone to share it with. Someone that gets to see the beauty for the first time and genuinely appreciates life under the water.”

“I would think that’s pretty common here,” he said.

I shook my head. “Yes but experiencing it with you was different.”

“I’m glad it was a memorable experience for you,” he said. “You’ve changed my life, Shiloh. I know it sounds cheesy, but I have never really lived until you made me jump off that yacht. I’ve been gliding by on the surface with no real ups or downs. I’ve never experienced euphoria.”

I loved that I was able to bring all that to him, but it was also a little sad to think I opened his eyes to this way of living and he might choose to share it with someone else. “I should get dressed,” I said with sadness. “I’m sure you’ve got a lot to do to get ready for your departure.”

“I don’t want to go,” he whispered.

I kissed him. “But you have to. You’re not free.”

“Yet,” he said. “I’m not free yet.”

I got off his lap and looked down at him. It might be the last time I got to see him. I wanted to remember him smiling and sexy wearing just a pair of shorts. He reached out and grabbed my hand. I held it for a few seconds before I pulled away and went back inside.

I dressed and went back upstairs. Penelope was in the kitchen wearing a pink satin robe and her hair piled on her head. It looked like she’d been crying.

Ryder looked just as bummed. He was sitting at the bar with a cup of coffee in front of him. Archer was still on the deck. The sadness in the room was palpable.

I didn’t know what to say to break the tension. I figured it was best to rip the bandage off and get going. “Ryder, are you ready? You’re my ride.”

“Give me a minute,” he said.

I left them alone and went back to the deck to say goodbye to Archer. I told myself to keep my emotions in check. It might be the last time I saw him. I didn’t want him to remember me as a blubbering mess.

Archer was standing near the railing, staring out at the ocean. He looked up as I approached, his expression unreadable. “Leaving so soon?” he asked.

“I have to,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “But I just wanted to say goodbye.”

He turned to face me, his eyes dark and intense. “I don’t want you to go,” he said, his voice low and rough.

“I know,” I said, my heart aching. “But you have your life, and I have mine.”

“I will come back,” he said.

I gave him a quick kiss. I didn’t want him to make promises he couldn’t possibly keep. “Goodbye, Archer. Good

luck. No matter what happens, I want you to be happy. Don't let anyone take your joy. Go to the beach. Swim. Snorkel."

"You're making it sound like I'm not going to see you again."

"I hope that's not true," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "But I have to go back to my life. And you have to figure out what you want to do with yours."

Archer nodded, his eyes flickering as if he were trying to hold back tears. "I'll miss you," he said.

"I'll miss you too," I said, feeling a lump form in my throat.

He leaned in and kissed me deeply, his hands on my waist, pulling me closer. I felt his warmth, his passion, and his sadness all at once. "I'm going to call you. I'm not going to disappear."

"Archer, I need you to make me one promise."

"You said no promises," he reminded me.

"This is different. If you have the chance to have a life with Ashley that you think will be fulfilling, take it. Don't think about me. I want you to be happy. I would hate to have you feel like you owe me something. You don't. I knew what I was getting into last night. I know you have a lot on the line back home and I would never ask you to sacrifice anything for me. When I say all I want is for you to be happy, I mean it."

"I know you do," he said, smiling. "I'll see you soon."

We kissed again before I had to force myself to walk away.

Ryder and I were both quiet on the drive back to his place. "Are you okay?" he asked when we got out of the car.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine," he said. "But are you okay? Do you want to come in? I'll make breakfast."

"No, thank you. I'm good. I need to do some research. Thank you, though. I guess I should ask if you're okay."

He grinned. "Peachy. I'm good. If you want to talk, find me. You can pretend you're not crushed right now, but I know you."

"I'll be okay. You wanted me to see him before he left, and I did. I'm good with it. I've made my peace. I know he's got a life back in New York."

"Okay," Ryder said and gave me a big hug. "I'm here for you, though."

"Thanks."

I walked down the dock to my boat. I did feel a sense of sadness, and even though they weren't gone, I felt his absence. It was going to be hard to get over him. I was going to throw myself into my work and stay busy. I was not going to be one of those women pining over a man.

ARCHER

The air felt different. I felt different. The suit felt too small, which I knew wasn't possible. If anything, I lost a couple of pounds while I was in Hawaii. It just felt strange to be wearing a suit after getting used to being shirtless or just wearing shorts and a T-shirt.

I walked into my building and felt nothing. I didn't want to be at work. I longed to be back on the beach with Shiloh stretched out beside me in a tiny bikini. I wanted to get in the ocean and swim. I was only there for a week and it transformed my entire life.

"Good morning, Mr. Ryatt," my secretary said as I walked into my office.

"Kim," I said.

"You have a board meeting in ten minutes. I put all the information and bullet points in a file and sent it to you."

"Thank you."

I carried my briefcase to the boardroom and took my seat at the head of the table. Kim came in right behind me and delivered me a cup of coffee and a banana. I was feeling a little out of sorts. I'd been home for two days, and despite several texts to Shiloh, she never responded. I knew exactly what she was doing.

She didn't think I was going to come back. She was cutting me out before I could hurt her. Or maybe it was just her sending me a message. It was a fling. That was it. We had

a good night and it was over. I wasn't about to accept that. I was going to fight like hell to get back to her.

The board meeting was dragging on, and I couldn't concentrate. My mind was back in Hawaii, with Shiloh. I knew I had to focus, but every time I looked at my notes, the letters seemed to swim before my eyes. I took a sip of my coffee, but the bitter taste only made my head throb.

I wondered if Shiloh knew how much she had changed me in just a week. I had never felt so alive, so free. And now, back in this stuffy boardroom, I felt like a caged animal. I wanted to run, to scream, to do anything but sit here and pretend to care about the numbers and projections on the screen in front of me.

After the meeting, I stayed behind to take a few notes.

"Sir?" Kim was standing in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"Your father is waiting for you in your office. He's brought along a Mr. Shipley."

The family lawyer. I didn't have to guess what the meeting was about. "Thank you. Can you please hold my calls?"

"Of course."

I went to my office and saw my father and the lawyer had already made themselves comfortable. I asked for the meeting with the lawyer. I didn't need my father involved.

I took a seat and waited. "Well? Can we burn that contract?"

"No," Dad answered. "The wedding needs to happen. We've looked at every option. She's not interested in a buyout."

"Of course not," I said, scoffing. "The end game was to get her hands on my company. She's looking at the long game. She knows ten million is a drop in the bucket compared to what she might earn over ten years. She's not going away calmly."

“You would be better off marrying her,” Dad said. “You can divorce three years in with the same payout without the business shares, assuming there aren’t any children. If you have children, her payout will be significantly higher.”

“I don’t want to marry her,” I said. “I’ve had some time to think about it, but it’s just not what I want to do. Neither of us would be happy.”

“We have contracts in place,” my father insisted. “Our family’s reputation is at stake.”

I leaned back in my chair, feeling the tension bubbling up inside me. “I don’t care about the family reputation. I care about my own happiness. And I won’t let you or anyone else dictate my life.”

The lawyer cleared his throat. “Mr. Ryatt, I understand your frustration, but we must honor the agreements that have been made. If you refuse to marry Ashley, she will take legal action against you and the company.”

I gritted my teeth, feeling trapped. “What kind of legal action?”

I knew there was another shoe that was going to drop. My father wouldn’t be this riled up if there was an easy fix to the problem.

“Ashley’s father has suggested she will sue for damages if you refuse to marry her,” Dad said.

My heart sank at the thought of being forced into a loveless marriage. But with the threat of a lawsuit looming over me, I felt like I had no other choice.

“Sue me for what?” I asked.

The lawyer cleared his throat. “They claim you’re refusing to marry her because you discovered she has fertility issues. The contract specifically states that is not grounds to break the contract.”

“Fertility issues?” I asked with confusion. “What the hell is that about? Since when? She’s been on the pill so she doesn’t get pregnant until we’re ready.”

“Apparently, she has documentation that proves she may have a hard time getting pregnant,” Dad said.

“That’s news to me,” I said. “How could I use that as an excuse not to marry her if I didn’t know about it?”

“She claims you did know,” the lawyer said.

“I didn’t!”

“You have to understand, there is no way out of this,” Dad said. “You need to marry her. You can divorce her down the road, but for at least the next three years, consider yourself shackled.”

He checked his watch, implying he had somewhere to be. That worked for me.

“I’d like to talk with Mr. Shipley alone,” I said.

He frowned but nodded. “Fine. I’ll expect this to be handled quickly. Dragging it out is only feeding the rumors. We don’t need this kind of negativity, especially with Penelope’s pending wedding.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “We don’t want to get in the way of another unhappy marriage.”

He frowned at me. “Not funny.”

He left my office. Mr. Shipley gave me his full attention. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“I’ll admit, I didn’t read the contract as carefully as I probably should have. Is there a cheating clause?”

“Cheating?” he asked. “As in an affair?”

“Yes.”

He sighed and leaned back against the couch. “You’ve had an affair. Does she know?”

“No, not me, *her*,” I said. “What if I could prove she’s been cheating on me the last couple of months?”

“Oh,” he said, nodding his head. “That would certainly change things.”

“Would it be a dealbreaker?” I asked. “Would that cancel the contract?”

“Yes,” he said. “There is a specific clause about affairs. If either of you cheat, it would dissolve the contract on one end. If you cheat, she can still enforce the contract.”

“If she cheats, I can still demand she pay for half of the wedding that didn’t happen and my grandmother’s ring gets returned to me?”

“Yes. However, you would have the burden of proof. I’ve dealt with these situations in the past. I can guarantee you she would deny she was cheating. You would need proof. Irrefutable proof.”

“Pictures?” I asked.

He shrugged. “They help, but with technology, it would be easy for her attorney to claim photoshop.”

“Then how would I prove it?”

“Pictures are good, but if she’s adamant she hasn’t cheated, they might not be enough. An admittance would be better.”

I snorted. “Like she’s going to admit it. She knows she loses. She’ll keep denying it for as long as she can.”

“Sometimes, the bluff is enough,” he said with a smile. “Do you have proof?”

“Not yet,” I said. “But I’m certain it happened. I’m pretty sure it’s still going on. This little game she’s playing is one big bluff. If I tell her I will marry her, she might back out. I don’t think she actually wants to marry me. I can almost guarantee you she has a boyfriend. What happens if I say I’ll marry her and she backs out?”

“Then she would break the contract,” he said definitively. “However, I think you’re playing a risky game. If you say you’ll marry her and she agrees, then you’re married. The longer you stay married, the less you’ll pay her, but if you are miserable and you can’t control yourself and you step out, you will pay through the nose.”

It was high-stakes poker. I wasn't the type of person that gambled. I didn't like the unknown. I liked certainties.

But in this case, I had to take a chance. My happiness was riding on it. Shiloh wasn't going to wait three years. I wasn't even sure she would wait three weeks. The lawyer's words made sense. I needed proof, and an admission was the best way to go.

"Would I be violating any part of the contract if I hire a private investigator?" I asked.

He pulled a face. "Are you sure you want to involve outsiders? You are somewhat of a public figure."

"I'm sure you work with investigators all the time, right?"

"I have a few I trust," he said.

"I would appreciate you sending their information my way," I said. "I'm not committing to hiring anyone, but I might need the option."

"Understood. Anything else?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Once the contracts are fulfilled or voided, this is over, right? She can't come back a year later and try to sue me?"

"No."

"If I have a girlfriend once the contracts are over, there's nothing she can do?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?" he asked.

"No."

"I think you need to be careful," he said. "You're talking about a private investigator. There's a pretty good chance her attorney is advising the same. You are in a cutthroat battle. Watch your back."

"I shouldn't talk to her, right?"

"I would prefer you didn't," he said. "I think it would be better if all communication was done through us. That will

eliminate any chance she could claim you threatened her or attempted to coerce her in any way.”

“Good,” I said with satisfaction. “I don’t want to talk to her. Maybe you could pass that along to her attorney.”

“I’ll do that. Anything else?”

I shook my head, feeling a sense of relief as I stood up. “No, that’s all. Thank you for your help.”

As he left the office, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was in over my head. I had never dealt with anything like this before, and the thought of a private investigator digging into my personal life made my skin crawl. But I couldn’t let Ashley get away with this. I had worked too hard to get where I was, and I wasn’t going to let her ruin it. I also needed to protect Penelope. If my suspicions about Ashley and Matthew were true, I needed to keep my sister from getting into the same situation. It was only a matter of time before Matthew’s family presented their version of a prenup.

As if Ashley knew I was plotting against her, she texted me. I felt nothing but disgust as I read her message. She wanted to get dinner and talk. That was not going to happen. She knew I was back in the city and had been texting me nonstop.

I replied to her text and let her know I was busy. I didn’t provide an excuse. I didn’t have to. I went to my desk and tried to focus my attention on work. In the back of my mind, I was quietly plotting my next absence. I wanted to get back to Hawaii. I needed to get back to Shiloh.

SHILOH

I was driving myself crazy. It had been a week since Archer left and I knew nothing about what was happening back in New York. He did try and call a few times, but I had been diving. I couldn't bring myself to call him back or reply to his texts. It felt too weird. I was worried I would call at the wrong time. If he was ending things with Ashley, I didn't want to make things worse by calling and revealing I existed.

I didn't have any work to do. Sitting around and waiting was giving me way too much time to think. Ryder was doing his best to distract me, but it wasn't working. I kept second-guessing myself. I wondered if I made a huge mistake sleeping with Archer. I didn't know what his life was like back in New York. He might have caved into the pressure from his family and decided to take the path of least resistance. It wasn't like he was committed to me. We made it very clear there were no promises. If he didn't come back, that was that. I would have to live on the memory of that one night.

But as I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, I couldn't help but feel like I wanted more. I couldn't let go of the way Archer's hands felt on my body, the way his breath felt hot against my ear. I wanted to know what it would be like to have him here with me. Maybe it was foolish, but I couldn't shake the feeling that what we had was real.

I would love to take him out on my boat for a long trip around the Hawaiian Islands. There were so many things I could show him. He seemed to love all the things I showed

him thus far. I would blow his mind with more reefs and even beautiful hiking trails.

As I lay there, lost in my thoughts, I heard a knock on the door. I wasn't expecting anyone, so I was hesitant to answer. But the knocking persisted, so I reluctantly rolled out of bed and made my way on deck.

"What?" I asked Ryder.

"What are you doing?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sleeping."

"You're not sleeping."

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You're grumpy."

"You woke me up. You could have just come downstairs. You didn't have to sit up here and pound on the deck."

He laughed. "Don't sit around sulking," he said. "Take this." He handed me a small card.

"What's this?"

"It's my guest pass," he replied. "Come hang out."

"I don't think I'm up for that."

"You're going to sit around here and sulk. That's good for no one. Just come hang out. You get two free drinks with that card. I have to go to work, but you don't need to sit around and pout."

"I'm not pouting," I insisted.

"Get up and get out of here. You're driving yourself crazy. Archer has to handle his business. Give him time."

"I am," I said.

"I'll see you in a bit," he said. "Don't sit here. I mean it."

He walked away and I was left with a decision to make. I thought about doing some research for my whale trip, but that was something I had done a hundred times. Going to the resort

was one way to surround myself with people and distractions. That's what I needed.

“A watched pot never boils.”

I went below deck and took a quick shower. I put on my favorite turquoise bikini and adjusted the straps, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness as I headed to the Turtle Bay resort. It was a sunny day, and the salty breeze caressed my skin. I spent the majority of my time in the ocean. Sometimes, it was nice to lounge poolside with a fruity drink.

As I walked into the resort, the scent of sunscreen and the sound of crashing waves filled the air. The sight of the luxurious pool area made me feel like I was stepping into paradise. I presented the card to the young lady I knew from my other visits to see Ryder.

I walked to the largest pool that was very busy. Young and old splashed around with lots of laughter. I found an available lounge and quickly shed my coverup and shorts. I stretched out, feeling like one of the guests that could afford the luxury accommodations.

“Shiloh!”

Ryder waved as he walked up from the beach area. He was shirtless with a lanyard around his neck, identifying him as an employee of the resort.

“Hey there,” he said, his eyes twinkling with warmth. “Glad you made it!”

I blushed slightly, feeling a little foolish for my surly attitude the last couple of days. “Thanks for the day pass. This is exactly what I needed. You're always looking out for me.”

“No worries. It's my pleasure to have you here. Just relax. You never take time to just be. Chill. Make good use of the bar.”

“That sounds fantastic. I could use a refreshing drink right about now.”

As I lounged by the pool, Ryder occasionally stopped by to check on me, making sure I had everything I needed. I

appreciated him taking care of me. Sometimes, I forgot that I wasn't alone. I could lean on him. He liked to feel needed.

I got myself a drink and went back to my chair. I watched the kids playing in the pool and the proud parents that kept a close eye on them. I never really thought about my future. I knew I wanted to do the whale migration, but beyond that, I never bothered to plan a future. I didn't think about finding a husband or having children. I never met a man I could ever imagine myself settling down with. I loved being a free spirit. I loved getting up and pulling up the anchor and just going wherever I wanted to for that day.

Archer never implied he wanted a future with me. We talked in present tense. Archer may not be the man for me, but maybe it was time I started to think that way. I didn't want to be alone anymore. I wanted companionship. I wanted to love and be loved. I wanted to feel as good as Archer made me feel that night.

“Shiloh?”

My ears were deceiving me. I pushed up my sunglasses and looked right at Penelope Ryatt. My heart skipped a beat. I looked behind her. “Penelope, what are you doing here?”

“Ryder told me he worked here,” she said, smiling. “I thought this would be a good place to look for him.”

“Are you back?”

“I am,” she said. “Just me. Not Archer. You're stuck with me.”

I tried to hide my disappointment, but it was impossible not to feel it. I missed him. I was desperate to see him again.

“I'm thrilled to be stuck with you,” I said, smiling. “Pull up a chair. Do you want a drink?”

“The waiter is bringing one over. I'm surprised you're here.”

“Ryder gave me a day pass,” I said. “Does he know you're here?”

Her face lit up. “No. I thought I would surprise him.”

“Oh, he’s going to be surprised,” I said, laughing. “He’s down at the beach.”

“I’ll wait until he’s off. I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Trust me, I don’t think you could ever be in his way,” I said, smiling. “He’s going to be thrilled to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see him,” she said with a shy smile.

I wanted to ask about her fiancé, but it was none of my business. Whatever she was doing with Ryder was her business. I wasn’t going to get in the way. They were adults. They could decide what they wanted to do.

“Are you staying here?” I asked. “The resort, that is.”

“Yes,” she said.

I had so many questions. I didn’t know if I had the right to ask them.

“Did you just get in?” I asked.

“Yep, I flew commercial,” she said with a giggle. “It’s been a while since I did that.”

I couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like to fly private. “I’m surprised you’re back.”

“You can ask me,” she said.

“What?”

“You want to know about Archer,” she stated.

“I don’t want to put you in the middle,” I told her.

“Have you guys talked at all?” she asked.

“No. He called but I was diving. I didn’t want to bother him. How is he?”

She took a deep breath and shook her head. “Honestly, he’s fine, but he’s stuck cleaning up a huge family mess. I didn’t want any part of it. I bought a plane ticket and hightailed it out of there.”

I could only imagine what that mess was. I felt guilty that I was actually happy there was a mess to clean up. That implied

he was digging in and rejecting the pressure to marry Ashley. I hated that he was dealing with a mess, though. I hoped he was okay.

“How long are you staying?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’m not sure what I’m doing. I just know when I was here, I felt like I could breathe. I felt like I could be free to be whoever I wanted. I need that.”

“I’m glad you’re back,” I said. “I know Ryder is going to be happy to see you.”

She smiled at me, a small tear forming in the corner of her eye. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I have no idea what I’m doing. I just knew I had to be here. This was the only place I wanted to be.”

“I get it,” I said. “Do you want to grab some lunch? Ryder works until four. If you want someone to keep you company, I’m your girl.”

“Thank you. I would like that. You can tell me what you’ve been up to the last week.”

We collected our things and made our way to the restaurant. We ordered salads and talked about her flight. It was funny to listen to her go on about flying commercial. She made it sound like a ride at Disneyland.

As we ate, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was. Ryder was a lucky man. I was happy for him. I just hoped she didn’t break his heart. I knew she was the equivalent of royalty and Ryder was a guy that worked just enough to pay rent and eat. The rest of his time was spent surfing or hanging out and doing whatever made him happy for the day. It wasn’t a bad way to live, but it was probably not the way Penelope was used to living.

“So, have you done anything exciting?” she asked. “Diving? Checking out reefs?”

“I’ve worked some, but not much.”

“I wish you would let me pay you,” she said softly. “You did show us around for nearly a week.”

“I can’t take your money,” I told her. “It would be too weird. I think you know how things ended up. It would make me feel like... well, a working girl.”

“But you took us snorkeling and you guys both showed us that cool bar. Let me pay you for a few days.”

“No. Thank you, but no. I really had a good time. It wasn’t work at all.”

“Do you know much about the other islands?” she asked.

“I’ve spent time on all of them,” I said. “I spend most of my time here just because Ryder is here.”

“I would love it if you would show me around the other islands,” she said. “I want to see it all.”

“I would be happy to do that,” I said, smiling. “Ryder knows a lot about them as well. He’s probably surfed every beach. You should have him teach you to surf.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure this body was meant to do that.”

“Ryder is an excellent teacher. He taught Archer.”

“True,” she said, smiling. “Maybe I will.”

ARCHER

With a deep breath, I unlocked the door to the apartment that I once shared with Ashley. The week of avoidance had only prolonged the inevitable, but now there was no escaping it. The place was mine, and I had to face whatever awaited me inside. She had her own place, but somehow just kind of ended up living with me. My apartment spanned three floors and was big enough we could both be in the place at the same time and never realize it. I never officially invited her to move in. It just kind of happened. When she left without a word, I made it clear to everyone in our circle to pass along the information she knew she was no longer welcome at my apartment. Whether she paid attention was anyone's guess.

As I stepped into the familiar surroundings, a pang of nostalgia hit me. I remembered the day I bought the apartment. It looked nothing like it did now. The building wasn't one of the newer ones on the Upper West Side, but I saw potential. It had been so satisfying to buy something with money I made and didn't inherit. It took nearly a year to make the renovations. I loved my apartment. I was so proud of it. I had a hand in picking out every detail, right down to the automatic blinds and the quartz countertops. I loved my home, but that love had been tainted by Ashley's presence. She loved my home, and when things were good, we talked about the parties we would host.

I thought I was the one pushing the marriage. I thought our parents were nudging us along. I couldn't shake the feeling

that she had an ulterior motive. She targeted me. I fully believed that now. She saw an easy mark and made her move. I firmly believed she was sleeping with Matthew. I hadn't quite figured out when it started. I would, though. I was going to find it all out.

I hoped beyond hope that Ashley had already moved out, sparing us both from an awkward confrontation. But I knew her too well. She was stubborn and determined, and the thought of giving up on our relationship was not something she would take lightly. I could almost picture her digging in, unwilling to back down without a fight. If she moved in, she could claim it was her domicile and that was another legal battle we would have to address.

I sensed her desperation to tie the knot, but it was clear she had her own reasons for pushing me toward marriage. It felt like she was trying to back me into a corner, forcing me to be the one to end things. It wasn't a feeling—I knew that's exactly what she was doing.

However, I wasn't ready to give up just yet. While I hadn't officially said no to the marriage proposal, I was actively seeking a way out. I had hired a lawyer to comb through the intricacies of the marriage contract, hoping to find a loophole that could release me from this predicament. She was the one dangling now. She had been texting and calling, but I ignored her. I had stayed at a hotel under a different name to avoid her.

I needed to focus on getting my life in order. There were matters to attend to with the company, and I couldn't let personal issues distract me from my responsibilities. It was essential to have my ducks in a row, professionally speaking, before I confronted Ashley about our future.

As I walked through the apartment, it became evident that Ashley was still there. Her personal belongings were scattered around the living room, and the faint scent of her perfume lingered in the air. She had no intention of going quietly, and a knot tightened in my stomach at the thought of the impending confrontation.

My ringing phone cut through the quiet, startling me. I pulled it out and saw it was my father. “Joy.”

I couldn't ignore it. Things were coming to a head. Lawyers on both sides were making a fortune off of the mess. I was pushing Mr. Shipley to get me out of the contract while my father was pushing me to just go through with it and start planning the divorce. I didn't want to waste a day with Ashley, let alone years. I had a woman waiting for me. There was no way she was going to sit back and wait for me to get married and stay married for years. I wasn't even sure she was waiting for me now. She might have already set sail—literally.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Where is she?” he snapped.

There were a lot of she's in my life. “Can you give me a name?” I asked sarcastically.

“Penelope! Where is she?”

“I don't know,” I said, shrugging. “I wasn't aware I was supposed to be watching her.”

“Do not make jokes,” he hissed. “This is serious. Get over here. Matthew is here and he's very upset.”

“Oh no. Poor Matthew.”

“Get over here. This is a disaster! I don't know what the two of you are doing. Are you trying to kill your mother and I?”

More drama. I couldn't hide. They would find me. I took one last look around my home before leaving. The place I loved didn't really feel quite as inviting anymore. I couldn't help but think about the expansive beach and the simple pleasure of drinking coffee on the deck without all the technology humming around me.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the confrontation ahead, and walked into my parents' sprawling house in upstate New York. As I stepped inside, I could hear raised voices coming from down the hall. I didn't know what Penelope had

done, but if Matthew was pissed, that was great. The guy was a piece of shit, sleeping with my fiancée.

I walked into the living room and saw Matthew with a scowl etched on his face and his arms firmly folded across his chest. I could see the pain and confusion in his eyes, mixed with anger at the chaos my decisions had caused. My father was staring at the flames in the gas fireplace. It was a warm night and I didn't understand why it was going at all. My mother had a glass of wine and was stretched out on the sofa. She looked equally distraught.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Where is she?” my father demanded, his voice tense with emotion.

“Where is who?”

“Penelope!” Matthew barked. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know. She’s your fiancée.”

“She left a note,” Mom said. “She ended the engagement and ran away. She didn’t say where she was going. This is very unlike her. We’re worried.”

I knew Matthew deserved answers, but I couldn’t betray Penelope’s trust. She had her reasons for leaving, and I respected her decision to keep them to herself. I knew where she was, but if she didn’t tell them, it was for a reason. I wasn’t going to out her. I didn’t blame her for leaving.

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly, hoping he would see the sincerity in my eyes. “She didn’t tell me anything.”

My parents’ expressions were a mix of fury and disappointment. My father’s jaw clenched tightly, his displeasure evident.

“Enough with the lies, Archer,” my father snapped. “You always had a way of protecting Penelope. Wherever she is, you know something.”

I shook my head, my heart pounding in my chest. “I swear, I don’t know where she went. I didn’t even know she was gone.”

Matthew's anger seemed to shift from me to Penelope. "How could she do this? We were supposed to get married!"

"I know it's tough, Matthew," I said. "But she must have had her reasons. Maybe it's better to give her space and let her sort things out."

Matthew was only pissed because he saw his golden goose abandoning him. He had a backup plan. If Ashley couldn't get my money, Matthew still had a chance to get rich quick by marrying Penelope. I had no doubt in my mind Matthew would treat her like shit while continuing to sleep with Ashley. I didn't know the ins and outs of the prenup, but I was sure Matthew had another plan to get his hands on Penelope's money and continue to see Ashley. I didn't want my sister to endure that kind of heartache.

My mother burst into tears. "This is all your fault!"

The accusation stung. "My fault?" I asked. "What the hell did I do?"

"You set a bad example," she said. "You ran away after the wedding instead of handling your business. Now she's got the idea that's an option."

"Penelope is a grown woman. She doesn't get influenced. She does what she wants. I would suggest you look to the other guy."

"There's another man?" Matthew growled.

I shot him a dirty look. "No. You. Why aren't we asking *you* why she would run off?"

"I don't know why," he said without looking me in the eyes. "She called off the wedding and said she didn't want to see me again."

"I wonder why," I said.

Matthew glared at me, still angry but seemingly resigned to the reality of the situation. "She was fine until you guys got back. What did you say? What did you do? I don't know if she'll ever come back."

I shook my head. “We didn’t do anything. Maybe it was something you did, Matthew.”

He scoffed. “I didn’t do anything. I loved her. I was going to marry her.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah and treat her like shit. You’re broke and you needed her money. I’m sure that’s a recipe for a happy marriage.”

“Archer!” my father bellowed.

My mother let out a sob. “I can’t believe this is happening. Penelope was supposed to have the perfect wedding, the perfect life. Why do you guys do this to us?”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “Mom, it’s not about having the perfect wedding or life. Penelope wants to be happy.”

“I can’t deal with this,” she sobbed and walked away.

“Fix this,” my father’s command was kind of silly. I couldn’t wave a magic wand and make it better.

Matthew was still pouting. I walked over to him, like I was going to sympathize. “What exactly did she say to you?” I asked him.

“She said I didn’t love her and she couldn’t marry someone that didn’t make her happy,” he muttered.

“Did she mention anything else?”

“No.”

I found that hard to believe. I had a feeling she told him exactly why she walked out on him. “I guess Penelope and I are both going to be living the single life.”

He looked at me. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not getting married. Ashley and I are over. For good.”

I didn’t miss the tug at his lips. He was trying not to smile. That was exactly the kind of reaction I expected from a co-conspirator. “Is that wise?” he asked. “Doesn’t that mean you break the contract and Ashley profits from it?”

“It would have, but as it turns out, there is an infidelity clause,” I said, smiling. “All I have to do is show proof Ashley has been sleeping with another man while engaged to me and she’ll get nothing.”

I saw him stiffen. I grinned and patted him on the shoulder. “Good luck, Matthew.”

I walked out of the house feeling satisfied. My suspicions were confirmed. Matthew was going to run and tell Ashley. She was going to call me and demand to know what I was talking about. That would be the only proof I needed. It proved Matthew and Ashley were in cahoots. I couldn’t wait to have all of this behind me. I envied Penelope. She was probably lounging on the beach with Ryder by her side.

SHILOH

I lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. It was something I found myself doing a lot of lately. I was constantly thinking about Archer. I was a little worried about him. I knew he felt stuck. What kind of shit was he dealing with? Did he have any allies standing beside him? If his sister was here, he was all alone. I felt like I should be standing beside him. Then again, that would only make the situation worse.

I felt very fortunate to have loving parents who supported me in everything I did. They helped get me to Hawaii so I could pursue my dream. I didn't know Archer's parents, but I couldn't understand why they would push him into a loveless marriage. Wouldn't they want him to be happy? He had more money and power than most people, but he didn't have love. I was no longer envious of the people I was jealous of before. Just because they had money didn't guarantee their happiness or satisfaction in life.

I made myself a cup of coffee and went up to enjoy the morning. It was going to be a busy day. I was taking Penelope and Ryder out on the boat today. We were going to take Penelope out to do some of the touristy things without the crowds that accompanied the many charters. We were giving her personalized tours.

I sipped my coffee and listened to birds overhead. There were already people out on the water and flocking to the beaches. I heard voices coming down the dock. I got up and saw Ryder and Penelope coming toward the boat. They looked so happy.

“Good morning!” Penelope called out.

“Good morning,” I replied.

“What is all that?” I asked at the many bags they were carrying.

“Penelope wanted to make sure we had plenty of food,” Ryder said, laughing. “I think she’s worried we’re going to get marooned on some deserted island with only the food on the boat to survive on.”

I laughed and reached for the bags. I put them on the deck and helped Penelope on board. “Holy crap,” I said as I carried the supplies downstairs. Penelope was behind me carrying some bags as well. “You really went all out.”

The excitement in her eyes was contagious, and I couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “You guys are doing so much for me, the least I can do is provide snacks.”

“You didn’t have to bring all this,” I said gratefully, looking at the spread of veggie trays, drinks, chips, and dip. “But I’m so glad you did. This is going to be an amazing day!”

Penelope beamed, her eyes sparkling. “I wanted to make sure we had everything we needed for a perfect day on the water. Good food makes everything better.”

Ryder carried down a few more bags. “We’re going to be as big as the whales Shiloh loves to follow.”

I was thrilled with Penelope’s thoughtfulness. She seemed different. She was always kind and fun, but I noticed the absence of the hat and the makeup she wore despite knowing she was going in the water. For lack of a better word, she looked normal. She looked like someone I would normally hang out with. Seeing them together made my heart swell with joy. It was evident how much they liked each other, and their happiness was infectious.

We put away the groceries and filled the ice chest with soda, beer, and bottles of water. Penelope had brought a couple bottles of wine as well. The food she bought was all the stuff that was premade and cost a small fortune. That was one thing her money could buy—food.

“Are we ready?” I asked my giddy passengers.

“So ready!” Penelope exclaimed.

As we set sail, the wind gently tugged at our hair, and the boat glided smoothly across the azure waters. I couldn't help but feel a little guilty that we were setting out for a day of fun and relaxation while Archer was in New York doing whatever he had to. If he came back, I promised myself I would make sure he was kept busy with lots of days on the boat.

I was thrilled for Penelope and Ryder but I couldn't deny I felt a tinge of jealousy that they got to spend time together while I longed to be with Archer. Nevertheless, I pushed those feelings aside, determined not to let them dampen the day's spirit. I wasn't even certain Archer was miserable back home. He might very well be in bed with her at that very moment. They might be planning their new wedding. I had to accept there was a chance I would never see him again.

As the hours passed, the sun reached its peak, and we decided to anchor the boat near a secluded cove. The water was crystal clear, inviting us to take a refreshing swim. I plunged into the cool embrace of the ocean, feeling a rush of exhilaration as I resurfaced.

Penelope and Ryder splashed around, their laughter blending with the lapping of the waves against the boat. I joined in the fun, grateful for the momentary distraction from my thoughts.

As we swam, I felt Penelope's eyes on me, and I turned to see her gazing at me with a knowing look. My heart sank, realizing that she could sense my inner turmoil. I swam over to her, hoping to change the subject.

“Did you ask Ryder about surfing?” I asked.

She laughed and shook her head. “I'm easing into it.”

“Don't take this the wrong way, but you look different,” I said. “Happier. You look like you've lost a hundred pounds and I don't mean that in a literal sense.”

“I feel like I've lost that kind of weight. I don't have to be Penelope, the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in the

country. I can just be Penelope, a twenty-five-year-old woman that doesn't have her shit together and just wants to figure life out without everyone watching and judging."

I couldn't help but admire Penelope's newfound sense of freedom. Her words struck a chord within me, reminding me of the weight that came with money. I needed to consider the money when I thought about being with Archer. I didn't want to find myself carrying the same burden.

Ryder reappeared on the deck after taking a break to get a drink and something to snack on. He jumped off the side, creating a big splash and soaking me and Penelope. She burst into laughter and splashed him as he swam toward her. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. I suddenly felt a little like a third wheel. "My turn," I said. "I'm going to raid the kitchen."

"I think we're going to swim to shore," Ryder said.

"I'll be here," I said, smiling.

I understood they wanted some privacy. I swam to the ladder and climbed up. Despite the fleeting moments of jealousy, I was happy for them. I wanted them to be happy even if it wasn't in the cards for me.

I went downstairs and made myself a plate of fresh fruit, some veggies and a few of the little cucumber sandwiches. I sat down at the table and enjoyed my meal while I thought about my future. Archer and I had one night together. I was getting a little too caught up in the idea of falling in love. I did believe he liked me and I did believe we might date or whatever, but I didn't know where it went after that. I didn't know if I wanted to be seriously involved with someone that had the kinds of demands on their lives that Archer did. I didn't want to be like Penelope. I didn't want to be like him. I loved my freedom.

I went back up on deck to make sure all was well with Ryder and Penelope. I spotted them bent over and staring at something on the beach. They were safe, which meant I could relax. As I lounged on the deck of my boat, I couldn't help but smile as I watched Penelope and Ryder playfully splash

around in the water. Penelope's laughter echoed across the waves as Ryder teased her, grabbing her around the waist. It was heartwarming to see the two of them so carefree and happy together.

The sun kissed my skin, and a gentle breeze rustled through my hair, creating the perfect backdrop for this idyllic moment. I had always cherished my time on the boat, and having my friends here made it all the more special. It could only be better if I had someone to frolic in the water with.

Penelope resurfaced, her laughter contagious. "Come in!" She waved her hand at me when she spotted me lounging.

"You guys go ahead," I said. "You're having plenty of fun."

"Get your ass in here!" Ryder shouted.

I didn't want to be a party pooper, so I dove in. Ryder immediately went for me, dunking me under the water. I came back up and attacked him. We continued our playful water fight, forgetting any worries or responsibilities for the moment. To outsiders, they probably thought it was silly for three grown adults to act like children, but those outsiders didn't know how good it felt to be carefree.

As we swam and laughed, I couldn't help but feel grateful for the friendship we shared. Penelope had always been like a sister to me, and Ryder had become an inseparable part of our group. His genuine nature and infectious enthusiasm were impossible to resist. I understood why Penelope left her New York life behind to be with him.

After a while, we climbed back onto the boat, our bodies glistening with water and our spirits light with joy. Penelope and Ryder exchanged playful banter, their eyes sparkling with mischief. I settled back on the deck, basking in the warmth of the sun and the company of my friends. In that moment, I knew what I wanted. I needed to fight for it.

"I'll be back," I said and got up. "Anybody want a snack?"

"Will you bring up those cookies?" Penelope asked.

"Absolutely."

I grabbed my phone and walked into my bedroom and closed the door. I made the call I had been debating making for a week. My heart pounded in my chest as I listened to the phone ring. When it went to voicemail, all that excitement faded. I didn't leave a message.

I had tried. At least I knew that much.

I put my phone back on the counter and grabbed the chocolate chunk cookies Penelope requested. I heard my phone beep just as I was headed back up. I checked it and found a text message from Archer.

"I'll see you soon," I read the short message aloud.

My heart soared. I didn't know his definition of soon, but I couldn't wait. I was thrilled. I put my phone back and carried the cookies upstairs with a smile that wouldn't go away.

"Here you go." I gave her the cookies.

We settled in and enjoyed the gentle rocking of the boat. The two of them opened a bottle of wine and snacked on grapes and cheese while I daydreamed about my future. As the sun began its descent, casting a golden glow over the water, we all fell into a comfortable silence. The peacefulness of the moment enveloped us, and I felt a deep sense of contentment.

As the boat gently sailed back to the shore, I felt a new hope for my future. I truly hoped it included Archer.

ARCHER

I stood in the entryway of my apartment, watching Ashley as she took pictures of the small room. She moved around, snapping away as she rambled on about all the décor updates she wanted to make once she officially moved in after our wedding.

The sun was setting outside, and the fading light of the day cast a golden glow on Ashley's dark hair. It was in one of its many styles, for she was always changing it, always trying new things, her head never quite the same twice in a week.

I had seen her move around the room hundreds of times before—she had been living with me for months, since the day we got engaged—yet somehow, this felt different. Perhaps it was the knowledge that I had of her secret. I saw her differently. She wasn't the woman I thought she was. I never really had a high opinion of her, but I had some feelings for her. I wasn't dreading marriage to her.

Regardless, my heart sank as I watched her move around the room. I knew I could never make things right between us. I knew of her betrayal. I almost convinced myself I could marry her, but after seeing Matthew's smug face, I knew there was no way I could go through with it.

As Ashley continued to move around the room, I let my gaze wander to the window. I watched the sun continue to dip below the horizon, leaving the sky a deep navy blue. There was something about the beauty of the night that made me

yearn for a fresh start, a way to forget about the deception and betrayal of the past.

Shiloh was my fresh start. I didn't have a clue how to make it work, but I was going to try. I had to. It was like knowing the sky was blue and money was green. I knew I had to make things work between us. She was my shot at true happiness. I wasn't going to let that pass me by.

"What do you think?" Ashley asked and held her phone out for me to look at the screen.

"I think that's never going to happen," I replied.

"You don't like it?" she pouted.

"I don't care one way or another."

She laughed, but it was fake. She was doing her best to pretend everything was normal. I sometimes wondered if she was a sociopath. How could she practically stab me in the back and smile to my face?

"Fine, we'll talk about it later. I have an appointment with Franco. He's booked out for the next year, but for us, he's making an exception. We have a meeting next month. You'll need to put it in your calendar."

"What are you doing?" I asked her and sat down on the couch.

I pulled out my phone to see if I had a response from Shiloh. The message had been marked with a heart, which made me feel like I got a long-distance hug. I smiled and stared at the picture of her I saved with her contact information. She was just walking out of the water with her blonde curls hanging in thick blocks around her face. I always found her the prettiest when she was in the water or emerging from it.

"Did you hear me?" Ashley's shrill voice pulled me from my little fantasy.

"No."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

“Nothing.”

“I asked if you wanted Giorgios or sushi for dinner,” she said.

“Neither.”

“I want the two of us to have a chance to talk and enjoy some time together.”

I stared at her and tried to see what I saw in her in the beginning. In the beginning, I saw a beautiful woman who knew the right people and carried herself well. “I don’t want dinner. I would like you to leave.”

Ashley’s face contorted into a scowl and her eyes narrowed as if she was trying to burn a hole through me. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she hissed. “We need to talk about our future together. You can’t just ignore me. We’re going to be married.”

“No, we aren’t.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she sneered. “Your mother and I have been planning our wedding.”

“Again?” I scoffed. “Aren’t you tired of burning money?”

“We’re going to do it in Italy this time,” she said as if I said nothing. “We’re thinking something a little smaller but it will be more romantic. I already have a new dress.”

“Your first dress was never used,” I reminded her.

“It’s bad luck to wear it after what happened the first time.”

“What happened?” I asked with a laugh. “Nothing happened the first time. You ran away. You chose not to walk down the aisle and marry me. I wonder why that was?”

“I’m sorry for that,” she said. “I got cold feet. I’m good now.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” I said with a laugh.

“Let me get you another drink and then we’ll talk,” she said.

She took my glass and walked away. I pulled out my phone, unable to resist the only connection I had to Shiloh. I sent her another text, letting her know I missed her.

“Who are you texting?” Ashley snapped. “You’re smiling. You never smile. Who made you smile like that?”

I looked up at her and took the drink. “The woman I’m about to marry.”

Ashley’s face contorted into a snarl as the drink sloshed over the rim of the glass. “What woman?” she spat. “You’re going to marry me. You promised.”

“I promised to consider it,” I corrected. “And I have. I’m not interested in marrying you anymore.”

Ashley’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You can’t just change your mind like that. You’re mine.”

“I’m not anyone’s property,” I shot back. “Least of all yours. We’re done, Ashley. I think it’s time for you to leave.”

Her face twisted in fury as she threw the glass at me. I jumped back just in time to dodge the flying glass, but it shattered against the wall behind me. I stood up, trying to keep calm.

“Ashley, you need to leave. Now.” I said in a low voice.

“No, I won’t leave. You belong to me. I won’t let you go,” she screamed, her eyes blazing with anger.

“Please, this is exactly what you want,” I said. “Save the antics. I don’t buy them for a second. This is you pretending you want me so you look like the victim.”

Her tears and anger evaporated in an instant. “If you choose not to marry me, you’re breaking the contract.”

“It’s cute you think that,” I said. “But as a matter of fact, you’re the one that broke the contract.”

“But I changed my mind,” she sneered. “I’m back. I’m here begging you to take me back. I’ve agreed to marry you. You’re the one refusing me.”

I had been waiting for the moment I could tell her I knew about her affair. It was something I wanted to savor. “Did you know there’s some fine print in all that paperwork that states cheating is grounds for breach of contract? Technically, you would be breaking the contract and you will be on the hook to pay for the wedding you blew up. And I want that ring back.”

She jerked her hand away. “I don’t think so.”

“Fine, my family will sue you,” I said. “I honestly couldn’t give a shit. I don’t want the ring, but my dad is attached to it.”

“You’re going to pay through the nose,” she hissed. “You’ve just made me a very wealthy woman. I can’t wait to sit in that boardroom across from you. I’m going to ruin your world.”

“Have fun with that. You’re going to have a lot of time on your hands to worry about me.”

“I’ve already won,” she said, smiling. “You may as well write the check. I’ll let you keep your apartment.”

“Let me?” I laughed.

“You know I could claim I’ve been living here,” she said and trailed her finger across the arm of a chair. “I know I could get this place, but it’s not my style. It’s far too masculine. The cost to renovate it would—”

“Would eat into the cash you think you’re going to get from me?” I finished for her. “You have to save that cash for your boyfriend. You need to use my money to bail out your boyfriend’s failing company, right?”

She cleared her throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do.” I got to my feet and took a step toward her. I wanted her to feel like she was two inches tall. That’s how I saw her. She was nothing to me. “Matthew.”

“What?” she said, frowning. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been fucking my sister’s fiancé,” I said, staring into her eyes and watching them fill with guilt. “How long has

this been going on? How long have you been fucking him?"

"I'll deny it," she said. "You can't prove it."

"I don't need to prove it. All I have to do is hint that I know something. Penelope doesn't know it was you, but I do. I *do* have the proof. Walk away Ashley or I will expose you and Matthew. He's going to be broke soon. You're going to be ousted from society. Walk away and I'll keep your secret."

"You can't prove it," she said, but there was no conviction in her voice. She was already thinking about how to get out of the mess she'd created for herself.

"I can and I will," I said. "Don't force me to do it. I don't want to hurt you, but I can."

"You won't do it. You're a good man. You don't want to hurt me. You want to take care of me. That's what you want."

"That's what I want?" I said, laughing. "I don't even want to know you. I don't care what happens to you. Penelope and Matthew are over. I'll make damn sure my parents leave that alone. She's way too good for him and I'm going to tell her to stay the hell away from that piece of shit. The two of you deserve each other. I hope you get everything you deserve in life."

"Don't do this!"

"I didn't do anything. You did. You chose to fuck with me. Tell me something. Did you and Matthew come up with this plan together or was it just you?"

"There is no plan," she shot back.

"Get your shit and get out. I'm changing the locks and I will let building security know you are not welcome here. If you come back, you will be hauled out."

"Archer, you're being ridiculous."

"Leave, Ashley. Leave or I will humiliate you."

"What about that woman you've been seeing?" she snarled. "The woman you say you're going to marry?"

“What woman?” I smiled. “You don’t know that there is a woman. I know for a fact you can’t prove anything.”

“You know I can’t just leave,” she whined. “My parents are going to be devastated.”

“Actually, you can and you will,” I said, taking out my phone and taking a picture of her. “You’re no longer my concern. Get out of my apartment.”

“If I go, I’ll ruin you.”

“No, you won’t,” I said. “There’s nothing you can say or do. Smear me to your friends but the truth will come out. Honestly, I don’t care what you or anyone else thinks. I’m going to be happy. You’re the one that’s forever going to be miserable.”

I walked to the door and opened it. “On second thought, I’ll have someone pack and deliver anything you might have left behind. I want you out of here now.”

She glared at me and looked like she wanted to fight, but she had to know she was defeated. It was over.

SHILOH

It had been a week and, once again, nothing from Archer. I wondered if he had changed his mind again.

Was he playing games? Was it over? I felt like I was stuck on the rollercoaster from hell. I was up one minute and crashing to the bottom the next.

I waited every morning and every day. I kept waiting for him to stroll down the dock. I envisioned our reunion with me running and jumping into his arms. I didn't take the boat out in case he showed up and I was gone.

Penelope and Ryder spent pretty much every minute together. Ryder was staying at the resort with Penelope most days. When he worked, I hung out with Penelope. I liked having a girlfriend to hang out with. She was a lot of fun, but when Ryder got off work, they usually wanted to be alone. I didn't blame them a bit. I was envious but I tried to keep my bitterness in check. I wanted them to be happy.

And it was time for me to find happiness. Whether that was with Archer or just doing my own thing. I had waited a week with nothing and then another week with the promise he was coming back. I put my life on hold for an entire week.

Enough was enough. I had to move on. I had to get back to living my life and doing what needed to be done. That meant planning my excursion for next spring.

Now that it was established I wasn't taking the money from Penelope, it was back to the drawing board to secure the funds I needed to follow the whale migration.

I put on the dress I chose for the meeting. It felt weird to wear normal clothes and put on makeup to make myself look like a professional. A company I did some work for in the past reached out to talk about my whale migration interest. They wanted to talk about sponsoring the trip, which would be amazing. I printed out my plans and what I hoped to learn from the excursion. It was in a neat little package. I needed the money. I wanted it so badly and I needed it to keep moving forward with my life.

As I walked into the meeting room, my heart raced with both excitement and trepidation. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. The idea of embarking on such an adventure was incredibly exciting, but I knew better than to accept anything without thoroughly understanding the terms. I needed to know what they expected from me in return. There was always a catch. They weren't going to fork over money without getting something in return.

Taking a deep breath, I settled into a chair as the representatives from the company began their pitch. The prospect of exploring the seas, documenting the awe-inspiring whale migration, and contributing to marine biology research filled my mind with visions of grandeur. However, amidst the enthusiasm, I couldn't help but feel a pang of apprehension. I noticed they were using *they* instead of *you*. I would wait until the end to ask them my questions.

As the presentation went on, they revealed the catch. I would have to work alongside James Mulligan, a man I had known for years and, to put it mildly, loathed. James was infamous for his arrogance and self-proclaimed expertise in marine biology. He had an ego the size of a blue whale and believed he was God's gift to the scientific community.

At that moment, a sense of doubt crept over me. How could I embark on such a meaningful project if it meant having to tolerate James's condescending attitude and insufferable behavior? This was my idea. My project. James would take all the credit. I would get no recognition. He would be more interested in selling the data instead of trying to understand what it meant to the whales and the world as a whole.

Although the idea of working with James made me want to decline the offer outright, I knew better than to let my personal feelings get in the way of my dreams. I had to swallow my pride if I wanted to make the whale migration a reality.

The representatives exchanged a glance before one of them spoke up. “We’ve already scheduled a meeting between you and James for tomorrow. We suggest you prepare thoroughly for it, as it will determine whether we can offer the funding. We’re trusting James’s experience to help guide us on this. From what we see here, it looks like you have it all laid out. I don’t think there will be an issue at all. It’s a well-crafted proposal.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling.

I knew I had a decision to make. As the meeting ended, I stayed behind to speak with the company representatives privately. I voiced my concerns and told them that I couldn’t work with James Mulligan. They listened patiently, nodding their understanding. After a moment of silence, the lead representative spoke.

“Look, we understand your concerns. Working with James can be challenging, but he is the best in the field. We need him for the project to succeed.”

I sighed, already knowing what they were going to say next. James had name recognition and would add validity to the project. I was a no one in the field. They needed to make sure they were going to get their money’s worth.

“Can I have a few days to go over the contract?” I asked.

“Of course,” the head of the group said. “James is thrilled to get to work with you. He is certain there is a lot he can teach you.”

I nearly bit my tongue off. “Oh, I’m sure he’s certain he could,” I said with a tight smile.

“This project could lead to lucrative speaking engagements all around the world,” he reminded me. “We want to make sure it is set up for success.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. “I’ll get back to you. Thank you for your time.”

After the meeting, I left feeling like I had taken one step forward and two steps back. I could not imagine living on a boat with James Mulligan. I already knew about his rotten reputation before I had the misfortune of meeting him a few times at conferences. The guy was beyond arrogant.

We were talking about spending months together in a very small space. There was no way I could tolerate him every minute of every day. I would lose my shit and throw him overboard. There was just no world in which I could do this expedition with him.

That left me with no funding. I glanced up at the sky and saw the dark clouds rolling in. I could ride it out on my boat or hang out at Ryder’s.

I knocked on his door but no one answered. I let myself in. “Hello?” I called out.

The place was quiet. I assumed they were all out or at work. It wasn’t like I hadn’t ridden out my fair share of storms on my boat. I made my way down the dock just as the wind started to pick up. The water was already getting choppy. I quickly boarded and changed into a pair of shorts and a hoodie before I went back out to secure the boat to the dock. I didn’t want it breaking free.

As I tightened the ropes, the rain started to come down in sheets. I had been in storms before, but this one felt different. The wind was whipping around with a ferocity that made me wonder if I had made a mistake coming out here. But I didn’t have much of a choice. I couldn’t risk staying at Ryder’s because I knew the storm would only get worse. I had to stay on my boat, alone. If it did break away from the dock, I wanted to be able to navigate it through the water. Usually, I would take her away from the shore where the water might be a little calmer. But it was too late for that.

I went below deck to grab some food and water, and as I was rummaging through the cabinets, I heard my phone ringing.

I glanced down and saw it was Ryder. “Hey,” I answered. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m at the resort. Are you at the house?”

“I’m on my boat.”

“Go to the house. We’re all going to hunker down here.”

“I’m fine,” I assured him.

“How did your meeting go?” he asked.

Outside, I could hear the wind howling. “It didn’t go as planned,” I said, my voice barely audible over the sound of the storm. “But I’ll fill you in when I see you.”

“Alright, just be safe,” Ryder said before hanging up.

I sighed and put my phone back in my pocket. The storm was getting worse, and the boat was starting to rock back and forth violently. I knew I had to do something before I lost control of it completely. I made my way back up to the deck, leaning into the wind as I struggled to keep my balance.

The rain was coming down so hard that I could barely see in front of me. I made sure everything was secure before quickly going below deck once again.

It looked like I was going to be staying in for a while. Thunderstorms were pretty common. Usually, they blew through pretty quickly, but on occasion, we would get storms that wanted to linger.

I settled onto the sofa and stared out at the raging sea. The storm was getting worse by the minute, and I knew I had to do something to keep my mind occupied, to keep from going crazy. I decided to grab a book and lose myself in the pages.

As I was reading, I remembered the first time I saw Archer that day on the beach. He nearly fell over me. When he noticed the book I was reading, I had been just a little embarrassed. It never occurred to me how odd it was he knew anything about shifter romances.

I smiled at the memory of him trying to give me his drink after his foot smashed mine. I would have never guessed the

man on the beach would end up being the man I was crazy about now.

I thought about texting him but didn't. I always thought about texting him, but I didn't want him to think I was clingy. He needed his space to figure out his life. I knew it was far more complicated than I could ever imagine.

I was just glad I didn't have to worry about marrying the right man to please my parents. They trusted me to follow my heart. They wouldn't care if he was dirt poor as long as we loved each other and made each other happy.

I heard a loud crack and jumped up to go see what it was. The wind and rain whipped my body. Along the shoreline, the houses and resorts were dark. The power was out. That was pretty normal. I went back downstairs and took my book to my bed to read for a while.

I heard another sound and strained my ears. It sounded like knocking, which made zero sense. "Dammit," I muttered and got out of bed. Something must have come loose on deck. I opened the door and saw Archer standing there, soaked through with hair mussed and water dripping down his nose.

"Archer?" I exclaimed, surprised to see him in the middle of a storm. He looked different, as if something had shifted inside him.

I had waited for this moment for two weeks. I grabbed him and jerked him inside before launching myself at him.

ARCHER

Her mouth slammed against mine. Her hands slid into my wet hair with her body pressed against mine. To say she was happy to see me was an understatement. The wind howled outside and the rain pelted the ceiling over our heads, but in the cabin of her boat, none of that mattered. I had been thinking about the moment I would see her again for weeks. I longed to be in her arms, and now that I had her, I couldn't get close enough.

Then I remembered I was soaked to the bone from my walk from the taxi down the dock. The taxi driver told me I was crazy to get out of the cab, but the pull to get to her was too strong. I would have walked through a hurricane to get to her.

"I'm soaked," I said and pulled back a bit. "Let me get a towel before I get everything wet."

"You've already got everything wet," she said in a sultry voice. "But I have no problem with you getting naked."

I chuckled, feeling the heat rising in my cheeks. "Someone sounds desperate."

"That's one word for it."

"Let me dry off a little," I said and stepped around her.

I grabbed a towel from the bathroom and dried myself off as best as I could, but my clothes were still drenched. She watched me, her eyes dark with desire. I couldn't resist her any longer.

I closed the distance between us and kissed her again, this time with even more passion. Her lips were soft and warm against mine. I ran my hands over her body, feeling her curves and the softness of her skin.

She moaned into my mouth and I felt the heat between us rise to a fever pitch. I wanted to rip her clothes off and take her right then and there.

“I want you,” I said, my voice strained with desire. “I’ve thought about you every minute of every day we’ve been apart.”

“Me too,” she murmured. “God, I hate how much I missed you.”

I smiled and brushed my thumb over her lips. “Not me. I’m glad you missed me.”

I kissed her again, feeling her body pressed against me. My cock pulsed with need as I kissed a line down her jaw to her neck. Her moans grew louder.

She pushed me back a bit and reached to unbutton my wet shirt. She tossed it aside and unbuttoned my pants. I slipped off my shoes and pushed my pants over my hips, letting them fall to the floor. I kicked them out of the way as she slid her fingers into my boxers and caressed my cock.

She gasped when she felt how hard it was. “Mmm, what’s this? You’re ready for me already.”

“It’s all for you,” I said. “I think I’ve been like this since I boarded the plane to come back here to you. I’ve spent some very long nights with just me, my imagination, and my hand thinking about you.”

She grinned and slipped my cock out of my boxers. She wrapped her hand around my shaft and stroked me, making me breathe faster.

“You’ve been thinking about me, huh?” she asked. “What have you been thinking about?”

I groaned and rested my forehead against hers. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why?” she asked with her nails scraping down my chest.

“Because my dreams were slightly erotic. If I start thinking about what it felt like to bury myself inside you, I’m going to come before we ever get started.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think that might be kind of hot.”

“Me too,” I breathed as she stroked me faster. “But I know what’s even hotter.”

She let go of me and leaned back. “Tell me.”

“I want to see you,” I said. “All of you.”

She raised an eyebrow and pulled off her shirt and bra, tossing them aside. I leaned in and cupped her breasts in my hands. They were full and firm and absolutely fucking perfect. I groaned with relief and excitement.

While I kissed and sucked on her breasts, she undid her shorts and pushed them down.

She was wearing a black thong, which she pushed aside with a grin. “See something you like?”

“You know I do,” I said. “Bed. Now.”

She flashed me a sexy smile. “Someone’s a little bossy.”

She walked to the bedroom, giving me a perfect view of her beautiful ass. I playfully swatted her backside, pulling a shriek from her. She hopped on her bed and rolled over, propping herself up on her elbows before she very slowly spread her legs. My gaze focused on her sweet spot.

“Like what you see?”

“Absolutely,” I said as I walked over to the bed. I climbed on top of her and leaned down to kiss her.

“Are you okay?” I asked when I felt her shaking.

“Of course,” she said. “I’m so happy you’re back. I thought you might not come back. I prepared myself to never see you again.”

“No way,” I said and kissed her breasts. “There was no way I was going to stay away from you. I couldn’t.”

“I’m so glad,” she said, kissing my neck.

“I want you so bad,” I said.

“Me too,” she said. “And now you’re here.”

I pushed her thong aside and slipped my fingers inside her. She was so wet and warm and tight. “I’m here. It’s going to take a lot to get me to leave you again.”

She moaned as I fingered her, her hips rocking against my hand. I kissed her lips, then her neck, and then her chest. I moved down her body, pushing her legs apart as I went. I gently tugged on her inner thighs.

I smiled as I pressed my lips to her pussy, just brushing my lips across her sweet spot. I loved the taste of her, the smell of her, the feel of her.

She groaned as I licked her, her fingers clutching at the sheets. I pushed my tongue inside her, then licked my way back up to her clit. I gently sucked on her clit and felt her body tense. I sucked harder, pressing the flat of my tongue against her clit. I felt her shaking and moaning underneath me and I knew she was close to orgasm. I kept my mouth on her, sucking and licking as her muscles clenched and unclenched. “Oh God, yes,” she groaned.

She let out a long groan as her body writhed and shook underneath me. I gave her clit one last long lick before I kissed my way back up the length of her body. She was still panting and trying to catch her breath when I reached her lips.

“Oh God,” she said, her breath hot against my ear. “You have no idea how good that feels.”

“You’re welcome,” I said with a grin.

She reached down and grabbed my cock, throbbing with need to be inside her. “I need you.”

I pulled back and ran my hands down her lean thighs. I grabbed the thong and slowly pulled it down her legs. “Roll over,” I whispered.

She rolled over and looked over her shoulder at me. I grabbed one of her hands and put it on the low headboard and then the other. “We’re going to rock this boat,” I told her. “Where are your condoms?”

“Drawer,” she whispered breathlessly.

I could barely take my eyes off her ass. The boat was slowly rocking back and forth, her ass bobbing up and down. I quickly rolled on the condom and moved behind her once again.

I rubbed the head of my dick against her pussy, then pushed inside. She moaned as I sank deep inside her. She was so wet and so fucking tight that I couldn’t help but groan as well.

I pulled out slowly, then thrust hard into her. She gasped, her fingers digging into the wood of the headboard. I pulled out and thrust into her again and again, her moans telling me that she was loving every second of it. I slowed my pace, trying to build her up to the ultimate orgasm.

The boat rocked and moved up and down, threatening to knock me over. I leaned into the rocking while I fucked her. The movement heightened the pleasure. She was moaning loudly. “Oh God, yes. More.”

I grabbed the headboard and leaned into her. I fucked her hard and fast, gritting my teeth as I tried to hold on. I wanted to last, but I wasn’t sure how much longer I could go. She was moaning loudly, telling me that she was getting close.

The storm raging outside added to the pleasure that was building inside me. I was going to lose it any second.

“Fuck, I’m going to go,” I yelled out as her pussy clenched around me. She was falling into sweet oblivion, too.

“Holy shit,” she screamed as her orgasm tore through her. I gritted my teeth and pounded inside her. My ears were ringing and my muscles clenched so tight I felt like I might snap in two.

I collapsed onto the bed with her, rolling over onto my back. I gasped for air. My lungs felt tight. The orgasm had

locked me in a vise and I was still struggling to be released from it.

She rolled over and looked at me, smiling. “Damn.”

I laughed. “Me, too.”

She collapsed against me with one hand resting against my chest. “Are you back for good or is this a drive-by visit?”

“I have no plans for what happens next,” I told her. “My only thought was to get back to you. I figured the rest would happen the way it was supposed to.”

“I’m glad you’re here. Really, really glad. I’ve missed you. Honestly, I thought you might never make it back. Penelope —”

“She’s here, right?” I asked.

“Yes. You didn’t know?”

“I suspected, but she went rogue on us all, fell off the grid. She hasn’t even talked to me. I assumed she would be here, but I didn’t know for sure.”

“She’s staying at the resort,” she answered. “Ryder is with her.”

I chuckled and rolled to face her. “I thought that might be the case. Everyone has been asking where she is, but I’ve pleaded the Fifth.”

“They don’t know she’s here?”

“No, she basically ran away from home. I don’t blame her. She’s lucky she doesn’t have a company to run. She had the luxury of running away.”

“What happens now?” she asked.

“Now, I’d like to give this a real shot,” I said. “I know there’s some wrinkles I’ll have to iron out, but I like you, Shiloh. A lot. You are different from any other woman I’ve met in my entire life. I want to be with you. I’m going to do all I can to make that happen. What about you? Do you want to try this with me?”

She stared at me for a long time. “There’s a lot that will have to happen in order for this to work out for the long term. You know that, right?”

“I know,” I said. “But, if you’re willing to try, I’m willing to do whatever I have to. I’ve already made it clear to my father that I won’t be living under his rule. I don’t need or want his money. I choose happiness.”

“That’s very sweet.”

I kissed the tip of her nose. “Maybe, but right now, I’m not feeling sweet. I’m feeling something far naughtier.”

“I like naughty,” she said, grinning.

“I’m going to get something to drink,” I said.

“Are you hungry?” she asked. “I still have a bunch of groceries from Penelope’s shopping spree.”

“Penelope went grocery shopping?” I asked.

“She did. I don’t think she’s done it often because she bought everything and clearly didn’t worry about looking for the best deals.”

I laughed and rolled out of the bed. “Penelope doesn’t worry herself with much, especially when it comes to spending money.”

SHILOH

W *e are a foursome! I am one half of a couple.*

All those days I watched Ryder and Penelope fawn all over each other and spend time together while feeling jealous were in the past. I had Archer. He was with me and I wanted to take advantage of every minute we had together.

I handed Archer the cup of coffee I made for him.

“Thanks, babe.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you have work today?” he asked.

I slowly shook my head. “No. Penelope wanted to go for a hike today. We made plans to hike the Waimea Falls trail. Are you up for it?”

“Absolutely, but there’s just one thing.”

“What would that be?” I asked.

He gestured to his body clad in just a pair of boxers. “What you see is what I brought. I was hoping to order a few things.”

“I know a store,” I said, grinning. “You might end up looking a bit like a local. I’m not sure we’re going to find designer suits.”

“Good,” he replied. “That’s the last thing I want.”

“I’ll text Ryder and let him know we’ll meet them in a couple of hours. In the meantime, we’ll go shopping.”

After a whirlwind shopping trip to outfit Archer with a full wardrobe, we put on our hiking gear and met Ryder and Penelope in the parking lot. Penelope threw her arms around her brother when she saw him.

“I’m so glad you escaped,” she said. “I’m sorry I bailed on you. I just couldn’t take it anymore. I had to get out of there.”

“And I’m glad you did.”

The lush greenery of Oahu surrounded us. The sound of birdsong mixed with the rustling leaves in the gentle breeze. Archer reached out and took my hand, his touch warm and reassuring.

“Ready for this?” Archer asked, a smile dancing on his lips.

I nodded, my heart pounding with anticipation. “Absolutely! Are you?”

“I am,” Penelope said, smiling. “I talked to a couple yesterday that visited the valley. They said it was the prettiest place they’d ever seen.”

With our fingers entwined, we stepped onto the trail, our footsteps in sync as we ventured deeper into the tropical paradise. Ryder and Penelope were behind us. The path meandered through dense foliage, alive with vibrant flowers and towering trees. The air was thick with the scent of nature, and I couldn’t help but feel a profound connection to the world around me. The only downside was the number of people. Sometimes, I wished we could close the island and enjoy it for just a day or two without masses of people packing the trails and beaches.

As we walked, I shared snippets of local legends about the area. Ryder chimed in with his own stories. Penelope and Archer seemed genuinely thrilled with our storytelling. The trail led us over wooden bridges, beside sparkling streams, and past small waterfalls that cascaded into inviting pools. The temptation to dip our feet in the cool water was strong, but we pressed on, eager to reach the grand finale, Waimea Falls.

As we approached the falls, the sound of rushing water grew louder, like the heartbeat of the land. I had visited the falls several times, but it was so much better getting to share it with Archer. Sunlight filtered through the canopy above, creating a mesmerizing play of light and shadow on the emerald ground.

“There it is,” I said, pointing ahead with excitement in my voice.

Archer’s eyes widened as he laid eyes on Waimea Falls for the first time. The cascade was magnificent, crashing down from the rocks above into a crystal-clear pool below. The water shimmered like liquid diamonds, inviting us to get in. Thankfully, the pool was open. It wasn’t always.

We found a spot near the pool’s edge, removed our shoes, and waded into the refreshing water. I gasped at the sensation, the chill of the water sending shivers up my spine, but it was invigorating. Archer held my hand as we stood under the falls, the water pouring over us like a gentle waterfall shower. We laughed like carefree children, feeling the joy of the moment wash away any worries.

After spending some time enjoying the beautiful place, we moved on to make room for the other people all wanting to experience the beauty. We stopped to get some food before going back to the beach for a picnic.

“So, how was it?” Penelope asked her brother.

I nibbled at my sandwich and listened. I knew very little about what had happened in New York. Last night, there wasn’t a lot of time for conversation. I supposed part of me didn’t want to know what went on back there. I was too afraid to face the reality he might be leaving very soon.

“It was as you would expect,” Archer said. “Dad was pissed I didn’t want to marry Ashley. He tried to push me into it. The lawyer said I had to.”

My stomach erupted into a bundle of nerves. Was he actually considering it?

“But you’re not going to,” Penelope said.

“No. I told Ashley it wasn’t going to happen. I talked with the attorney. He went over the contracts and found my out.”

“What?”

“She’s been having an affair,” Archer said.

The three of us looked at him. It was the way he said it that had us all stopping to listen to what he was saying.

“She’s been having an affair?” Penelope asked. “How did you find out?”

Archer looked at his sister with sympathy in his eyes. “You told me.”

“I told you?” she repeated. “I didn’t even know she was cheating. I couldn’t have possibly told you.”

He took a deep breath. “Remember when you told me you thought Matthew might be cheating?”

“Yes.”

“You mentioned one of his trips to LA,” Archer explained.

I was listening to every word. I didn’t know if it was any of my business, but it didn’t seem like they were trying to hide their conversation. And dammit, I was nosey.

“Yes. Several trips,” she said.

“Yeah, well, when you mentioned the LA trip it reminded me of something. I checked my calendar and that is when Ashley had an emergency shopping trip—to LA. You said Matthew was taking weekend trips and acting differently. So was Ashley. They were together. They’ve been messing around for a while.”

Penelope’s eyes widened. “No way!”

“Damn, that’s some fucked up shit,” Ryder said. “Talk about keeping it in the family.”

Even though it benefited me and Ryder, I felt terrible for Penelope and Archer. It was horrible.

“You’re sure?” Penelope asked.

“As sure as I can be,” Archer said. “I casually mentioned to her I knew she was cheating, which would mean she breached the contract.”

“Did she admit to it?” I asked, inserting myself into the conversation.

Archer laughed. “No, but the look on her face told me I was right. When I started thinking about little things, it all added up. I never noticed it before because I guess I didn’t care. But when you told me Matthew was cheating, something just kind of clicked inside me.”

“Wow,” Penelope said. “Right under our noses. How did I not know it was her?”

“They did a good job hiding it,” I said. “I think this was always their plan.”

“Whose plan?” I asked.

“If Ashley married me, she would have been very wealthy. If Matthew married Pip, he would be rich and it would save his failing company. I don’t know the details about your marriage contracts, Penelope, but Ashley gained a lot if I broke the contract. She set me up. She took off, knowing it would sour me on the idea of our marriage. Then she came back because she knew I would never marry her. She would get the money and the shares of my company, which would make her wealthier in the long run. That would have saved Matthew. You and I were the backup plans.”

“Holy shit,” Penelope said with a shake of her head. “I can’t believe we almost got saddled with those two. Why didn’t you tell me you knew about them?”

“I wanted to make sure,” he said. “But then you dumped his ass and ran. That’s when I knew there was no way Ashley would marry me. She wanted to be with him but needed my money. With you out of the picture, she could have him all to herself.”

“I’m so glad I left,” Penelope said.

“You are going to have to eventually talk to Mom and Dad,” he said.

She groaned. “I don’t want to.”

As they talked, I realized their lives weren’t quite as shiny and pretty as they looked from the outside. They dealt with a lot of things I didn’t have to. I looked at Ryder, who slowly shook his head. We were both living modestly. We’d grown up with very little but we had good families. I felt guilty for all the times I snarled at the rich people that visited the island, blowing money like there was no end to their supply. They needed the money to fill the empty holes in their lives.

“Well, enough of this,” Penelope said and got to her feet. “Shiloh, let’s go swimming.”

We stripped down to our bikinis and walked down to the shore. “I truly love it here,” Penelope said. “I never want to leave.”

“Do you have the freedom to live where you want?” I asked.

I understood why Archer wasn’t truly free. He had a business to run.

“Yes and no,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means I have to go back and face the music,” she said, sighing. “Archer will have to go back. We both love it here, but we have homes and responsibilities in NYC. I do a lot of charity work. I can’t just leave them hanging. I have to replace myself. As much as I wish we could both pick up and leave, we can’t.”

“What about your engagement?” I asked. “Do you have to marry Matthew?”

“Oh no.” She shook her head. “He might try and push it, but knowing what I know now, there is no way in hell I’m marrying that asshole.”

“I don’t want to say I feel sorry for you guys, but I kind of do,” I said.

Penelope gave me a wry smile. “Don’t feel sorry for us, Shiloh. We may have our problems, but we also have the

means to deal with them. There are people out there who have it much worse than we do.”

I nodded, understanding what she meant. We continued walking until we reached the water. The sun was beating down on us, and I could feel the heat radiating off the sand. The water was cool and refreshing, and I felt rejuvenated as I swam. Penelope and I chatted about everything and anything, from our childhood to our dreams for the future.

As we swam, I tried not to dwell on the fact Archer would have to leave soon. He had obligations back in New York. I didn't have a right to tell him to leave all of that behind. I believed him when he said he wanted to make a go of a relationship with me. I just wasn't sure what that looked like. There were so many things that could go wrong when you were thousands of miles apart. Not to mention, his parents were never going to stop trying to get him to marry the right woman.

I looked toward the beach and saw Ryder and Archer talking. I wanted to be selfish and keep him with me forever.

But I knew that wasn't realistic. I had to accept that our time together was limited and make the most of it while we had it. I swam back to shore and joined the guys on the beach. We sat in comfortable silence for a while, watching the waves roll in and out. All of us seemed to be lost in our own thoughts.

ARCHER

I sat shotgun as Shiloh drove the rental car through the busy streets of Honolulu. The traffic was relentless, with tourists and locals alike bustling about, but we were determined to make our way to the Pearl Harbor site. It was a place I had always heard about but never had the opportunity to visit, and being so close, I knew it was a chance I shouldn't pass up. Shiloh agreed I needed to see the historical place.

I reached over and put my hand on her thigh. "Thank you for doing all of this for me."

"All of what?" she asked with a smile.

"Being my tour guide," I said, grinning. "Are you sure you don't have to work?"

"I'm sure. This is fun. I love getting to see all of this through your eyes. It's like getting to see it all for the first time."

"You're going to stay with me tonight, right?" I asked her.

I rented the beach house for another week. Her boat was nice, but it was very tight quarters. I missed being able to step into a shower and fully stand. Her shower was meant for people her size. The showerhead hit me about chest level.

"I will," she said. "Like I'm going to pass up the chance to stay in your fancy mansion."

"Good, if that's what it takes to entice you, so be it."

As we navigated through the traffic, I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions. I was so happy to be with her. When I was with her, I could forget all about life in New York. I could pretend there was nothing to worry about except planning our next adventure.

Shiloh's upbeat energy and enthusiasm were infectious, and she kept up a lively conversation to distract us from the traffic. As we neared the site, I could see the signs pointing in the direction of the memorial. The anticipation grew. I wasn't going to pretend I was a history buff, but of course I knew about Pearl Harbor.

We parked the car and made our way toward the entrance. The air seemed to hold a certain gravity, as if the very atmosphere remembered the events of that fateful day. As we stepped onto the grounds, the echoes of history enveloped us. I wasn't surprised by the number of old men wearing various military hats and uniforms roaming the place.

Shiloh took my hand and gently squeezed. "What do you think?"

The memorial itself stood solemnly over the sunken remains of the USS Arizona. It was a haunting reminder of the lives lost and the sacrifices made during the attack. The sheer scale of the tragedy hit me hard, and I felt a deep sense of humility and respect for those who had endured such hardship.

"I think every student that is going through American history should visit here," I said. "You can read about it, but you don't really get it until you see it."

Shiloh and I moved through the exhibits, absorbing the historical information and personal stories of the people who had lived through the attack. The displays and artifacts offered a glimpse into the past, bridging the gap between the present and that tragic day.

As we stood at the edge of the memorial, gazing down at the submerged battleship, a profound silence settled over us. Everyone visiting the site was very quiet. I could feel the weight of history pressing down on my shoulders. It was a moment of reflection.

We left the site and sat in the car for a few minutes. “That was really cool,” I said. “Thanks for braving the traffic and taking me.”

“Of course.”

“Ryder told me you had a meeting the other day about your whale trip,” I said. “What was that about?”

“It’s a company I’ve done some work for in the past,” she answered. “They’ve offered to sponsor the trip.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “Why don’t you sound more excited?”

“I have this big plan in my head about what I want this project to be. I envisioned me alone on my boat, watching the whales and documenting what I saw. I guess I kind of saw it as a solo journey. It was supposed to be my project without a bunch of rules and demands.”

“They have rules?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, sighing. “And I wouldn’t be alone.”

That got my attention. “What do you mean?”

“They want me to have a partner. Another marine biologist. I don’t dislike many people in this world, but I don’t like him. He’s arrogant. The company wants him to share his *vast knowledge with me.*”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“His name is James. He’s kind of a big deal in the marine biology world. However, I think he’s a hack. He doesn’t really believe in learning. He thinks he knows everything already and only he can teach people like me. They are making these grand plans to promote the excursion but it will be James that’s the star, not the whales.”

“Let me fund your trip,” I said.

“No way. I am not interested in your money. I don’t want you to think that’s your value to me. I like you for you. I wouldn’t care if you’re penniless.”

I smiled, touched by her words. “I know that, but I want to help you realize your dream. You deserve to have the experience you envisioned, without anyone else’s demands or restrictions. Let James figure out his own expedition.”

She looked at me, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” I replied. “Just promise me that you’ll let me join you on this journey.”

She hesitated for a moment before nodding. “I love that you want to help me and I am so grateful, but I can’t take your money. I’ll just have to swallow my pride and do what’s necessary. If I don’t do this trip, James will. They’ll buy him a big fancy boat and he’ll take my ideas and run with it. This is one of those situations that I can’t beat them, so I have to join them.”

“Bullshit,” I muttered. “What if we call it a loan?”

“Thank you, but no.”

“What happens if he takes your idea and follows the whales to Alaska? Is there only the one group of whales?”

“No, not really,” she answered. “But James will use the research and sell it. He’ll get speaking engagements. He’ll write a book and publish articles.”

“Is that what you would do?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Yes and no. I’m not doing it to make money. I will be able to sell myself, but my research will be handed over to the people that need to see it and learn from it.”

As she spoke, my mind raced with potential solutions. I couldn’t bear to see her dreams crushed by James and his greed. Then, an idea struck me. “What if we both go on this trip together?” I suggested. “We can split the cost. I’ll be the stowaway along for an adventure. You’ll have the freedom to explore and document the whales as you see fit, without worrying about James stealing your ideas. And I’ll have the opportunity to support you and learn from you.”

She stared at me, her expression unreadable. “Are you serious?” she finally asked.

I nodded. “Completely. I want to be a part of this journey.”

She burst into laughter. “That is a wild idea, but don’t you have to go back to New York?”

“I do.”

“Then you can’t possibly take months off.”

We arrived back at her boat and walked down the dock. She needed to pack an overnight bag. We dropped the conversation about the Alaska trip but I wasn’t done with it. I wanted to help her. I wanted to make sure she got to follow her dreams. I had a feeling I understood why she didn’t want to accept my money. We had yet to discuss what we were really doing.

“Can we talk for a second?” I asked her.

“What’s up?”

“What do you want this to be?” I asked her.

“This?” she questioned.

“Us. Do you want to be with me?”

“Yes...”

“Yes, but?” I prompted. “You’re holding back. What do you want?”

“I want you,” she said.

“Again, I hear a but in there.”

She sat down on the couch. “But you’re going back to New York,” she said softly. “Your life is there.”

“I’m not ever going back to Ashley,” I said firmly.

“I believe you, but when you’re there, I’m here. Then what?”

I sat down beside her, taking her hand. “I don’t want to think about the future right now. Let’s just enjoy this moment and see where it takes us.”

She looked at me skeptically, but her expression softened. “Okay,” she said.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, just enjoying each other’s company. I leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t want to get too attached,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to get hurt. The two weeks you were gone were brutal. I missed you like crazy. I didn’t know where we stood. I expected you to send me a text telling me you were going to marry Ashley.”

“I’m here,” I said. “This is where I want to be.”

“I get it, but you guys have so many responsibilities. I understand that and I’m not going to try and get in your way. Honestly, all I want is for you to be happy. You and I are so different. I’m just not sure we could ever really make this work.”

“No way.” I shook my head and sat down beside her. “Don’t get in your head. I’m serious about making this work with us. I wasn’t lying when I said you are unlike anyone I’ve ever met. You’ve opened my eyes to a whole new world. I’ve realized I have only been half-living. I was perfectly content to live in my boring little world, but not anymore. Dammit, Shiloh, don’t walk away from me now.”

Shiloh looked at me with a mixture of uncertainty and desire in her eyes. I could tell she was struggling with her feelings for me. I wanted to take her in my arms and never let her go, but I knew that I had to be patient with her.

“You make it sound so easy,” she said softly. “But there’s so much that could go wrong. I don’t want to be the reason your life falls apart.”

“You won’t be,” I said confidently. “I know what I want, and I want you. I don’t care about the risks or the consequences. I just want to be with you.”

“Are you suggesting we try a long-distance thing?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Maybe for a while until I can get things settled. We could talk every night. We’ll text and video chat.”

“I just feel like I’m holding you back,” she said.

“Not even a little,” I said, smiling. “If anything, you’re propelling me forward. Imagine being in a dark storm. You can’t see the sunlight. Everything is gray and gloomy. That’s how I’ve spent my entire life. I came to Hawaii and it was the same thing until that day on the yacht. You are the sunshine that cleared the cloud cover.”

She put a hand to her chest. “That is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I leaned in close to her and took her hand, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine. “It’s the truth, Shiloh. I know it’s not going to be easy, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make this work. I want to be with you, to explore this new world together.”

She looked into my eyes, and I could see the fire of desire burning within her. “Okay,” she said finally. “Let’s do it. Let’s give this a shot.”

I grinned and leaned in to kiss her, softly at first, then with more passion as the heat between us grew. I knew that this was just the beginning of our journey together, but I was ready for it.

SHILOH

I looked at him and saw the passion and desire in his eyes. If he was serious about making our relationship something solid, I was going to match his commitment. We would figure out the long-distance thing.

I leaned against him. His hand slid up my back and caressed over my neck. Every time he touched me, I felt like he was touching my soul. My body came alive in his arms. His gentle caress slowly turned into something that was anything but innocent.

I closed my eyes and let out a soft moan as he traced his fingers down my spine. His lips found mine and kissed me with a hunger that was hard to resist. Our tongues tangled together, and I could taste the sweetness of his mouth. He pushed me back against the back of the couch as his hands roamed over my body, exploring every inch of me.

I reached down to stroke him through his shorts. He groaned and pulled away from me, his breath coming in ragged gasps. “Damn, what is it about you?” he asked. “I get near you and I long to be inside you. I can’t explain what you do to me. It’s not just normal sex. It’s an experience that touches my heart and soul.”

“Let me lock the door,” I said. “Just in case Ryder and Penelope come by to visit.”

He grinned and got to his feet. I walked the few steps to lock the door to the cabin. I turned to face him with a smile on my face. “All alone.”

He jerked his shirt over his head and tossed it on the couch. “I’d really like to get naked,” he said, laughing.

“I can help with that,” I said with a grin. I reached up to undo his belt buckle. He grabbed my hands and pulled me close to him.

I ran my fingers through his hair and stared into his eyes. It was impossible to read his thoughts, but I knew how I felt. *I love this man*, I thought to myself. I wanted to take him to bed and make love to him. I wanted to have his babies and make him happy.

I stood on my toes and kissed him. His arms wrapped around me like bands of steel. He pulled me against him and held me tight. I felt his body throb as he pressed against me. His desire for me was obvious.

“If you don’t stop this I’m going to tear your clothes off,” he warned.

“Do it,” I told him.

He flashed a grin. “Be careful what you ask for.”

“I know what I’m asking for,” I said. “I want you, Archer.”

He picked me up in his arms and carried me to the bed where he dropped me and lay down beside me, one hand stroking my face.

He leaned down and kissed me. It was a long, slow kiss that told me more than words ever could. I was in love with this man and he was in love with me.

The next kiss was harder, more demanding. I gave as good as I got. I knew what he wanted. I wanted it too. He started to frantically undress me. I felt that same desperation. We had sex less than eight hours earlier but it felt like it had been weeks. I couldn’t get enough of him.

He stripped me until we were both naked and panting. His hands pinned mine to the mattress as he stared down at me. I looked up into his blue eyes and knew what he wanted.

“I’m all yours, Archer,” I whispered.

“Are you mine, Shiloh, really mine?”

I lifted my head to kiss him. “Yes.”

“I’m yours,” he murmured. “I don’t want to scare you away or freak you out, but I’m in love with you.”

His words took me by surprise. I felt it, but to hear him say it was incredible. “I feel the same. I love you. I know that’s crazy given how little time we’ve spent together, but I do. I really do.”

“It’s fast, but I think that means it’s right,” he said. “We don’t need two years to figure out we’re right. I think that is more important than anything else in the world. When two souls recognize each other, that’s all you could ask for.”

“You’re suddenly very romantic,” I said, smiling.

“I’m feeling romantic. And horny.”

I laughed and lifted my hips to rub against the erection just waiting to make me a very happy woman. “I can certainly help with the latter while being the benefit of the first.”

“You don’t think you’re going to benefit from me being horny?” he teased. “We’re both naked. I’m inches away from sliding into your wet heat and you don’t think that’s a benefit to you?”

“I guess it’s a win-win,” I said, smiling.

“Damn,” he said again. “You have a way of turning me inside out. What is it about you? Why did I fall for you so easily and quickly? I didn’t even have a choice. I just fell for you.”

“I’m pretty spectacular,” I said before he kissed me again.

“You are,” he said. “You’re smart and kind and funny. You’re adventurous and fearless. I love your independence.”

“I’m also yours,” I said.

“You always will be,” he said. “I swear it.”

He dropped his mouth to mine and kissed me while keeping my hands pinned on either side of my head. His kiss

was a slow perusal of my mouth with his tongue. He had yet to touch me between my legs but I was wet and throbbing for him.

I moaned into his mouth when his fingers finally dipped between my legs. He stroked my clit a few times before sliding a finger inside me. His thumb found my clit and he rubbed and stroked me. I was close to coming and he knew it. He kept my mouth busy with kisses while he brought me to the edge.

“I want you,” I breathed against his mouth. “I want you inside me.”

“Let me get a condom,” he whispered.

“Archer, are you only going to be with me?” I asked him. “Am I the only woman in your life?”

“Shiloh, absolutely yes!” he answered and sealed the declaration with another kiss. “Yes. I don’t think I can ever be with another woman. You’ve ruined me. You have to believe me. You are the only woman I will ever want. I’m not telling you I love you because I think you need to hear flowery words. I’m telling you because I fucking love you.”

“I believe you,” I said. “And you believe me when I tell you I will only be with you?”

I studied his expression. After being cheated on, I imagined he might have some reservations about trusting another woman.

“I believe you,” he said. “Unequivocally.”

“Then make love to me. Just me and you with nothing between us.”

His nostrils flared when he understood what I was saying. “Okay.”

He kissed my mouth. He kissed my neck. He kissed my breasts. He kissed my belly. He kissed my thighs. He kissed me everywhere but between my legs. I moaned in frustration.

I pulled his head down to me and rubbed my clit against his lips. He slowly wrapped his lips around my clit and

sucked. I moaned and arched my back.

He slid a finger inside me and finger fucked me until I was on the edge again. He stopped and removed his finger. He gently parted my legs and stared down at my pussy.

He leaned over and kissed my clit gently. I moaned again.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he whispered as he stared at my pussy. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I pulled his face to me and kissed him. His body moved over mine, aligning himself between my legs. His thick cock slid between my thighs. I was wet and ready.

He paused and looked at me once again. “Is everything okay?” I asked with concern.

“I just want to savor this moment. I love you. Thank you for giving me the gift of you.”

His words were so sweet and tender. I felt tears burning the back of my eyes. “Thank you for walking into my life.”

He slowly slid his cock inside me. We both were silent, relishing the moment of being joined together with no barriers. He pressed in deeper until I felt his balls against my skin.

“Give me a second,” he whispered.

I understood. He needed to regain control. I ran my fingers down his arms and felt his muscles flex. He kissed me once again before he pulled his mouth away and rose above me. He moved his hips with purpose.

I wrapped my legs around him and pulled him closer. His chest pressed against mine as he pushed into me. His thick shaft filled me with each stroke. He was in total control. I could feel how much strength he wielded with every rotation of his hips. The experience was one that involved my total body and mind. Every cell in my body was tuned into what he was doing.

“Don’t stop,” I moaned.

“I’ll never stop fucking you,” he whispered.

I could feel his heart pounding against my chest. His sweat mixed with my own. He was in total control. The power and strength of his body were evident. I could feel his muscles flex and move as he made love to me.

I felt a tingle in my body. It started in my toes and spread up my legs. I could feel it move through my pelvis and into my stomach. It was a familiar feeling, but so much more intense than any other time we were together.

It was more than I could handle. The pleasure was too much to bear. I moaned and cried out as I came. His body stiffened and his cock twitched inside me. I felt him explode inside me. Grunts and groans filled the cabin.

We spent a few moments catching our breath. Our bodies were covered in sweat and we were a sticky mess. He pulled his cock out of me and rolled to the side. He pulled me into his arms and held me against him. “That was an experience I’ll never forget,” he whispered.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” I said, smiling, and gave him a kiss on his chest.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” I replied.

“I think we should go to the house and enjoy a very long shower together and then I want to go swimming with you in the pool. No clothes. We’ll enjoy a nice leisurely dinner together. And then we’ll have drinks on the deck as we watch the sunset. We’ll go to bed and make love again.”

I laughed. “Sounds like you have it all planned out.”

“I’m willing to make a few adjustments, but I’d like to stick to the main points.”

“Me too.”

“I guess that means we have to get up and actually get dressed,” he said, sighing.

I didn't want to leave the bed, but the idea of getting to swim naked in the beautiful infinity pool with him was tempting. Tempting enough to get me out of bed. I grabbed my suitcase and together we walked to the rental car. I wasn't going to second-guess anything. I was going to live in the moment with him.

The house was incredible. I couldn't imagine living in anything so large. I had grown up in my parents' modest home. Then I spent years in a dorm room. From there, I went to my boat. I was used to small living spaces. The house felt as big as the whole damn island.

Two Months Later

I was exhausted. I had been traveling across several time zones every week for the last two months. It was killing me. I was trying to live in both worlds but it wasn't working. I had to cut one of them out and it was no contest about which one I was going to choose.

I was all in when it came to my relationship with Shiloh. I only wanted to be with her. This was hopefully my last trip for a while. My plan was to work remotely from Hawaii. I spent the last two months training my people to take over the bulk of my job in my company. I would hop on conference calls and handle some tasks, but I was done with the day-to-day stuff.

The private plane descended into New York, and as the city skyline came into view, my excitement grew. I looked over at Shiloh and smiled. "Are you ready?" I asked, trying to ease her nerves. "I can't wait to show you my life here in the big city."

Shiloh nodded, a mixture of excitement and apprehension in her eyes. "I'm excited too, but I have to admit, the idea of navigating New York City is a little overwhelming."

"It's no different than Waikiki or Honolulu," I said with a laugh. "In fact, I think Manhattan is easier."

"Yeah right," she said, scoffing.

“Don’t worry,” I reassured her. “I’ll be your guide. You’ll see. Once you get the hang of it, you’ll love this place just as much as I do.”

“I’m looking forward to being the tourist with you being my guide,” she said, smiling.

As the plane touched down, we gathered our belongings and made our way off the aircraft. I had a car waiting as usual. There was an electrifying buzz in the air, and I could sense that Shiloh was feeling both thrilled and a bit daunted by the urban chaos surrounding us. As we drove through the iconic streets of Manhattan, I pointed out landmarks and shared stories of my time in the city. Shiloh listened attentively, her excitement growing with each passing moment.

“Let’s grab some breakfast before we go back to my place,” I said.

“I would love that.”

Our first stop was my favorite coffee shop, where I introduced her to the city’s famous bagels and deli sandwiches. We strolled through Central Park, enjoying the green oasis amidst the towering skyscrapers. Shiloh’s initial nerves seemed to melt away as she immersed herself in the city’s vibrant atmosphere.

“I can’t believe you have this massive park right in the middle of the city,” she said. “It boggles my mind.”

“I think people would go crazy if they didn’t have the park,” I said. “The concrete jungle can be a little much to take in.”

“No kidding.”

“Are you missing the water?” I asked her. “My little mermaid.”

“Not yet,” she said, laughing.

We took a cab to my building. She seemed to be in awe as we stepped into the elevator. When the doors slid open into my foyer, she paused. “The elevator goes to your house?”

“It does.”

We stepped out and walked through the doors that opened to my living room. I heard her suck in a breath. “Holy shit,” she whispered. “You have stairs. In an apartment.”

“It’s three floors,” I told her. “Seven bedrooms. Eight bathrooms.”

She looked at me with her mouth hanging open. “Just for you?”

I shrugged. “Yes.”

“Holy shit. I cannot imagine what you must think about my little boat. I had no idea this is how you live.”

“How I *lived*,” I corrected. “It’s not how I’m going to continue to live.”

I gave her the tour and then left her alone while I went to the office. Being away from her was rough but I knew it was the last time for a while. We were only going to be in the city for a few days while I wrapped up loose ends. I was leaving my clothes in my apartment that I planned on keeping for my return to the city. There were only a few things I would be taking back to Hawaii with me. It was nice to have things coming to an end in New York because that meant I was getting ready to start my new life in Hawaii with Shiloh.

“Babe?” I called out when I returned home on our last day in the city.

“In here,” she called out.

“Did you get my surprise?” I asked.

She appeared at the top of the stairs. She was wearing the little black dress I sent her for our last night in the city. “I did,” she said, smiling as she started walking down. “Is it everything you hoped it would be?”

I looked at her and felt my heart jump in my chest. She was so fucking gorgeous. I couldn’t help but feel a little intimidated by her beauty. But I wasn’t going to let that stop me. I had planned something special for our last night in the city, something that would make it a night to remember.

We started with a nice dinner at one of the best restaurants in the city. In Oahu, we didn't spend a lot of time doing stuff like this. We didn't go out to expensive restaurants or clubs. We spent our evenings together or hanging out with Penelope and Ryder. It was a slower way of living and I loved it.

After dinner, we ventured into the heart of the city, walking along the bustling streets as the city lights painted a mesmerizing picture. I took Shiloh to some of my favorite spots, reminiscing about the memories each place held. From the hidden jazz clubs to the quirky street art, I shared with her the experiences that had shaped my life in New York. She hung on every word and asked me lots of questions. It was nice to be able to show her where I came from.

As we strolled through Times Square, the neon lights illuminated the night, and the energy of the city pulsed around us. Shiloh's eyes sparkled with wonder, and I knew she was falling in love with the charm of Manhattan.

"Do you want to get a drink before we go back to the apartment?"

"I'd like that."

We made a detour to a rooftop bar, where we sat under the starry sky, feeling like we were on top of the world. The skyline stretched out before us, a breathtaking sight that never ceased to amaze me. We laughed and shared stories, relishing the moments as the night unfolded.

When we got back to my building, I was surprised and a little concerned when I saw my father sitting in the lobby. "Dad?"

He looked up from the newspaper he was reading. "Son."

He put the paper down and walked over to us. "What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Nothing. I was hoping we could talk."

"Dad, this is Shiloh. Shiloh, this is my father."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Ryatt." She smiled and shook his hand.

I knew Shiloh wasn't what he was expecting. She was beautiful, but nothing like Ashley or the other women I dated.

"Why don't we go up?" I suggested.

It was an awkward ride up to the apartment. My parents had made it pretty clear they were not interested in the life I was building for myself in Hawaii. They were pissed I was leaving New York.

"I'm going to go up and change," Shiloh said. She gave me a quick kiss. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Ryatt."

My father and I walked into my den. I poured us each a drink and handed him one. I waited for the lecture I was sure was coming.

"Is that why you won't marry Ashley?" he asked.

"No. I won't marry Ashley because she was sleeping with Matthew and I have no interest in being with her."

"And do you plan on marrying that girl?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "She's the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. She's beautiful, smart, and fun. I have never been so happy in all my life. She's who I want to be with."

I expected him to point out the many reasons why I couldn't be with her. Instead, he nodded. "I see. Do you want the ring?"

"Grandmother's ring?" I asked.

"Yes. It is yours. She left it to you to give to your wife."

"No," I said. "Thank you, but no. I already gave that ring to a woman. It's not something I want to give to another woman. Plus, Shiloh wouldn't appreciate a rock of that size. She's a simpler woman who appreciates the beauty in this world. She's not ostentatious. She's not going to want a rock that will sink her to the bottom of the ocean. I've actually already bought her a ring."

"You have?"

I was pretty excited about it. "It's an aquamarine stone with small diamonds around it. She loves the ocean. It's

perfect for her.”

He smiled. “It sounds like you know her pretty well.”

“I do.”

“What’s your plan?” he asked. “I know you’re set on leaving the city, but what are you going to do?”

“Actually, I bought a house,” I said. “For me and her. It’s nothing big or fancy, but it will be ours. She’ll be able to dock her boat and be close to the ocean. I know I’ve disappointed you, but this is what I want. This makes me happy. I’ve never really thought much about happiness, but now that I’ve had a taste of it, I can’t let it go. I can’t walk away from the chance to be truly happy.”

“I understand,” he said. “And the business?”

“I’ll be working remotely. We’re going to be moving the headquarters to the West Coast to make my commute a little shorter. Shiloh’s family lives in southern California, so it will be a good chance for her to visit them while I check in on the business.”

“Sounds like you have everything worked out,” he said.

“I’m not doing this without thinking about it,” I said. “I’ve spent the last couple of months putting all of this together. I know you think Ashley or someone like her was better suited for me, but no. She was not the woman for me. I hope you will give Shiloh a chance.”

He didn’t say anything for several seconds. “We would like to come and visit you in Hawaii,” he said. “We would like the chance to get to know her.”

“Really?” I asked with surprise.

I was expecting anger and the threat of being disowned. I was not expecting him to be willing to accept my relationship.

“Your mother and I know we’ve set some expectations that might have been wrong,” he said. “We wanted the best for you and Penelope. We were worried you might be taken advantage of, but I see we were wrong.”

“I would love for you guys to come and visit,” I told him.

He extended his hand. I shook it before pulling him in for a hug. “We’re leaving tomorrow. Please tell Mom I said goodbye. We’ll be in touch.”

“Good luck,” he said.

I walked him to the elevator and then headed upstairs to see Shiloh. She was sitting on the edge of the bed. “How was it?” she asked. “Is everything okay?”

I smiled. “Everything is great. He wished us luck and they plan on visiting later.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes.”

She jumped up and gave me a hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

“For us.”

SHILOH

I was glad to be back home. New York was awesome, but I didn't think I could ever live there and be happy. It was a little much for me. The people were different. A city was a city, but the people were so much more tense. They were all in a hurry and didn't seem to care much about the people they walked by on the street.

"I really like this," I said and ran my hand over the dash of Archer's new vehicle.

"Do I fit in?" he teased.

The brand-new Toyota Four Runner was a nice vehicle, but it looked like one of the rentals the tourists drove around. "Yes," I lied. "Pretty soon you're going to be wearing those wild shirts."

"Don't count on it," he said, laughing.

"Where are we going?" I asked when he missed the turn to Ryder's house.

"It's a surprise," he said, smiling.

We drove a few more miles before he pulled into the driveway of an older bungalow-style house. He shut off the engine and looked at me. "Ready?"

"For what?" I asked.

"To see the house."

I looked at the house and was a little surprised. It was very different from the luxury home he rented before, but maybe he

wanted to live a simpler life. I stood beside Archer, taking in the sight of the beautiful cove and the three weathered houses that lined the shore. The sound of crashing waves filled the air, and the salty breeze kissed my skin. It was a breathtaking view.

“Is this your rental house?” I asked, assuming that one of these properties was the temporary residence for his stay in Oahu.

Archer chuckled, his eyes sparkling with pride. “No,” he said, a hint of playfulness in his voice. “This is our house. Technically, all of them are. This is our cove.”

My eyes widened in surprise as I turned to look at him. “Wait, seriously? All of them?”

He nodded, and his smile widened. “Yes. I thought about buying one of those big fancy homes, but this cove felt so perfect. It spoke to me. It felt like the right place to settle down.”

I was speechless, unable to believe the magnitude of what he was saying. The stunning cove, with its pristine beach and awe-inspiring view, was not just a rental property but a home. His home. Our home. My heart pounded in my chest. I could never imagine owning a home on the beach in Oahu. Even though the homes were older and small, the land and the view were worth millions.

“Should we go in?” he asked.

“You seriously bought these houses?” I asked with disbelief.

“I really did. But this house is in the best shape. I think this one would be the best one to live in, but we can check out the others.”

“We?” I said with a laugh.

“You don’t want to live together?” he asked with surprise. “We’ve spent so much time together the last couple of months, I just assumed that was our next step.”

“No, I do want to live with you. I’m so overwhelmed and excited about all of this.”

As we approached the house, I noticed the charm of its weathered exterior, which only added to its character. He unlocked the door, and we stepped inside the cozy home. It was evident that the interior hadn’t been updated in a while, but I could see the potential. The space felt warm and inviting, with a cozy living room and a quaint kitchen. Archer explained that the houses had been short-term vacation rentals, and when he made an offer the sellers couldn’t refuse, they decided to sell all of them.

As we walked through the house, Archer talked excitedly about the changes we could make, how we could turn this place into a haven that reflected both of our personalities and tastes. He wanted this house to be a reflection of our love, a place where we could create new memories and cherish the moments we shared.

“I want to make this our home,” he said with his arms around my waist. “We could raise a family here. I think this is the beginning of our future.”

With every passing minute, I found myself falling even more in love with Archer. His thoughtfulness, his generosity, and the love he poured into this gesture were beyond anything I could have imagined. I felt incredibly lucky to have him by my side.

We walked out to the front deck. I inhaled the salty air. It felt so much like home. Archer pointed toward the water, and I saw a dock stretching out. “This is where you can dock your boat,” he said with a smile.

My heart soared. I had always dreamed of having a place where I could keep my boat close by, a place where I could escape to the water whenever I wanted. And now, Archer had made that dream a reality. “I love you,” I said. “You think of everything. I am so lucky to have you.”

“I would buy you the world if you would let me,” he said. “I love you. “This is just the beginning for us.”

We stood on the deck for several minutes before going back inside. It was time to take another look at the house. “I cannot believe this is where we’re going to live,” I said.

“For a while,” he replied. “Until you drag my ass across the Pacific.”

I laughed. “Are you sure you want to go?” I asked him.

“I’m not letting you go alone.”

I got funding for my trip via a research gig. I didn’t have to take the money that tied me to James. I was thrilled to finally have the trip settled.

“You know it’s going to be cold,” I told him.

“Which is another reason why I have to go,” he said, grinning. “I have to keep you warm.”

“But I have to work,” I reminded him. “We cannot spend the entire trip below deck—naked.”

“I don’t know about that,” he joked. “Let’s go get our bags.”

“You want to stay here tonight?” I asked with surprise.

“It’s our new home,” he said. “Shouldn’t we break it in?”

“I would love that. We can stop at my boat and get some blankets.”

“You know, we are going to have to pick out furniture and decor and kitchen stuff.”

The very thought excited me. It was like we were officially starting our new life together. “I cannot wait,” I told him.

“Come on, let’s go get some supplies. Then we need to start planning.”

“Planning?” I asked.

“Paint colors. Flooring options. I think we need to get all new appliances and maybe even gut the kitchen.”

“Woah, that’s a lot of work.”

“I know, but I think it’s better to start fresh,” he said. “We don’t want to have to move stuff around and do renovations a little here and a little there, right? Don’t we want to just get it all done at once?”

“I think you’re a very persuasive man,” I told him.

He flashed a grin. “I hope so.”

With a skip in our step, we made our way down the dock toward my boat. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over the marina. The air was crisp, and I could feel the excitement bubbling up inside me. I was about to embark on a new adventure with the love of my life, and it was going to be amazing.

As we approached my boat, I noticed that Archer had a mischievous glint in his eye. “What are you up to?” I asked.

“I’m just so damn happy,” he said. “I’m thrilled I don’t have to go back to New York anytime soon. I get to be here with you.”

After picking up some blankets and pillows from my boat, we drove to a grocery store to get stuff for dinner and breakfast in the morning.

As we walked through the aisles, Archer’s arm around my waist, I couldn’t help but feel like the luckiest woman in the world. He was thoughtful and caring, and it was clear that he wanted to make our new home perfect for us.

We picked out fresh ingredients for a delicious dinner, and as we walked to the car, I felt Archer’s hand slip down to my rear. He gave it a playful squeeze, and I couldn’t help but let out a giggle.

As we drove back to our new place, the sky had turned a deep shade of blue, and the stars were starting to twinkle. Archer turned on some soft music, and we sang along to the lyrics as we drove.

When we arrived back at the house, we unloaded the groceries. We got to work on making dinner. The kitchen was small, but we worked together seamlessly, chopping vegetables and marinating meat. The smell of garlic and

rosemary filled the air, and my stomach grumbled with anticipation. It was crazy to see my billionaire man in a T-shirt, shorts, and bare feet chopping veggies in an old, tiny kitchen after seeing his apartment in New York. I had marveled at the size of his closet, but it was the assortment of expensive suits hung up by color that really surprised me. There were countless dress shoes, ties, and cuff links all neatly arranged in the closet. The man that lived in Manhattan was not the same man standing in the kitchen with me. This man didn't have any hair gel in and even had a bit of a five o'clock shadow. This was a man that had no cares in the world. He was happy.

As we ate our meal, we talked about our plans for the future. "What do you think about a light wood floor?" he asked.

"Honestly, I don't know a lot about house stuff."

"Can I tell you something and you promise not to laugh?"

I grinned. "I don't know. That's a pretty big promise."

"I pretty much designed my apartment," he said.

"You didn't have a fancy interior decorator?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Well, hell, have your way," I said, laughing. "Your apartment is gorgeous. I have no business interfering in your design choices. All I ask is you avoid the black and gray look. I love colors and beautiful art."

"I would never ask you to live in something as clinical as a black and white home. I'm thinking light floors, something that looks almost white with the lightest blue walls. Something soothing that matches the beauty of the view. White cabinets and the typical stainless-steel appliances. This is a pretty small space, but it will look bigger with lots of bright colors. I think we should go for new windows."

I listened to him talk and found myself in awe. He was a man of many talents. As we finished our meal, he stood up and walked over to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of champagne.

“Let’s celebrate,” he said, popping the cork and pouring us each a glass.

I took a sip and savored the bubbles dancing on my tongue. “What are we celebrating?”

“Us,” he said with a smile. “Our future together.”

I felt my heart swell at his words. This man, who had everything anyone could ever want, was choosing me to share his life with. It was a heady feeling.

He took my hand and led me over to the couch, sitting down and pulling me onto his lap. We sipped our champagne in silence, enjoying each other’s company and the beauty of our million-dollar view. He leaned in to kiss me, his lips soft and warm against mine. I felt my body responding to his touch, my heart racing with desire.

He broke the kiss and looked into my eyes. “I want you,” he said huskily, his hand caressing my cheek.

I shivered at his words, feeling a wave of desire wash over me. “I want you too,” I whispered, my voice hoarse with need.

“I think it’s time we christen our new home.”

ARCHER

As I stood there, paintbrush in hand, my heart weighed down by uncertainty, I realized that my plan to propose to Shiloh when I showed her the house had crumbled under the weight of my own doubts. I had this grand plan to walk her through the front door and then propose. But I panicked. I got cold feet and backed away.

I didn't want to take away from the moment of seeing the house I bought for us to start our life together. I had envisioned the perfect moment, but now I was filled with apprehension, worried that it might be too soon in our relationship. She was a free spirit. I didn't want to scare her off.

The house was a pretty, bright blue color. Shiloh picked the color, claiming it matched the sea and complemented the interior walls. I thought it was perfect. We were painting the shutters white, giving the home a very classic appearance. No one in my old life would believe I was painting my own house. My small house.

Ryder was painting alongside me, unaware of the internal struggle I was facing. Shiloh and Penelope had gone down to explore the cove after a busy morning painting the walls in the main bedroom and living room. As we worked, I found myself opening up to him about my desire to propose to Shiloh. He had known her longer than I did, and I valued his opinion more than anything. He would know what I should do.

"I've been thinking about proposing to Shiloh," I confessed, feeling a knot of nervousness forming in my

stomach. “But I don’t know if it’s the right time. It’s only been a few months since we started dating, and I don’t want to rush into anything. Am I crazy? Is this way out of left field?”

Ryder paused, set his paintbrush down, and turned to me with a thoughtful expression. “I get where you’re coming from, man. Proposing is a big step, and you want to make sure you’re both ready for it. Shiloh is an amazing person, and I know she cares about you a lot. But you also need to be honest with yourself about your feelings. Are you truly ready for this commitment?”

His words hit me like a splash of cold water, forcing me to confront my own emotions. I cared deeply for Shiloh, and I could see a future with her, but the idea of proposing felt overwhelming. I didn’t want to rush things and risk losing what we had. Maybe I was finding excuses not to propose because I was the one that wasn’t really ready.

“I don’t want to mess things up,” I admitted, my voice tinged with vulnerability. “She means so much to me, and I don’t want to push her away by moving too fast.”

Ryder nodded in understanding. “I get that, but remember, communication is key. Talk to her about how you feel. It’s essential to be on the same page before taking such a big step. If you’re unsure, maybe it’s best to wait a bit longer. There’s no need to rush. If you two are meant to be, things will fall into place when the time is right. Just talk to her.”

His advice was like a soothing balm to my anxious heart. I realized that I needed to trust my instincts and have an honest conversation with Shiloh. It was the only way to know if we were both ready for this next step in our relationship.

As we continued to paint, I resolved to have that conversation with Shiloh soon. I knew that we had something special, and I didn’t want my fears to hold me back from experiencing the joy of being with her. “Thank you,” I said. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t say anything to her.”

“I won’t,” he said. “Shiloh has been my best friend for years. She’s always been very reluctant to let herself fall in love.”

“Why?” I asked. “I mean, if you don’t want to tell me, I understand. I only ask because I want to know if she’s got some trauma. I don’t want to do anything that’s going to send her running in the opposite direction from me. If I need to take my time, I will. I’ll let her ease into this.”

“She’s never really had a boyfriend,” he said. “There was one guy, Max, that kind of floated in and out of her life, but they were never serious. She’s been really focused on her work. I think she puts so much energy into her work because she doesn’t want to risk falling in love. She doesn’t want to be derailed.”

“Do you think she’ll be worried I’ll derail her?” I asked.

He laughed. “Relax. Shiloh is crazy in love with you. She’s not worried about getting derailed. Didn’t you agree to go with her?”

“I did.”

“You’re the man she loves,” he said. “Don’t throw it away because you’re worried about what she may or may not want. She wants you. If you’re not ready for marriage, don’t ask her. She doesn’t need a ring on her finger to feel secure. Don’t propose if you’re not a hundred-percent ready.”

I nodded with understanding. I was ready. I was sure I was ready. I was just so damn worried I was going to spook her. “Thanks.”

“Did you get her a ring?” he asked.

I couldn’t help but smile. “Yes. I bought it in New York. I designed it with a jeweler.”

He burst into laughter. “Why am I not surprised? Look, I know she’s going to say yes. You guys have had a whirlwind romance already. Why stop now?”

“True.”

We went back to painting when Ryder stopped again. “I’m not going to critique your ring, but I’m hoping you picked one that suits her. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but she’s not like other women. She doesn’t care about carats and all that shit.”

“I know,” I said. “Trust me, the ring is perfect for her. It’s not big and gaudy. It’s not traditional.”

“Then it sounds perfect for her. I can’t wait to be surprised when she shows me.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

Ryder refilled his paint tray, his brow furrowed with concern. “Penelope has to go back to New York,” he said, voicing the worry that had been gnawing at my heart.

“Yeah,” I said, sighing, my mind filled with thoughts of my sister. She needed to return to New York to take care of some important matters, but I knew she didn’t want to leave Oahu. She had fallen head over heels for Ryder, and their connection was undeniable. Unfortunately, Matthew was a prick and he was dragging her name through the mud. He was causing all kinds of drama that wouldn’t die down. Penelope had to go back and meet with the lawyers to try and put everything to rest. It was crazy how much power a scoundrel could have.

“I want to ask her to stay,” Ryder admitted, his voice tinged with longing. “But I don’t have anything to offer her. I’m just a broke surfer. Every penny I make goes into my surfboard and gear. I feel like such an idiot for not saving money. I’m twenty-seven and I don’t have anything but my clothes and my board. Pip is a woman used to the best things in life.”

“She is but look at me,” I said. “It’s not always all about the biggest houses or the best cars. You’re painting my house right now. If I can change, anyone can.”

“I want her here, but what can I offer her?” he asked. “I think the world of her, but she’s too good for me. I don’t know what I could ever give her that would make her happy.”

I understood his dilemma, knowing that Penelope deserved the world, and it hurt to see him so unsure of himself. He was a free spirit, a soul that thrived on the ocean’s waves, and while that was admirable, it also seemed like an obstacle to building a stable future. He was just like Shiloh. They

followed their hearts, which seemed to be connected to the ocean.

“Love,” I replied firmly, looking into his eyes. “That’s what you can offer her. Your heart and your unwavering love for her. She doesn’t need anything from you except love and respect. Loyalty. She can buy anything she wants. Penelope has her own money. She doesn’t need any more, but as Shiloh has told me on more than one occasion, money can’t buy true love.”

Ryder’s gaze softened, and a hint of hope flickered in his eyes. “You really think that’s enough?” he asked, his vulnerability on full display.

I nodded. “Absolutely. Love is a powerful thing, Ryder. It might not come with material wealth, but it has the ability to change lives and create happiness beyond measure. Penelope can see who you truly are, and she’s still here, isn’t she? That’s because she loves you too, not for what you have, but for who you are. She ran away from home to come back to you. I will tell you it took a lot of courage for her to leave Matthew and home.”

Ryder seemed lost in thought for a moment, contemplating my words. “You’re right,” he finally said with a soft smile. “I don’t need to offer her material possessions or a lavish lifestyle. I just need to be there for her, to love her with all my heart.”

“That’s it,” I affirmed, feeling a swell of pride for my friend. “And I know Penelope well enough to say that she wants you, Ryder, just as you are.”

We continued to paint in companionable silence, both lost in our thoughts. As we worked, I hoped that Ryder would gather the courage to talk to Penelope, to tell her how he felt and ask her to stay. They were clearly meant for each other, and I couldn’t bear the thought of them letting this chance slip away.

“I wish I could find this Matthew guy,” Ryder said after a few minutes.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I would love to kick his ass,” he muttered. “What man cheats on a woman that beautiful? What man tries to fuck her over?”

“An asshole,” I replied. “Trust me, Ryder, you may not have a house or anything valuable, but you have more integrity in your little finger than Matthew will ever have. I never liked the guy.”

“Why would your parents push him on her?” he asked.

“Because our parents are a little different than what you guys are used to,” I said. “They don’t believe there is real love out there. They believe in money and power. They believe that no one could possibly fall head over heels in love. They believe in protecting their wealth and getting richer for the next generation. They aren’t totally cold and calculating, but they have never been all that concerned for true happiness.”

Ryder shook his head in disbelief. “That’s messed up. I mean, I understand wanting to provide for your family, but to push someone into a loveless marriage just for money? That’s just cruel.”

“I know,” I said, setting my paintbrush down. “But we can’t change the way they think. All we can do is support Penelope and make sure she knows that she deserves real love and happiness.”

Ryder nodded in agreement. “You’re right. And I’m going to be the one to give it to her. I’m going to tell her how I feel and ask her to stay with me.”

I smiled at him, feeling a sense of pride in my friend. “That’s what I like to hear. Just be honest with her, Ryder. Let her know how you feel and that you’ll always be there for her.”

He grinned back at me, his eyes shining with determination. “I will. And I won’t let anyone else come between us.”

I watched as Ryder walked away, feeling a sense of warmth in my chest. It was clear that he cared deeply for

Penelope, and I had a feeling that she felt the same way. I couldn't wait to see what the future held for them. I hoped she did come back to Hawaii and set up home. My sister and I were close. I wanted her nearby.

SHILOH

I stepped around the pile of boxes stacked in the corner of the room, trying my best to navigate through the chaos.

Our home was in the middle of a major renovation, with a crew replacing all the floors, and it seemed like everything was out of place. Amidst the mess, I found my way to the laundry room, trying to find some semblance of normalcy in the disruption.

I was glad we didn't have any real furniture. That would have made the situation so much worse. Already, the transformation of the house was impressive. I couldn't wait until we did get furniture and got to move in. I felt like such a grownup. We had a house and a yard and were making plans for the future. He even mentioned children, which truly surprised me. The last couple of weeks had been good for him. He was doing a lot of the labor around the house. I had to admit I was a little surprised. I thought he would have just hired people to do all the work around the house, but he was determined to do it himself. The only thing he wasn't doing was the floors and kitchen remodel.

I could hear the steady pounding above me. He was fixing some weak spots in the roof—himself. Of all the jobs he should have hired out for, I thought the roof was one of the things he should have left to the professionals.

As I began folding clothes, my phone rang, and I glanced at the screen to see an unfamiliar number. I would have ignored it but it could be someone with the grant organization. Curiosity got the better of me, and I answered the call.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hello?” a woman said.

“Yes?”

“Is this Shiloh?” she asked, saying my name like it was a slur.

“Yes, who’s this?”

“This is Ashley Carmichael.”

I didn’t know an Ashley Carmichael, but I knew Archer’s ex was named Ashley. I had to assume it was the same woman. I hadn’t expected to hear from her at all. The mere sound of her voice sent a wave of discomfort through me.

I decided to play dumb. “I’m sorry, who?”

“Archer’s fiancée,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t believe Archer is engaged,” I replied calmly.

“I know who you are,” she sneered. “And you know damn well he was engaged to me when you slept with him.”

I didn’t know how she got my number, but I wasn’t going to take the bait. “I don’t know you.”

“Yes, you do,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’m not trying to get back my ex. You can have him, but I feel like I should warn you.”

Before I could say anything, she launched into a tirade of insults, attacking both Archer and me. Her words were filled with bitterness and resentment, as if she were determined to tarnish the happiness we had found together.

“He’s a bad guy, you know,” she spat. “You think he’s all that, but he’s just playing you like he played me. He’s a liar and a cheat, and he’ll never change. You are never going to be Mrs. Archer Ryatt. He’ll lead you on and then leave you hanging.”

“Are you done?” I asked.

I felt my heart race, the anger and hurt rising within me. I wanted to defend Archer, to stand up for the man I knew he was, but I also knew that engaging with Ashley would only feed into her negativity.

“Are you?” she sneered. “What kind of prenup did he get you to sign?”

“None,” I replied.

“Read the fine print,” she said. “He’s going to screw you over. That man is only out for one thing. I’m sure you’ve been giving him plenty of that. Girls like you always do.”

She was trying to insult me. I couldn’t possibly be insulted by a woman that had been cheating on her fiancé with his sister’s fiancé. That was despicable in my book. She destroyed two people. Two people I happened to care about a lot.

“I don’t need a prenup, and if he asked me to sign one, I wouldn’t care. I don’t want Archer for his money. I love him. True love. I’m sure you’re not aware of what that is.”

“Of course, you want his money,” she said, snorting. “Don’t act like you’re some naïve country bumpkin. You saw him and you sank your claws in. You pretended you were some simple girl who didn’t want pretty things. It’s a game. Been there, done that.”

“Are you done?” I asked again.

“You better not take him back,” she said. “Just remember, I warned you.” Her voice turned venomous. “You’ll regret it.”

“Take him back?” I laughed. “Ashley, I’m not dumb enough to let him go. I understand he’s a good man. It’s too bad you didn’t.”

“You don’t know me,” she spat.

“And you don’t know me,” I shot back.

“You really are a bitch,” she said.

“You don’t know anything about Archer and me,” I finally said, my voice trembling with emotion. “Our relationship is

none of your business, and I won't let you poison it with your bitterness."

Ashley laughed, a cold and bitter sound. "Oh, I know all about you two," she sneered. "I've heard plenty. He told everyone he could to make sure it got back to me. You think he loves you, but trust me, it won't last. He'll get bored, just like he did with me, and then you'll see his true colors."

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I knew I couldn't let her words get to me, but it was difficult not to be affected by her venomous accusations.

"Listen, Ashley," I said, my voice firm. "I don't want to be a part of your drama. Whatever issues you have with Archer are between you two, not me. I'm happy with him, and that's all that matters to me."

There was a brief pause, and I could hear her seething on the other end of the line.

"You'll see," she spat before hanging up abruptly.

I stood there for a moment, my heart still racing from the confrontation. I felt a mix of anger and sadness, but deep down, I knew that Ashley's words were fueled by her own pain and insecurities. It was clear that she hadn't moved on from the past, and I hoped that one day she would find the peace and healing she needed. She was the one that fucked him over. She was only pissed she didn't get the money from him that she planned on. She didn't care about him. She cared about his money.

As I continued folding clothes, I reminded myself that the strength of my relationship with Archer wasn't determined by Ashley's bitterness. I knew the love and trust we shared were genuine, and I refused to let anyone else's negativity tarnish that. In the end, our love was our own, and I was determined to cherish and protect it, no matter what challenges came our way. She never loved him and he never loved her. I would never cheat on him. I couldn't imagine myself ever looking at another man.

I heard Archer's frustrated curse echoing from outside, and my instincts kicked in. I quickly set aside the laundry I was folding and rushed to the back door to see what was going on. As I stepped outside, I found my billionaire boyfriend, who was more accustomed to boardrooms and luxury, standing shirtless and wearing a pair of shorts, working on the roof of our new home.

The sight both amused and warmed my heart. Archer was a man of privilege, but he had willingly embraced the challenges of manual labor to help fix up our new house. His dedication to making our home a better place was both endearing and surprising.

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked, walking toward him.

Archer looked up from his work, a mixture of frustration and determination in his eyes. "This fucking roof is not cooperating," he grumbled. "I'm a little pissed the home inspector didn't catch how bad this was."

I couldn't help but smile at his efforts. "You're doing great," I said, trying to encourage him. "Remember, this is your first time doing something like this. We can hire someone, but honestly, I kind of like watching you getting all hot and sexy."

Archer's lips curved into a faint smile, and he wiped the sweat off his brow. "Thanks, babe. I just want to get it right, you know? I want this house to be perfect for us."

"Let me get you some cold water," I told him.

He was just climbing down the ladder when I walked back out.

I stepped closer, placing a hand on his shoulder that was warm from the sun. "The house already is perfect, Archer, because it's ours. We'll figure out the rest together."

He nodded, appreciating my support while sucking down the cold water. "You're right. I'm not used to this kind of work, but I want to be a part of this, to help create our home. I want to know how to do this. I can take care of you in a

monetary sense, but I want to know I can take care of you in all ways. I guess I'm feeling a bit like a caveman."

"You can pound your chest, club me over the head, and drag me back to your cave any day of the week," I teased.

"Don't tempt me." He finished the water and looked up at the roof. "I'm done for today. I have plans for us."

"Plans?" I asked.

"I am going to take a quick shower and then I'm going to play the tour guide," he said. "I have a little something to show you."

"You're going to be the tour guide?" I asked with a laugh.

"I am."

"I don't know if I can afford your rates," I joked.

"You can pay me in sex," he replied.

"Shoot, sign me up," I said, grinning.

He reached around and grabbed my ass, jerking me against him. "Get dressed. We're going hiking. I need five minutes to wash away the sweat and then we are out of here."

"I'll be ready. Should I pack us a lunch or anything?"

"Nah, this isn't that kind of hike," he said.

While he showered, I put on clean shorts and my hiking shoes. "Babe!" I called out while he was in the shower.

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget we have the barbecue later today," I reminded him.

"I know," he said. "That's why it will be a short hike."

I thought it was a little strange that he wanted to go on a short hike, but I was happy to do it. We spent our time exploring or working on the house. I hadn't even been out on the boat in over a week. Normally, I would be jonesing to get out on the water, but we stayed so busy, it was easy to forget about getting under the water.

He stepped out of the shower and slung a towel around his waist. I couldn't resist touching his wet chest. My hands pressed against his skin. "You look fucking hot with this tan."

He grinned. "You like it?"

"I do. Are you sure you want to go on a hike? I think I could think of a few other things we can do."

"Naughty, naughty," he teased. "Save it for later. We've got plans for the day."

"But I have my own plans."

"I'm sure you do," he said and gave me a kiss. "But you're just going to have to hold all of that until later."

ARCHER

I had spent weeks planning the perfect proposal, envisioning a magical moment surrounded by the breathtaking beauty of Oahu's remote hiking spots on the north shore. I wanted the setting to be just right, a place where our love would be etched into the memory of this special day forever. But sometimes, life had its own plans, and nature had a different idea.

As we hiked along the rugged trail, the anticipation building with every step, dark clouds began to gather in the sky. The winds picked up, and the distant rumble of thunder echoed through the air. I looked at Shiloh, her eyes filled with excitement and joy, completely oblivious to the approaching storm. I didn't want to worry her, but it was evident that our plan was in jeopardy. She was used to the random thunderstorms that rolled through out of nowhere and disappeared just as quickly. To her, it was just another day.

Once again, my plans were thwarted. I was beginning to wonder if it was a sign. I wasn't supposed to propose. Fate was telling me to hold off. We weren't supposed to be engaged. But dammit, I really wanted to do it.

"We might want to turn back," I suggested, trying to hide my disappointment.

Shiloh glanced up at the sky, her expression turning thoughtful. "You think the rain will hold off?" she asked.

I hesitated, not wanting to crush her enthusiasm. "I'm not sure, but it looks like it might get worse," I admitted

reluctantly.

As if to emphasize my point, a few drops of rain began to fall, slowly at first, but soon the sky opened up, unleashing a torrential downpour. We hurriedly sought shelter under the cover of some trees, hoping the storm would pass quickly. But it seemed as if the rain had other plans.

“Shit,” I muttered. I didn’t turn back. I had worked up the courage to get the proposal done today. I didn’t want to wait.

“It’s fine,” she said. “This happens all the time.”

With the trail now muddy and slippery, continuing the hike was out of the question. We had no choice but to abandon our plans and head back to the car. My heart sank as I realized that my carefully planned proposal would have to wait for another day.

As we trudged through the rain, our clothes soaked and our spirits dampened, Shiloh turned to me with a smile. “Well, this wasn’t exactly what we had in mind, was it?” she said, her laughter ringing through the air. “Your first job as a tour guide has been a bit of a failure. I’ll stick to being the tour guide.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, grateful for her positive outlook even in the face of a ruined plan. “Definitely not,” I replied, taking her hand in mine. “But you know what they say, life is full of surprises.”

We made our way back to the car, and as we drove, I noticed a little dive bar by the side of the road. It seemed like the perfect place to take refuge from the rain and warm up. With Shiloh’s adventurous spirit, I was sure she’d find the charm in this unexpected turn of events.

“Want to get a drink before we have to head to Ryder’s?” I asked her.

“Sure,” she said, shrugging.

We stepped into the cozy dive bar, the warmth and laughter of the patrons embracing us like an old friend. The atmosphere was inviting, and we settled into a corner booth, the rain still beating against the windows. It was clear other people were taking refuge from the freak storm in the bar.

As we waited for the storm to pass, we ordered some drinks and settled into a booth. The disappointment of the ruined proposal began to fade, replaced by the joy of simply being in each other's company.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine."

"I'm sorry I teased you about hiking," she said. "We'll try again tomorrow. It was a pretty place and I have honestly never been there. I'd like to see it again when it's not raining."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry it went to hell."

"It's Hawaii," she said. "It happens."

I was going to have to rethink my proposal plan. I wasn't sure I could count on Mother Nature cooperating with my plans. I needed to plan an indoor option. Or I was just going to give up on the idea of the perfect proposal. It was better to just do it and have it done than to keep waiting for the right moment.

"We better go," Shiloh said, glancing at her watch after a while. "The rain has stopped and Ryder and Penelope are expecting us for their barbecue."

"Let's go," I replied, grabbing my keys from the table. I loved spending time with Penelope and Ryder, and seeing my sister so happy with him warmed my heart. I was glad she was able to see how important happiness was. Money didn't matter when you had love.

We arrived at Ryder's place, the smell of barbecue filling the air as we approached. Penelope greeted us with a warm smile, and I could see the love and happiness radiating from her. I was grateful that she had found someone like Ryder, who brought out the best in her and made her truly happy.

"I'm so glad you guys are here." Penelope hugged each of us.

"I didn't get the impression our attendance was optional," I joked.

“Stop,” my sister groaned. “You know you want to be here. You missed me.”

“I’m glad you’re back. We’ll have to talk about what happened.”

“Later,” she said. “I’m so not talking about any of that stuff tonight. We’re celebrating. Ryder has a big announcement.”

“Do you know what it is?” Shiloh asked.

“Nope.” Penelope shook her head. “He won’t tell me. He said he wants to say it when everyone is together.”

Part of me wondered if Ryder was going to propose. I would be a little irked if he beat me to the punch, but if it made my sister happy, I was cool with it. That’s what mattered the most. I wanted her happy. She had only gotten back last night. I still didn’t know what happened in New York, but I assumed things were settled since she was back.

As the evening unfolded, we laughed, shared stories, and enjoyed each other’s company. Ryder was in his element, grilling delicious food, and his charisma filled the air with a contagious energy. Penelope was the perfect hostess, keeping everyone happy with cold drinks and plenty of snacks.

Just as we were all settling down to eat, Ryder stood up with a glint of excitement in his eyes. “Hey, everyone,” he announced, drawing our attention. “I have something I want to share with all of you.”

Curiosity piqued, we turned our full attention to him, eager to hear what he had to say. He was stealing my thunder a little bit. If he managed to pull off the perfect proposal, I was going to be pissed. I seemed to be destined to an average proposal. I was going to roll over in bed and have to ask her. Not exactly romantic.

“I’ve been working on something for a while now,” he began, his voice filled with enthusiasm. “And I’m excited to share that I’ve secured the funding to buy a surf shop.”

Gasps of surprise and excitement filled the air, and I exchanged a knowing look with Shiloh. We had seen how

passionate Ryder was about surfing. Shiloh started clapping.

“That’s not all,” Ryder continued, a wide grin spreading across his face. “I’m going to start a surf school too. I want to teach others how to surf and share the joy of riding the waves.”

Cheers erupted around the table, and I couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride for Ryder. To see him pursuing his dream and turning it into a reality was truly inspiring. Penelope beamed with pride, wrapping her arms around Ryder, and I could see the love and admiration in her eyes. They were a perfect match. Penelope gave him one hell of a celebratory kiss. Shiloh walked over and gave him a heartfelt hug.

I wasn’t the least bit jealous of their friendship. I knew I had nothing to worry about. There was zero chance Ryder would cheat on Penelope and I knew Shiloh would never cheat on me.

“That’s incredible, Ryder,” I said, unable to contain my excitement. “I knew you could do it!”

He grinned at me, clearly thrilled to share this moment with his closest friends and family. “Now I have something to offer,” he said with a knowing smile. “Beyond the thing we talked about. I thought I would sweeten the pot.”

I laughed. “You definitely did that. Good job. I think Penelope will be a good asset to your business as well.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I’m going to need all the free help I can get.”

As the night went on, we celebrated Ryder’s success, toasting to his bright future and the surf school that was sure to bring joy and adventure to so many. It was a night filled with love, laughter, and dreams realized. Penelope seemed absolutely crazy about Ryder. Watching the two of them together gave me a great deal of satisfaction. He was trying. I loved that he was trying to do everything he could to make her happy.

“Hey everyone!” Penelope shouted and raised her hand in the air. “I have another announcement.”

“If she announces she’s pregnant, I’m going to be displeased,” I murmured.

“Stop,” Shiloh said, laughing, and swatted my arm.

“I’m throwing a party next week to celebrate Ryder’s big news! It’s a beach party with a bonfire. All you have to do is show up. I’ll make sure everyone has plenty to drink!”

There was a round of cheers with everyone clapping. Free booze tended to have that effect. We stuck around a while longer, but as usual, I had a sudden desire to get Shiloh home alone. I pulled her into my arms and gave her a chaste kiss. “Feel like you want to get out of here?” I asked.

She flashed me a smile. “That sounds like a very good plan. Let me say goodbye to Ryder.”

I found Penelope chatting up some of her guests. “Hey, we’re going to get out of here,” I said. “We need to talk. I want to know what happened.”

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Needless to say, I don’t plan on going back anytime soon.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll leave it at that, but we have to talk.”

“I know. Have fun. I can’t wait to come by and see everything you guys have done on the house.”

“You know you’re welcome to one of the other houses in the cove,” I told her.

“Thank you. I’ll talk to Ryder. We might just take you up on that. Your cove is like a little piece of heaven.”

“It is,” I said, grinning. “I’ll share it with you.”

“You better,” she said, laughing.

Shiloh was waiting for me. I took her hand and we headed for home. Every time we pulled up to the house, I got a little chill. I still couldn’t believe I had a home in Hawaii. An apartment was a lot different than a home. The blue house was a true home that I knew was going to provide plenty of good memories. I hoped we would raise our children here. The house might need a little more work to make it a bit bigger, but

we would cross that bridge when the time came. I was just happy to be a part of the process from the ground up. It made it better. It made it truly ours.

“Do you want a drink?” Shiloh asked as we walked into the kitchen.

“Sure.” I followed her into the kitchen that was still in the construction phase. She pulled a beer from the fridge and opened it before handing it to me. I grabbed her hand and pulled her against me. “I love you.”

“I love you,” she said, smiling in return.

I pushed her hair back and stared into her stunning green eyes before leaning in for a kiss. I didn't think I would ever get tired of looking into her eyes. This was the woman that would have my children one day.

SHILOH

I kissed him back, letting him know what I was after. I was always after him. My hands trailed down his arms and slid under his shirt. We were in our own kitchen. We could do whatever we wanted. Almost every other room in the house had been properly christened. The kitchen was the only place that was left untouched.

“Here?” he asked with his lips against mine.

“Have a problem with that?” I smiled.

“I will never have a problem making love to you,” he said, laughing. “I’m a man. I’ll do you wherever you’ll let me hike your skirt.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

As his hands roamed over my body, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of urgency. We had been together for a while now, and our passion for each other never seemed to wane. But something about the heat between us tonight was different. I needed him now more than ever before.

I pulled away from him for a moment, looking into his eyes. “I need you,” I whispered.

He didn’t need any more convincing. He lifted me up onto the kitchen counter, his hands gripping my hips as he kissed me deeply. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him closer, feeling his hardness pressing against me.

I moaned softly into his mouth, running my hands through his hair. I ached for him to be inside me. He kissed my neck

and down my chest, his lips leaving a trail of fire on my skin. He unzipped my shorts and tapped my knee. I lifted myself from the counter while he yanked the shorts down my legs. I plopped back down on the old laminate counters that would soon be gone. He quickly pulled my shirt off and tossed it to the floor. His skilled hands had my bra off with a quick flick of his wrist. I shuddered when the AC kicked on and sent a cold blast of air over my skin.

He ran his hands over my body, his touch making me quiver. I slipped my hand down the front of his pants, wrapping my fingers around his shaft. I began to stroke him gently.

He trailed his fingers along my inner thigh, grazing the thin material of my panties. I moaned softly, watching him as he slipped them off. He kissed the insides of each of my thighs, his fingers spreading my wetness. The cool air hit my throbbing clit, sending sparks of pleasure through my body. I moaned again, louder this time. He slipped a finger inside me, pulling a loud gasp from me.

Suddenly, he jerked at my thong, pulling me to the edge of the counter. He jerked the lace fabric again until they tore. I had never been so turned on in my life. He smiled up at me as he pulled them from my body. "They were in the way," he said.

"I noticed."

I pulled at his shirt until he lifted his arms and let me pull it over his head. My mouth closed down on one strong pectoral muscle while my hands pushed his pants and underwear down. He pushed two fingers inside me while I stroked his cock.

"I've been waiting for this all day," I murmured.

"Me too. Then again, I wait for it every day."

"You get it every day," I said, laughing.

"And yet, I still want more."

He positioned himself in front of me, the head of his cock brushing against my entrance. He teased me, rubbing his shaft

along my slit. I moaned, bucking my hips forward, desperate for him.

He grabbed my ass, lifting me up a little, and with one swift, deep thrust, he was inside of me. I screamed and grabbed his shoulders.

“Fuck,” I moaned, getting used to his size.

“That’s the idea.”

He slid his hands under my ass, lifting me up a little higher, changing the angle.

“Oh shit, Archer,” I moaned. The man knew how to please a woman. His skills impressed me every single time. There was no end to his creativity. He knew my body better than I did and knew exactly what I needed.

He sucked on my breast, making me moan louder. He thrust into me again. I could hear the wetness of us as we fucked. I could feel my orgasm building, my body tightening. His fingertips dug into my hips as he pounded into my body.

“Lay back,” he ordered.

At first, I didn’t understand. He gently pushed against my chest. I slowly leaned back, propping myself on my elbows at first until he pushed me all the way down. I was laid out on the kitchen counter under the bright lights completely nude. I sucked in deep breaths. The exposure and vulnerability made me hot.

Archer rubbed his hand along my leg, rubbing his finger around his cock still deep inside me. I shuddered, gasping for air as pleasure overwhelmed me.

“Oh god,” I groaned. “It’s too much.”

“Never,” he whispered and continued to tease me.

He thrust inside me, pressing down on my lower belly at the same time. I gripped the edge of the counter and tried to regain some composure. My body was shattering into a million pieces with the most exquisite pleasure.

He pulled out of me and slid his cock along my slit again. I whimpered and thrust my hips up to meet him.

“Come on, you want my cock?”

“Yes.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, please, fuck me,” I begged. My body was aching for him. He slid inside me again.

“Oh fuck, yes,” I moaned, gripping the counter so hard it hurt.

He leaned in close to me and aggressively took my mouth. He thrust in and out of my body. He pulled his mouth from mine and continued moving inside me. I was so close to the edge but the orgasm wouldn't happen.

My head rolled back and forth across the counter. “Please,” I begged.

I knew he could give me the release I was desperate for.

“Please?” he asked breathlessly. “What do you want?”

“I don't know,” I moaned.

“Look at me,” he ordered.

My eyes open, stinging under the bright lights, I looked at him. He put one of his fingers in his mouth and slowly sucked on it. Then he slid the finger to where we were joined together. He ever so slowly worked the finger inside me with his cock already stretching me. He gently worked it deeper and began to move. It was exactly what I needed. The sound of his gruff grunts sent me over the edge. I cried out, bucking my hips, and nearly fell off the counter with the power of my orgasm.

“That's it,” he encouraged. “That's my girl. Damn, you're so wet.”

I moaned and thrashed with my eyes squeezed closed. It was too much to handle. My brain was overloaded with ecstasy. He slid his hand up to my breast and squeezed while he continued to push in and out.

He reached for my hand with his other hand and pulled me to a sitting position. I felt limp and hung on his shoulders, kissing his neck. He wrapped his arm around my waist and held me in place while he thrust inside me over and over.

I finally opened my eyes and looked into his. I was mesmerized. He was staring at me as he took me. He breathed my name. He thrust in one last time and exploded inside me. The force of his orgasm made my body shake.

He held me while he rode it out, pressing his forehead to mine. A few minutes later we were both able to breathe normally again.

“Damn,” I said with a long sigh. “We should have been doing it in the kitchen this whole time.”

He chuckled and lifted me off the counter. “Maybe. I’m not sure either of us can handle that kind of excitement.”

“Good point,” I said, smiling. “Ready for bed?”

“I am.”

We left our clothes where they were and shut off the lights. We walked to our bedroom and were just crawling into bed when his phone rang.

“Who in the hell is that?” he muttered.

“Maybe something happened at the barbecue,” I said.

He walked out of the room to get his phone. I got into bed and waited.

“Hello?” I heard him answer. “Dad? What time is it there?”

I listened, without trying to eavesdrop, but it was concerning. Archer was silent and then I couldn’t hear what he said. He walked back into the room and put his phone on the nightstand before getting into bed.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes, fine. He just wanted to let me know he handled everything. Ashley is finally out of our lives. She has zero claim to anything.”

“She was still fighting?” I asked with surprise.

“Yeah, she was claiming she had partial ownership of my apartment. It was a weak claim but it was enough to keep the lawyers busy. She’ll get nothing. It’s over. She’s finished.”

“She called me,” I blurted out.

“What? When?”

“Today,” I said. “She told me to stay away and how horrible you were. She warned me about signing a prenup with you. Said you were going to screw me over and just a bunch of ramblings.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her I didn’t care about a prenup because I was with you for love, not money,” I replied proudly.

He smiled and kissed me. “I’m sorry she bothered you. Is that the first time?”

“Yes. I don’t know how she got my number.”

“It’s hard to say,” he said, sighing. “She probably hired an investigator. She told the lawyers she knew I had another woman. It was made very clear it didn’t matter because she and I were through.”

“Do you think she’ll keep trying to get you back?” I asked.

“She doesn’t want me, she wants my money,” he said. “Apparently, the Matthew situation has been finalized as well. Those two are screwed. They’ll have to find other willing victims. Penelope is officially free and clear. Neither of them got a penny out of us.”

“Good,” I said. “I can’t believe they were so sneaky.”

“That’s one of the problems of being loaded.” He sighed and pulled me against him. “People target you for your wealth. You can’t trust anyone. It’s a bummer.”

“You can trust me,” I promised.

“I know,” he said and turned off the bedside lamp. “And that’s why I love you so much.”

ARCHER

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the sandy beach, Ryder and Penelope's party was in full swing. The crackling bonfire illuminated the faces of our friends, old and new, gathered around to celebrate Ryder's achievement. I was happy for both of them. Penelope had been talking nonstop about how she was going to decorate the shop. Poor Ryder probably thought he was going to run some chill, surfing business. He didn't know Penelope. She didn't do anything chill. But it worked and I knew Ryder was happy with all of her prattling about what she was going to do.

It felt surreal to be back at the same beach where just a few months ago, my heart had been heavy with heartache. I remembered that night vividly—the waves crashing against the shore, the warmth of the bonfire, and Shiloh's tearful eyes as she asked me to leave her boat. Things had looked pretty grim that night. I had convinced myself I would never find happiness.

But now, the scene was entirely different. Shiloh and I were together, hand in hand, our love stronger than ever. It was as if fate had brought us back to this very spot, this time to celebrate, not fight or sulk. The weather was a little cooler than that first night, but it was still pleasant. Shiloh looked more beautiful than ever. She was wearing a similar outfit. She had gone with a yellow sundress, a bikini underneath, and a sweater just in case she got chilly. I promised her if she was cold, I would be happy to warm her up.

As we danced and laughed with our friends, I couldn't help but feel a profound sense of gratitude. Ryder had achieved his dream, and we were here, standing by his side, celebrating his success. Shiloh and I had a beautiful home and she had the grant she needed to take her trip next spring on her own terms, except I was going with her. That was not negotiable. The idea of her sailing alone scared the hell out of me. That meant I had to brush up on my boating skills. If I was going to be her first mate, I needed to know what the hell I was doing.

Ryder, looking elated, raised a toast to everyone, thanking them for their support and encouragement. He spoke about the challenges he had faced and the journey that had led him to this moment. And then he grabbed Penelope's hand.

"You guys, I want to thank this beautiful princess," Ryder said. "This woman kicked my ass into gear. She gave me a reason to want to get off my butt and accomplish something. When my surf shop is up and running, I know she's going to be the one keeping me going. Baby, you are my hero. Thank you for coming into my life and loving me."

Penelope's bright smile warmed my heart. "You're welcome," she said and gave him a big, sloppy kiss.

As the night wore on, Shiloh and I stole a moment away from the crowd, walking along the shoreline hand in hand. The sound of crashing waves accompanied the whisper of the breeze, and I felt a deep sense of contentment.

"You remember the night I kicked you out?" Shiloh said, a playful smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

I chuckled, squeezing her hand. "How could I forget? It was the beginning of a rollercoaster ride that led us here."

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with affection. "And now, we're together, celebrating Ryder's success. Life has a way of surprising us, doesn't it?"

"It definitely does," I replied, gazing into her eyes. "And I'm grateful for every twist and turn that led us to this moment. If it had been too easy, it wouldn't have been nearly as exciting. I'm a man that likes a challenge."

“Oh yeah?” she teased.

“No, you’re not getting free lessons,” Ryder said as we made our way back to the party.

We both laughed when Penelope stepped up and read the guy asking for free lessons the riot act. “I think he’s got himself a pitbull,” Shiloh joked.

“He better get her a muzzle and a leash,” I warned. “She doesn’t listen worth a shit.”

We found a seat on a log and snuggled together by the fire. We drank warm beer and enjoyed the antics of those that had a bit too much to drink. As I looked around at our friends, my heart was full of love and gratitude. That’s when it hit me. I had been waiting for the perfect moment to propose but it didn’t get any better than this. It seemed right to start our lives together in the place we had first been intimate. Granted, it didn’t work out the best that night, but we certainly made up for it later.

“Take a walk with me?” I asked.

“To our secret cove?” She flashed a grin and wagged her brows.

“Actually, yes,” I said. “Let’s go.”

As we walked away together, there were plenty of catcalls and warnings about sand getting into places that would certainly chafe.

“How did they not know we snuck away the last time?” Shiloh asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m glad they didn’t come looking for us. That could have been pretty awkward.”

“I knew that night that you were the man I was supposed to be with,” she said softly.

“You did?”

“I did. I know it didn’t seem like it, but deep down I felt a connection to you.”

Her words were exactly what I needed to hear to reassure myself I was making the right move. The ring had been burning a hole in my pocket for too long. It was time to put it on her finger. I'd been carrying it around waiting for the right moment. I was terrified I was going to lose the damn thing.

My heart pounded in my chest as I held Shiloh's hand, feeling the warmth of her touch intertwining with mine. The moonlight danced on the waves, casting a silver glow over the ocean, creating a magical ambiance around us. We walked along the shoreline with our feet bare and the sand between our toes. The gentle rush of the waves enveloped our feet.

I couldn't contain the overwhelming emotions that were swelling inside me. I stopped walking and stepped in front of her. I looked into her eyes and I knew without a doubt there was no other person in the world I wanted to share my life with. With a shaky breath, I began to express what had been bottled up inside me for so long.

"Shiloh," I whispered, my voice carrying a mix of vulnerability and deep affection. "You've changed my life in ways I could never have imagined. From the moment I met you, my world was forever altered. Your kindness, your laughter, your strength—they all touched me in a way I never thought possible."

A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and I knew she could feel the intensity of my emotions. With each passing moment, my love for her only grew stronger, and I knew that this was the perfect moment to take the next step in our journey together.

Taking a deep breath, I dropped to one knee on the soft, sandy shore, and a rush of adrenaline surged through me. My hands trembled slightly as I reached into my pocket and retrieved the small, velvet box. The cool night air mixed with my nervous excitement as I opened it, revealing a dazzling ring that sparkled like stars in the night sky.

"Shiloh," I said, my voice catching with emotion. "I can't imagine my life without you. You've brought so much joy and love into my world, and I want nothing more than to spend the

rest of my days with you by my side. I know it's fast and I'm cool waiting until you're ready. I want you to know I am one hundred percent committed to you. I'm not going anywhere. I don't think I could even function in this world without you. You are my other half. You are my heart and soul and life isn't worth living if I can't live it with you. Will you marry me?"

Tears glistened in her eyes as she looked at me, her heart clearly moved by my words. The ocean seemed to hold its breath, as if waiting for her response. Time stood still as I waited, my heart pounding louder with each passing second.

"Yes," she finally whispered, her voice barely audible above the sound of the waves. "Yes, a thousand times yes!"

Relief and sheer happiness washed over me as I slid the ring onto her finger and stood up. Pulling her close, I kissed her softly, feeling an overwhelming sense of love and gratitude for this beautiful moment. Our souls became one in the moonlit embrace, and I knew that from this day forward, our lives would be forever entwined in a love that would withstand any tide.

We kissed, embracing tenderly. My world opened up and all I could see was the brightest future ever. She was mine.

"I wish you could see the ring," I said, laughing.

She held it up. "I can a little."

"I designed it for you," I told her. "I want you to look at the ring and know every detail was intentional. It was with you in mind."

"I love you," she said. "You spoil me."

"I want to spoil you. Please don't ever tell me I have to stop. I need to shower you with love and gifts. I'm not trying to buy your love. I just love to make you happy. If I can give you something that contributes to that happiness, I'm going to do it."

"I know," she said. "You're a generous man and I feel very, very fortunate you're mine."

"Always."

“Let’s go back!” she said and jumped up and down. “I can’t wait to tell everyone!”

“Should we do it tonight?” I asked. “It’s supposed to be Ryder’s celebration.”

She snorted. “He’ll get over it. It’s a surf shop. I’m engaged!”

“We’re engaged,” I reminded her. “Me and you. Engaged.”

She laughed and tugged at my hand, leading me back toward the party. She burst into the gathering with her hand held high. “We’re engaged! We’re getting married!”

There was an explosion of cheers. Penelope practically knocked me over with her exuberant, slightly drunken hug. “Congrats, big brother. Now, you did it right. She’s a keeper.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m feeling pretty happy about it.”

“I’m happy for you.”

Ryder shook my hand. “Glad you took the leap of faith,” he said, grinning. “And I never doubted she would say yes.”

“Let’s see the ring,” Penelope exclaimed. She grabbed Shiloh’s hand and nearly put it in the fire in an attempt to see the ring.

“Is it blue?” Shiloh asked me with awe.

“It is,” I said.

She put a hand to her mouth. “It’s perfect.”

Penelope slapped my arm. “You proposed to her in the dark when she couldn’t see the ring? Amateur.”

“No,” Shiloh said and walked into my arms. “It was perfect. It was the perfect time and the perfect spot. He could have given me a string around my finger and I still would have said yes.”

“Yep, she’s a keeper,” Penelope said, smiling. “I can’t wait to have a sister. We need to start talking about wedding planning.” She hooked her arm through Shiloh’s and dragged her away.

“I’m happy for her,” Ryder said. “I’ve waited a long time to see her that happy. Thank you for being the man she needed.”

EPILOGUE

SHILOH

Two Years Later

It was a chilly morning, the kind that sends shivers down your spine and makes you crave a warm embrace. I reluctantly left the comfort of our bed, knowing the day ahead held a promise of adventure and discovery. Pulling on a thick sweater and then my trusty rain jacket, I prepared myself for the Alaskan weather.

As I stepped onto the deck of my boat, I found Archer seemingly immune to the cold as he leaned against the railing watching chunks of ice float by. A thermos of steaming coffee in his hands provided a tantalizing source of warmth.

The thick fog had enveloped our surroundings, turning the world into an ethereal mist. Visibility was limited, but our excitement remained undeterred. It was our second excursion to Alaska together. Our current mission was to follow a pod of humpback whales, a journey that had brought us to the breathtaking beauty of Valdez, Alaska.

I moved to stand beside Archer and leaned into him. I welcomed the comforting feel of his arm wrapping around my shoulders. It was an intimate gesture, a bond between two people who understood each other beyond words. Together, we faced the challenges and wonders of the ocean, and I couldn't have asked for a better companion on this expedition. He had turned out to be one hell of a first mate. He was a

quick learner and had been helping me record information while taking lots of pictures.

“Good morning, wife,” he said and kissed my forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“As well as can be expected on these wobbly waters,” I replied with a hint of humor, referring to the gentle rocking of the ship. “How about you?”

I had come down with a case of seasickness that I couldn’t shake. I had gone to bed early last night to try and sleep it off. I was sure it was the cold weather. My body was used to the tropical climate. The cold zapped my energy and wiped me out.

Archer’s eyes crinkled with amusement, and he gave me a playful squeeze. “Slept like a log,” he said. “But nothing beats starting the day with this view and your company.”

The fog swirled around us, creating an atmosphere of mystery and excitement. Despite the limited visibility, we knew where we were going. We were following the whales. Their navigation system was better than anything technology could put out.

As the morning light slowly crept through the fog, we got a few glimpses of the surrounding landscape. We stood side by side, ready to embrace whatever the day had in store for us. With Archer’s arm around me and the promise of witnessing humpback whales in their natural habitat, I couldn’t have asked for a more perfect moment. I loved that I got to share this with him. I wouldn’t want to have the experience with anyone else.

Archer held me close, his concern evident in his eyes as he kissed me gently on the forehead. “Are you sure you’re feeling better?” he asked, his voice filled with warmth and compassion. “You look a little pale.”

I managed a weak smile and nodded, trying to reassure him. “Yeah, I’m feeling a little better now,” I replied, my voice still shaky from the bout of seasickness I had just endured. “I just need to sleep and get warm.”

“You’re going right back to bed,” he said.

“Not yet. This is too pretty to sleep through.”

“Do you want to rent a car and just spend a month driving around Alaska for the next month?” he proposed, his eyes filled with wanderlust. “I’d love to see it all with you. We’ve got plenty of time.”

The idea of exploring Alaska together sounded enticing, and normally, I would have jumped at the opportunity. But right now, with the dreadful bout of nausea, the thought of sitting in a car for extended periods didn’t sound appealing at all. I didn’t want to be on anything that moved.

I groaned softly, the discomfort still lingering in my stomach. “That sounds amazing, Archer, but right now, I don’t think I can handle sitting in a car for too long,” I confessed, my voice tinged with regret. “Ask me again this afternoon or tomorrow.”

Concern crept back into his expression. “Are you okay?” he asked, his hand gently rubbing my back. “I’m worried.”

“I’m fine,” I assured him, trying to dismiss the nausea that was threatening to resurface. “I just need some fresh air and a cup of coffee.”

Without hesitation, Archer handed me his coffee cup. I took a grateful sip, hoping the warmth would soothe my queasy stomach. But the moment the liquid went down my throat, a wave of seasickness unlike anything I had experienced before hit me like a tidal wave.

Panic flashed in Archer’s eyes as he saw me turn pale. I managed to utter a hurried apology before leaning over the side of the boat and losing the contents of my stomach to the ocean below.

Archer stayed close, holding my hair back and offering comforting words as I emptied my stomach, feeling humiliated and grateful at the same time. Seasickness was never something I’d struggled with, but today, it had chosen to make an unwelcome appearance. I lived on the water. I didn’t understand what was happening.

Once the worst had passed, I slumped against the railing, feeling drained and embarrassed.

“Let’s get you downstairs,” he said. “You’re in no condition to be doing much of anything.”

He was right, which only made it worse. He helped me below deck. I quickly went into the bathroom to wash my face. I looked in the tiny mirror and understood why he looked so concerned. I looked like shit. I walked out of the bathroom just as the boat lurched. I closed my eyes and forced my stomach to behave.

Archer handed me a bottle of water. “Take a few drinks,” he said. “Not too much and not too fast.”

“Thank you.”

“Maybe exploring Alaska by car can wait,” he said softly, understanding in his voice. “Let’s focus on getting you feeling better first.”

I nodded, grateful for his support. As I looked into his eyes, I knew that even if our plans had to change, as long as we were together, any adventure would be good. And perhaps, someday soon, we’d be able to take that road trip through Alaska.

“I’ll be fine,” I told him. “I’m just going to lie down for a bit.”

He followed me into the bedroom and got a second blanket. He tucked me in and stretched out beside me, stroking his hand over my hair. His gentle, soothing touch actually helped.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked, his eyes searching mine for an answer.

I took a moment to think, my mind racing with possibilities and uncertainties. “I don’t know,” I replied honestly. “Maybe, I guess. It’s a possibility. I didn’t even think of that, but it’s not like we’ve been using anything.”

It had been more than a year and I had not gotten pregnant. We weren’t pushing it but did talk about going to a doctor

when we got back home after the Alaska excursion.

His concern deepened, and without hesitation, he took charge of the situation. “We’re going into town,” Archer declared firmly. “We’re getting a hotel room for the night. You need to be warm and comfortable.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, offering me reassurance through his touch. “And you need a pregnancy test.”

I nodded gratefully. A hotel room sounded like a haven compared to the swaying deck of the research vessel. “I’m not going to argue,” I told him. “A stationary bed sounds very good right now.”

He kissed my head. “I’ll take us into port.”

I was glad he was capable of driving the boat. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe through one wave of nausea after the next. I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew I heard people talking and the boat was no longer moving.

We went into town and rented a house for the night, which was even better than a hotel room. Archer tucked me into bed once again.

“I’ll be back,” Archer said. “I’ll get some ginger ale and a pregnancy test. If you’re not pregnant, we’re going to the doctor to figure out what’s going on.”

His unwavering support brought tears to my eyes. I knew we would face this together, no matter the outcome. “Thank you. I’m fine. If I’m not pregnant, I really think it’s just a bug. I’ll be fine. I’m already feeling better being on land.”

He left the house and me alone with my thoughts. We did want a family. The timing could have been better. If I was pregnant, I hoped the nausea would be temporary. I couldn’t be seasick. I needed to get home. I didn’t want to ride out my pregnancy in Alaska. Plus, we had to get back for Ryder and Penelope’s wedding at the end of summer. They would kill us if we missed it.

The timing wasn’t perfect, but it was good. We were settled into our lives. Archer only had to go into his office about once a month. We made a few trips to the new west

coast office, but he was able to work from home. He barely did that anymore. We spent most of our time together enjoying and exploring. We talked about kids and decided we wanted at least two but would take whatever God gave us. Our home was complete and ready for a baby.

I couldn't decide if I wanted to hope I was pregnant or not. I wanted to be pregnant, but I didn't want to be miserable for the duration of our trip. I decided I was just going to have to suck it up. I would see a doctor and ask if I could take Dramamine. If it hurt the baby, I would tough it out. Thankfully, I had a strong man that could pick up the slack and get me home safely.

It wasn't long before Archer returned with a few bags of groceries. Archer handed me a pregnancy test and a Gatorade. "You can take it now, or don't. It's up to you."

"How are you feeling about it?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I mean, I want a baby, but I hate seeing you miserable."

I smiled. "I think that's just part of the process. We have to trust the process."

"If you are and it's the sailing that's making you ill, I'm putting you on a plane home. I'll bring the boat back."

"No! You can't do it alone."

"I'm not going to watch you suffer," he said firmly.

I held up a hand. "Before we have this fight, let's make sure it's necessary."

"It's not a fight," he said. "I'm just telling you what's going to happen."

I took the test and went into the bathroom. I peed on the stick like a pro. I had probably taken fifty tests over the last year. I left it in the bathroom and went into the bedroom to wait with Archer. Time seemed to slow down as we waited for the results.

As the minutes passed, I could feel the weight of uncertainty pressing down on us. We had been through this so

many times before and we were always left disappointed.

“Ready?” he asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

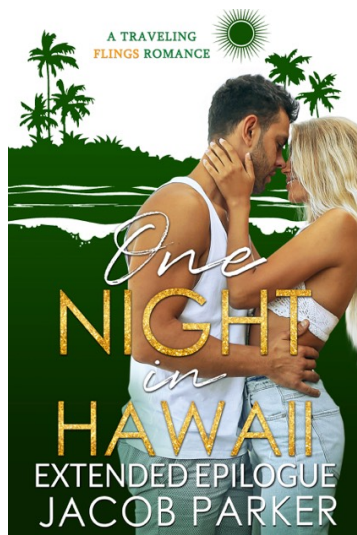
We walked into the bathroom together and stared at the test. Neither of us said a word. “This is a different brand,” Archer said. “What is that? Is that a positive?”

“Where’s the box?” I shrieked and looked around.

I read the instructions just to be sure. We looked at each other and grinned. “Congratulations,” I said. “You finally knocked me up!”

He grabbed me in a big hug. “I love you!”

What did you think about Archer and Shiloh? Want more? I’ve got a special Extended Epilogue just for you!! [Get your copy. HERE!!](#)

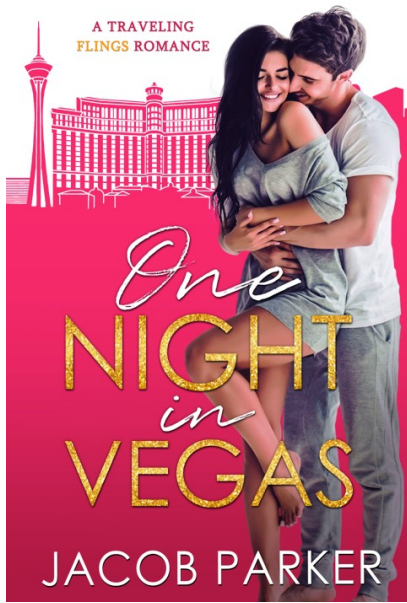


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After ten years of helping his wife, Ali Parker and brother-in-law, Weston Parker develop love stories of their own, Jacob Parker has decided to take the plunge with a new twist on the romance story.

He's a romantic guy in real life and wanted to bring the world of the Manhattan Men to life with his wife, Ali.

He lives in Texas with his family, loves to golf, also writes as J Stark, and can be found working in his wood shop when he's not writing.

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The Parker's Wicked Playground

One Night in Hawaii

A Traveling Flings Romance #4

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