

ELLA BEACHLEY



THAT ONE TIME IN  
**OREGON**



# THAT ONE TIME IN OREGON

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ELLA BEACHLEY

POLO RANCH PUBLISHING

That One Time in Oregon

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ISBN: 9798859418848

Library of Congress: 2023916540

Cover design by: Lily McGonagill

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*To all the whales along the Oregon Coast who refuse to let me  
see them doing their thing in nature.*

*I will be back.*



# **PROLOGUE: KATE**

JULY, EMPLOYEES BLISSFULLY GIVING BACK EVENT

“Let’s start the bidding at two hundred dollars. Two Benjamins to go on a date with me—oh a taker! Do I hear two-fifty?” Luca bellows into the mic. He gives his patented full smile as he peels off his navy cardigan, tossing it aside. Revealing his toned, sun-kissed arms, he flexes for the inebriated audience and walks the full length of the stage while he continues. “Two-fifty! Alright! Do I hear three?” The employees still lingering far too late at the annual Employees Blissfully Give Back charity night cat call and whistle, eating it up.

As hands go up and women continue to yell competing amounts, I know it is time to intervene. This wasn’t even on the schedule for the night. Who gave Luca the mic? Heels kicked off hours ago and stashed under a table, I move barefoot swiftly across the lawn, attempting some semblance of decorum, and head toward the stage. Stubbing my toe on a rock, I hobble my way up the steps and put on my most appeasing smile.

Luca whips around to see who has interrupted his big moment.

“Porter! I would have never guessed you’d play to win!” He raises his eyebrows and gives the audience a face of mocked shock. “I mean, I should’ve guessed you’ve had your eye on me this whole time—I *am* pretty irresistible! Ladies and gentlemen, one of our fearless leaders who helped put on tonight’s little soiree, Kate Porter!”

“Hand it over,” I whisper, holding out my hand like a scolding mother taking away a child’s prized toy.

Luca looks at me just long enough to give the false hope of cooperation before offering a wink and swinging his body back to the audience. “What was that, Porter? *You* want to make the final bid of the night? Oh boy. We are going to be watercooler gossip for sure.”

Hands on hips, I keep the smile plastered across my face while feeling my nostrils flare and a bead of perspiration form on my hairline. In the most even tone I can muster, I ask, “What are you talking about?”

“What were we at?” Luca calls out to the crowd who has gathered at the foot of the stage. He cups his free hand around his ear as they shout the amount.

“Oh yes! One. Thousand. Dollars.” He looks back at me, watching for a reaction.

I give him a scowl and go to grab the mic away, but miss. He only seems to enjoy this all the more and continues to pander to the audience. “What do you say, Porter? How much for one date? Be generous. All the proceeds go to the children’s hospital, after all.”

Too many eyes shift my way. Despite the breeze drafting off the Willamette River, the July night gets uncomfortably warm, and I feel suffocated in my cashmere sleeveless turtleneck. Why I chose to wear this fabric in the middle of summer is beyond me, but my closet doesn’t hold a lot of options appropriate for an event of this magnitude. And I definitely had not planned to donate *any* money to our company’s cause tonight, let alone the amount he was talking about. My purpose in being there is strictly due to the fact it is my *job* to show up, help make sure things go off without a hitch, and support my boss, Natalie.

Wait.

Where is Natalie? Now that I am standing on stage, being coerced into going on a date with Luca, I realize it has been a while since I’ve seen her. My assignment tonight was to

babysit the raffle with some interns and keep an eye on the food truck area. What good reason would she have to sneak out of her event early?

No. Way. I bet she was on her way to Hawaii to see Joel, the guy she'd met a few weeks ago.

“You're making me sweat it out here, Porter. Awkward.” Luca's comment draws me back to the present. He's stopped flexing and almost looks nervous for a reaction from me. “What's your final offer?”

Stepping closer to him, he bends the mic toward me as I slowly announce, “Five thousand dollars.”

The crowd reaches a new decibel, clinking drinks in celebration of such a generous donation. Luca gives me a long, impassive expression before turning on his charm full throttle. He thanks everybody for coming out, reminding them to call an Uber if they'd enjoyed the craft beer truck, and to check the raffle table to claim prizes on their way out.

“Wow, Porter. Wasn't expecting you to go big or go home with your bid. Actually, I didn't expect you to go along with it at all.” Luca puts the mic down and grabs his cardigan, swinging it like a little boy and follows me off the stage.

I rub my temples while heading toward the table concealing my shoes. “Where did Natalie go?”

“She left hours ago. I'm guessing it's about island love. But what would I know? You guys don't tell me anything,” he says matter-of-factly. “So, I'm not sure what your calendar looks like or what you'd want to do for date, but I—”

Heels back on, I stand closer to his eye level than moments ago. Nothing in them hints of teasing—he seriously thinks we are following through with this. “I'm sorry. I'm going to stop you there. You misunderstood what just happened.”

“Oh, did I?” He scratches his beard and lifts one brow. “Enlighten me, please. I was under the impression you way overpaid for an evening out.”

“You put me in an uncomfortable position and I had no choice but to pretend to bid on you. What that was, up there,

was me keeping you from being too embarrassing and giving the evening a chance to end on a high note. So what you're going to do is walk over there"—I point him in the direction of the table of accountants, busy taking donors' last-minute offerings—"and pay the five grand before you call it a night."

Hoping that ends our conversation, I simultaneously scan the emptying grounds and the clean-up list on my iPad. Like clockwork, everything is being taken down and carted off until next year. Every bone in my body aches, and I look forward to nothing more than getting home and climbing into bed. For the entire weekend.

"Fine. I'll go settle my tab, but Porter, I think you're making a mistake." He gives me a sideways smirk.

"How do you figure that?" I have to admit I want to know what he'll say. While his arrival to our department hasn't been my favorite move made by our company's founder, and his grandfather, Mr. Banks, I also can admit that while Natalie was on her solo honeymoon, Luca and I had kind of ... bonded. Maybe that was the wrong word; that feels intimate, like we were friends. What we *had* done was learn to work together in a nice little rhythm and allow this event to shine. We'd pulled long hours to make sure tonight would be memorable, but that was it.

"I'm a catch," he says, throwing his cardigan over his shoulder. When I don't respond right away, he shrugs and walks off.

I watch him purposely saunter with swagger, his signature move when he knows people are looking. Letting out a long overdue sigh, I head toward the food trucks. Jill flanks me and steps in stride.

"You seriously didn't pay to go on a date with him, did you?" she holds back a laugh. A few years older than the rest of our department, Jill Marshall has been our boss since before I'd started with the company. Her upcoming promotion is going to be rough. She is a good boss, and through standing weekly lunches with her and Natalie, I feel like I finally found solid friendships since moving to Portland. I know she'll still

be around, but it will be different and I can't think about it right now.

I laugh and power down my iPad. "No, I sent him off to pay it himself."

"You want to know what I think?" she asks with a twinkle in her eye.

"Probably not."

"I think he's a good person to have in your corner. And he's fun—people feed off his energy. I mean, before you went to stop him, he'd somehow talked people into spending lots of money to, I don't know ... what does he do on a date? Go to laser tag? Take some poor woman to the latest in pretentious food?"

"Spout off poetry he has written about himself and then count his large piles of money?" I offer.

Jill makes a face. "Ride Razor scooters down the Walkway and get ice cream afterward."

"Go roller skater at Oaks Park on disco night when the live organ player is there."

Our back and forth gets cut short upon hearing two familiar voices on the other side of the fish taco truck. I stop in my tracks, not wanting to be pulled into another conversation with Luca. My pajamas and Netflix are calling my name.

"For what it's worth, Grandfather, I think Porter would do a fantastic job. I know it's going to be incredibly hard to replace Marshall—"

I glance at Jill and mouth, *Wow, he respects you.*

She motions with her finger for me to stay quiet as we continue to eavesdrop.

"—but she threw her heart and soul into this night and it shows. She's committed to your vision and mission statement for the company, and she works harder than anybody else on the fifth floor. Even harder than Reddington, and you know I think she's on top of her game too. You have built this

company from the ground up, but I wanted to offer my two cents.”

“This has nothing to do with that little display tonight? You’re thinking clearly?” Mr. Banks’ voice holds a hint of reprimand.

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s nothing going on between you two?”

Jill’s lips turn up in a knowing smile, while I shake my head vigorously in disgust.

“No, sir. That was just a little bantering fun to raise money.”

“Okay. I’ll take it into consideration. I like Kate and think she could be ready for a more challenging position.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Luca says.

Poking my head carefully around the truck, I watch Luca put his arm around his grandfather as they snag one last crepe and walk toward the town car waiting for Mr. Banks on the street.

Jill looks at me with wide eyes. “That’s promising. You’ve got the owner’s grandson singing your praises.”

“Maybe he thinks with me as his boss, he could get away with murder,” I muse. “There’s no way he sees me as a threat of any kind.”

“Or he respects you too,” Jill offers.

“I did have my sights on your job the next time it needed filled. I assumed this time it would go to Natalie,” I admit, not letting myself get too caught up in what we’d just witnessed. “Do you think she’s going to end up making Hawaii home? If she does, I’ll fight for the job.” After the words leave my mouth, a spark of excitement shoots through me. *Me?* Taking the coveted corner office with the view and having millions of charitable dollars at my disposal to help better the community at large? I can’t even fathom what that would look like. But now that it had been loosely dangled, I want it. I’ll kill for it.

“What’d I just say a minute ago? Luca is a good person to have in your corner,” she repeats, and I feel hope whirl wildly in my chest. Things are about to get really good.



# CHAPTER ONE: KATE

## FRIDAY IN SEPTEMBER

If there was ever a day I was going to end up in jail, today was that day. The egotistical smirk that encroaches the corner of Luca's freshly-shaven face makes me want to run atop the length of the conference room table and smack it right off. Thatcher Banks, founder and CEO of Bliss by Banks, stands proudly at the front of our fourth-floor room, beaming at his grandson. He has just named Luca the newest President of Contracts and Charitable Giving, and while I usually respect Mr. Banks, currently a slew of very choice words run through my head, directed toward him.

When we had arrived at work that gray, rainy Friday morning, an email alerted us to the meeting being moved up a week and now taking place today, right before lunch. The department buzzed for the next hour with rumors of who would be taking Jill's spot while she began her new tenure running the purchasing department.

Bets had been waged for weeks, and I was highly favored to be the new fearless leader—something I was more than happy to take on. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been participating in an unhealthy amount of online shopping to curate a new wardrobe—one fit for the title change from my current spot as 'executive assistant to the vice president.' With the substantial pay raise, I'd finally be able to afford some of those carts that are waiting for me to push purchase.

Standing by Mr. Banks, Jill manages to twist her face into pleasant surprise and support when I know perfectly well she thinks he's a perpetual frat boy. Natalie would have been the

obvious first choice; however, the former vice president officially ran off to Hawaii permanently two weeks earlier to sell food truck crepes to tourists. I am happy for her—and that is something I keep reminding myself as I stand at the back of the room and glare.

Then Luca's eyes find mine. The smirk falters for the briefest of moments before he recovers and reaches for his tie, straightening it. Nobody else would even catch the rare moment of insecurity, but we had spent enough time together over the last eight months, I have become privy to his tells.

Those around me reach out and touch my shoulder, subtly shaking their heads. Based on numbers alone, it had made the most sense that I would become the new department president, having worked there longer than anybody else after Jill and Natalie. I'd been her righthand for the past four years and knew the demands of the job inside and out.

Nepotism is unfortunately playing a major role in today's selection, and as a result, my new boss is none other than Peter Pan.

“With Natalie Reddington's departure from Bliss by Banks, I'd also like to name her successor for the vice president position this morning.” Mr. Banks' gray hair is neat and short, his goatee kept trim. He wears an impeccable suit that costs as much as my rent for the shoebox apartment I call home. He looks over at his grandson, motioning him to take a step around the extra-long reclaimed barnwood table to make room for his next appointee.

“Without further ado, I'm very excited to announce the department's new vice president is Kate Porter. Kate, would you please come join me?” His voice holds the same grandfatherly pride as he scans the room.

My heart jumps at hearing my name, and those who have just been consoling me are now sharing congratulations as I make my way to the front. I take my place next to Jill, and she gives me a wide grin and subtle nod.

“These two are going to take this division to new heights. Their recent work making sure our annual fundraiser hit

unprecedented levels should give you all the confidence needed to know you're being led by the best and brightest in the company." Mr. Banks leads the room in a round of applause.

"Before you head off for lunch," Mr. Banks raises his hands to quiet everyone, "I wanted you all to be the first to know one final item of business before it goes company-wide."

The room stills, unsure what else could possibly be said today after promoting an employee of eight months to the most coveted spot outside of any position in Mr. Banks' exclusive penthouse club.

There were four people who worked closely with Mr. Banks on the top floor, overseeing Bliss by Banks, one of Portland's most sought-after luxury boutique toiletry producers. With the city's desire for exclusivity and unique experiences, every swanky property management company, small mom and pop hotel chain, and B&B wanted our products in their bathrooms for guests. Mr. Banks has been the forerunner in environmental causes in the Pacific Northwest for forty years and personally oversees that every item bearing his name meets a rigorous standard. It was what drove me to want to work for the company in the first place: a quality product that doesn't come at the cost of the planet.

"For forty years we have kept this company local—minus the Pineapple Bay Resort—choosing to focus on serving Portland and its immediate suburbs. I did this in part to make sure our charity dollars were thrown back into *our* community and to keep Portland one of the best cities in America. We've seen amazing programs come about as a result, but I feel it's time we expand a bit."

He turns to Luca and me. "Starting Tuesday, you two are going to be the face of the company and head down the coast for a week, networking and meeting with the same kinds of clients we currently work with. I want you to learn not only how we can help the coastal communities offer their guests indulgent shampoos and lotions, but also determine what kinds

of partnerships we can establish to help keep our oceans and forests available for generations to come.”

A murmur rises throughout the room. I can see everybody’s interest piqued by this. Mr. Banks has always claimed he wants to keep the company in his backyard, but spreading down the coast could bring a lot of opportunity to those towns, as well as a chance for me to hopefully secure my spot the penthouse club someday if I play my cards right. Suddenly, working closely with Luca isn’t the worst thing to have ever happened to me. That honor still belonged to the St. Louis incident of five years ago.



“I’M sorry I couldn’t warn you,” Jill says as she takes a bite of her cobb salad. After the meeting ended, people scattered to hit the various restaurants on our block. Before I could leave, Jill pulled me aside and offered to order takeout so we could have one last lunch in her old office.

I look up from poking around my chicken Caesar salad. “What do you mean?”

“About Luca. I tried to talk Thatcher out of it yesterday, but you know how he is—he loves his grandson, and his goal is to have him eventually take over the company. I guess Thatcher figured if he gave him a big role now, Luca would learn the ropes and it would go more smoothly when Thatcher retires. Maybe this promotion would give Luca an opportunity to rise to the occasion.” She puts down her biodegradable container and looks at me. “But he agreed with me that you were definitely the only one qualified to be president.”

“Oh, to come in second place, it’s always my favorite.” I offer her a half smile and take a deep breath. “Just promise me when we are both working on the top floor someday, we run a coup and oust him.”

“That will be our first order of business. I promise.” She picks up her food again and stabs a few lettuce leaves. “Though ...”

I tilt my head, guessing where she was headed. “Don’t say it.”

“No hear me out. You know you’re *really* the president, right? I mean, you will be doing everything and everybody will come to you all the time because, well, Luca. And you’ll have to train him so he can even pretend to do his job. But—”

“Don’t say it,” I cut her off.

“But, he’s not that bad. I mean, he did save the fundraiser with his food truck connections. He hasn’t missed one day of work since starting, and I remember when he did an internships here years ago for the warehouse. At least once a week, he would call in ‘sick’”—she uses her fingers as air quotes—“so he’s trying. He’s unconventional at times and thinks incredibly highly of himself, but maybe this will go better than you think it will.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re moving up to the fifth floor. You wouldn’t be singing his praises if you were sticking around and he was your new number two.”

At this, I raise my brows and she smiles, knowing I am right.



I HEAD over to Natalie’s empty office after lunch. No longer part of the cubicle crowd, I get to have a corner office with a view. Not quite as prestigious as Luca’s new office but it’s my own space, and I revel in the moment. Balancing a small box of things from my old desk, I notice somebody has already handwritten a temporary nameplate for me and slid it into the spot beside the door. HR calls to say they are coming by shortly for me to sign my new contract and discuss the way travel would be set up for the upcoming trip.

A week on the road with Luca.

The more I think about the whole idea of us being stuck in a car together, driving eight hundred miles, the more I consider turning in my resignation.

It is still pouring outside—Mother Nature is reminding us it is now officially fall and our warmer, sometimes sunny days are extremely numbered. I make a mental note to bring in an extra lamp to brighten up the room with our impending nine months of darkness and gloom.

“Knock-knock.” Luca pokes his head in. “Can I come in?”

He leans against my doorframe, filling the space like a leading actor in a romcom. I motion for him to take one of the two plush, leather chairs in front of my desk. He lowers his tall six-foot-two frame into one and crosses his legs at the ankle, leaning forward expectantly.

While waiting for him to tell me why he’d stopped by, I unpack things. Succulents get arranged in the corner. Pens go into my Kansas Chiefs coffee mug. On the credenza behind me I place a photo of me and my family in front of the St. Louis Arch when we went to visit my grandma in seventh grade—right before she passed away. I square my laptop front and center. Pulling a container of green grapes from my bag, I offer him some. He declines, and I pop one into my mouth. Waiting.

When he finally speaks, it hints of disdain. “You root for the Chiefs?”

“Sorry we can’t all be Seahawks fans.” I sit down in my chair and cross my arms. “Is that why you shaved your beard? You knew you were getting the job?”

He distractedly rubs his fresh face. In the absence of his bushy mountain man beard, he has unearthed two big dimples. Seeing them free of hair changes his face; makes him go from seeming somewhat mysterious to old Hollywood glam, and I can’t stop staring.

“It was time for a change.”

Yeah, in more ways than one. “What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to touch base with you about Tuesday—”

“HR is stopping by with our itinerary and travel arrangements shortly,” I cut in. “Our per diem, where we’re staying, that kind of thing. I’ll take care of it all.”

He takes a full breath and smiles. It pains me to admit as much but Luca has a great smile. Just like he has great hair, thick and slightly longer, which curls at the edges and he can tuck it behind his ears. He wears it in that way that screams, *tousled from slumber!* but I would wager he spends way longer working on it than he would ever admit to. “Actually, I was coming by to ask if you wanted me to drive. I’m not sure how familiar you are with the coast. You’re not from Oregon, right?”

“You *know* I moved here from Missouri. We’ve talked about it more than once.

Hence ...” I point to the mug.

“Right. Chiefs,” he says.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve seen a map before and the coast goes north and south. Doesn’t seem too tricky, even for me.”

He gives me a dead look. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“If you want to drive, that’s fine. It’ll give me a chance to prep pitches and do some of the admin stuff.” I snatch two blue folders off my desk. “Your grandfather gave these to me to look over—one has his research team’s collection of establishments that fit our branding, and the other has the team’s assessment of the best ways to contribute charitable dollars to various causes along the coast.”

He sits up, easing all the way back into the chair. “I’m planning on pitching, too, you know that ...” He waits until I meet his gaze. “Right?”

I pause to formulate an appropriate response. “You think you can learn everything you need to know about our products over the weekend? Every step, from meeting suppliers, through manufacturing and distribution, design of the physical product and label, to what the contracts look like, and ultimately how we partnership for the community component?”

Luca’s face scrunches up.



“Look,” I begin, “you can do the social media part they want us to work on from the road. You know, fun captions and buzzwords with pretty photos of the coast. If we get anybody to sign right away, we can post a ‘coming soon’ photo and tag their establishment. Maybe you can do a few Tweets. That is what I assume you excel at.”

He stands, readjusting his suit jacket. “I’m sorry you think that’s all I am capable of doing.”

Laura from HR knocks and enters before I can respond to Luca. “Hi, Kate, are you ready to go over everything?”

I nod to Laura as Luca swipes the folders from me, putting them under his armpit. “Looks like I have a busy weekend ahead of me. Stay dry, Porter. See you Monday.”

## **CHAPTER TWO: KATE**

## MONDAY

Laptop secured in my travel bag, daily grapes finished, I push away from my desk. The view from this office is quickly becoming one of my favorites in the city. From the fourth floor, I can see the University of Portland's rowing team dotting the Willamette River, gliding effortlessly across the top. There is a lone jet ski swirling around in the distance. People jog the path along the river, enjoying the reprieve from what had been a rather wet weekend.

I let out an exaggerated sigh. It is going to be a long week. All I want to do is go home, order some take out, and mindlessly catch up on the latest season of *The Great American Baking Show*, ignoring what lies ahead. But I can see the I-5 is backed up as usual, and by the time I get my dry cleaning and make it home, I still have to pack and meditate away all my anger.

It has been three days since Luca was named President of Contracts and Charitable Giving, and my acceptance of his promotion is still months away at best.

“Hey, good. You're still here.”

His voice grates, like an annoying fly buzzing in my ear. I have managed to avoid him all day with calls, meetings, hiding. Hiding from being a jerk on Friday and not wanting to apologize. My comment about his skillset lying in social media rubbed him the wrong way, and whether or not it was true, he is still my boss, and I need to get it together. I am a professional, even if I still stand by my belief he isn't fit for

the job. Briefly my eyes close, and I plaster on a smile before turning around. “Yep, how can I help you?”

Luca strolls casually into my office like he owns the place. Who am I kidding? He does. Someday this will be his all because his last name is Banks. Not only does he have an empire waiting for him, he is stupidly good-looking and knows it. It’s those dimples that have made me finally admit as much. He straightens his navy suit coat and loosens his cherry red tie.

“I was thinking we should pow-wow and make a finalized game plan. I know we talked very briefly about it on Friday, but we should kick this off the right way.” His dark eyes sparkle with mischievousness. He’s either forgiven me or I am in for it.

Never once has Luca been the one to suggest conducting any kind of business outside of working hours. The only time I remember seeing him beyond five o’clock was the few weeks we prepped for the fundraiser in July. Picking my jaw up off the floor, I arch a brow.

“You—*you* want to talk shop, tonight?” I try to swallow a laugh.

He ignores my question and pulls his phone out of his back pocket. “I’m airdropping directions to my favorite place. See you there around eight-thirty?”

He turns around to take a call before I can politely decline, and his footsteps echo down the hallway. I glance at my phone and accept the notification to some place called Tidal, grab my stuff, and lock my office door.



THE DRY CLEANER HAS MY single power suit ready for me as I step inside the shop. The I-5 has miraculously cleared. I hit every green light to my apartment. Packing had never gone smoother—checking and double-checking my list; I have everything for a successful eight days on the road. Glancing around my tiny apartment, I can think of no good excuse for

canceling on Luca. Despite dreaming all day of my sweats, I reluctantly change out of my secondhand Kate Spade wrap dress and into jeans and a black mock neck sweater. To top off the evening, the drive north to Tidal goes quickly.

I pull up to what appears to be an island-themed karaoke bar. There is no way this was where he plans to hammer out last-minute details about work. Ready to back out of the parking lot and call him, claiming a migraine, he taps on my window. He's changed from his three-piece suit and tie into a long-sleeve cotton button up and designer skinny jeans. I've never seen him wear casual clothes—if you could call it that; those pieces he's wearing still cost more than my budget would ever allow. Even dressed down, he looks like a Gucci model.

“Ready!?” His enthusiasm reverberates through the thick glass of my closed window. He tosses back his head, drains the Red Bull in hand, and pitches the can into a recycling bin nearby. “I got us a reservation.”

I step out and slow-blink, pointing at the building behind me. “There is no way this place takes reservations.”

“Um, yes, if you want a good karaoke slot, you have to call in and claim it early. I like the first slot of the night and the last.” He shakes his head at me like this was common knowledge. “Let's go—it's showtime in half an hour.”

“I'm not singing karaoke, Luca.” I open my car door, poised to get back in. “You told me tonight was about work.”

He pushes it closed and leans on it to keep me from being able to escape. Arms crossed, he flashes me the smile I know makes most women swoon. All I see is entitled and arrogant. “I know and it is. Come on, let's head in and we can talk until it's our turn. I plan on singing at least three songs. You can take a few if you feel up to it—they give me fifteen minute sets. No pressure, though, if you don't want to.”

I purse my lips—he is committed to his plan, and I realize it is best if I just ride it out. Maybe this evening is how he is punishing me, and what I need to do is apologize and lie through my teeth—tell him he will be the best president our

department has ever seen and I believe in him. “Fine, pitch me your plan, I’ll listen to you sing ‘Friends in Low Places,’ and then I’m out.”

Luca bounces toward the lounge entrance, pumping his fist in the air like he’s won the championship. “You will not regret this.” He turns around to face me as he opens the door. “And Porter, get the Aloha platter. Just trust me on this.”

WE SIT at a booth that faces the stage in the center of the eclectic bar. Strings of neon flamingo patio lights run the course of the large room in a zigzag pattern overhead. Potted palm trees are strategically bunched around the floor, showcasing the high ceilings. Everywhere I turn, the place is packed with coeds from the nearby university, despite being a Monday night. Everybody wears the same silk leis provided by the bartenders as they passed out drinks.

A perky blonde, who definitely knows Luca, takes our order for two platters and two Dr. Peppers.

“You can drink if you want, I don’t mind,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “I’m good.”

I sit back and quietly wait for him to start our meeting like a true leader would. This was his idea and certainly not the way I want to spend my evening.

“Do you want to know what my line up is so you can make sure we don’t sing the same song?” He is dead serious. “Or did you want to do a duet?”

When I don’t respond, he finally seems to sense my annoyed inner monologue and clears his throat. He sits up straight and confident, like I’d seen him do the *one* time he offered a genuine idea in a meeting. Clearing his throat a second time, he speaks over the noise. “I appreciate your willingness to meet me tonight, Porter. I always like to let loose a little before a big project—or in this case, an important trip. I know this place is a bit unorthodox for a team building experience, but I have been coming here since freshman year, and it’s kind of fun.” His eyes roam the room, trying to sell the

place to me. It's funny how he has become all business in a snap.

Still, I give him nothing. He squirms a little on the wooden bench across from me.

"I read over that list Mr. Banks' team compiled of the hotels he'd like us to meet up with. I've already arranged a presentation with some of them, but a few will be a cold call stop by—What?"

"I'm sorry." I bite my lip.

"Seriously, what?" He tilts his head to the side, and it hits me how much I unnerve him.

"You called your grandfather Mr. Banks. It-it's just so formal, and it makes me laugh."

He places his elbows on the table and leans in a bit. "I'm trying to be professional in working for my family, especially now that I got promoted, and well, it's weird." His simple confession is laced with honesty. His accompanying facial expression hints at something more he doesn't want to discuss tonight.

Before I can compliment him on how impressed I am that he has already reached out to some potential clients, our food comes, and we get distracted. The Aloha platter ends up being teriyaki chicken and kalua pork with sides of Hawaiian macaroni salad and steamed white rice. The sweet smell of the pork temps my tastebuds, and although I had eaten something before I left, I dive right in.

"You delivered on your promise," I tell him. "This is delicious."

Luca looks up from his food and smiles. "I told you, Porter. I will never steer you wrong when it comes to food."

We sit and enjoy the meal for a minute, before the karaoke host takes to the stage amidst a roar of applause and shouts. He quiets the room as best he can before announcing the lineup for the first hour. When Luca eagerly starts things off and takes the stage, women cheer and squeal, while men beat their chests with their fists and chant his name. I have stepped into

some weird dimension where he is everybody's favorite person. His groupies are a good decade or more younger than him, but that doesn't seem to bother him in the least.

"How's it going, Portland?" he roars into the mic.

The room gets even louder in anticipation of his performance. I glance at my phone. It is only nine. I can only imagine how much the energy of this place will vibrate after a couple more hours and a few more rounds of alcohol.

He pulls the mic off the stand and wanders to the other side of the stage. "Who's ready for me to kick things off tonight?"

Again the room goes wild. I am the only person in a five-mile radius not giving in to Luca's theatrics. Instead, I sit politely in our booth and make a dent in my plate. He goes quiet and I look up, noticing him watching me, then he nods. Why? What does he want me to do? Jump up and down, shriek with excitement because he is going to butcher some famous song? I take a long drink of my soda. With my free hand, I gesture him to get going.

That is encouragement enough for him. He looks at the host-slash-DJ, and says, "Here we go!"

Then to the crowd, he announces, "I dedicate this to Porter."

I roll my eyes so hard I am sure I sprain them.

The large lights in the room dim, and the stage backlights into a flood of neon fuchsia and orange. Luca takes a deep breath and lowers his head a moment before he raises it and jumps in place twice. He knows how to play the crowd. In another life, he was obviously a boy-bander.

A brief introduction is heard over the loudspeaker that sends the room erupting into excitement yet again. And he is off. Not only does he know every single word to Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance," he knows her dance moves from the famed music video. He struts his way up and down the stage not missing a beat. He sings well. Really well. It shouldn't be



surprising—just another Banks family trait he excels at. How lucky for them that they are born rich and perfect.

It would be slightly enjoyable to watch if he didn't look at me every time he gets to the chorus. Is he telling me I am toxic and he doesn't want to be friends? Was *this* his way of clearing the air about Friday? I was only being honest with him. And I haven't even shared an ounce of my true feelings about this new work arrangement.

Does he not understand it wasn't my idea to have the two of us go on what was essentially a glorified sales call? That isn't even part of my job description. As VP, I am strictly focused of the charitable giving side of things, and he knows that. Or should. Yet he has the nerve to publicly put me in my place.

“Luca Banks, not everybody falls for you!” I want to yell.

He hits the last round of the chorus, and everybody joins along at a deafening din. There he is, on his knees, clutching his chest, doing some overexaggerated move that just screams attention-grabber. I can't sit through two more songs in hopes we get back to the whole reason he lured me here. He's made his point. I feel he is inept; he apparently thinks I am in love with him and would rather I wasn't. We have a two hour drive ahead of us in the morning. We can strategize then. Or not. I don't care if this was how he was going to run things.

I throw a twenty on the table and walk out the door right as he takes his bows to a thunderous applause.

# **CHAPTER THREE: LUCA**

TUESDAY

I glance at Porter and merge into the right lane. She absentmindedly tucks her long wavy blonde hair behind her ear while she pours over the spreadsheet I'd emailed her while waiting for her to exit her apartment. Other than a terse, "Surprised you made it on time after your big performance last night. Since when do you drive a Forrester?" said in a judgy tone, followed by a, "I'll look over it and then we'll chat," she hasn't said another word to me. She barely grunted a thanks when I offered to put her suitcase in the back. We have been on Route 26 heading west out of Portland for thirty-five minutes, and the silence has become too much.

"Mind if I turn on some music?" I ask.

"Sure."

The lack of enthusiasm makes me shift gears, and instead of picking one of the carefully-crafted playlists I'd made for this trip, I reach behind my seat and grab a single paper sack. This time I use an enticing sing-songy voice. "I got us some breakfast." It comes out all wrong, and I feel my neck flush in embarrassment.

"Okay. Maybe in a minute." She doesn't peel her eyes off the laptop in front of her.

Before I can strike out a third time, I catch her glance from the screen to the bag and back again.

"NOLA's? Is it fresh?"

I scoff. "Yes."

She scrunches her brow, challenging me. “It’s only eight-fifteen, and I know for a *fact* they don’t open until eight.”

With a shoulder shrug and an act of nonchalance, I reply, “I know the owner, so I called in a favor, and she had this ready for us before I swung by your place.”

Greedily, Porter shuts the laptop and pries open the bag. “You didn’t!”

“I didn’t what?” I pretend to not care that I have finally gotten her to engage with me. Olive branch received.

She pulls out a box that contains a single, powdered sugar, raspberry-filled la’ssant and opens the cover to smell it. The shop’s three-day process for their handcrafted signature square layered donuts make them a fast favorite in the office. “It’s still warm. How is it still warm?!”

“Magic. Can you pass over my donut holes, please?” I hold out my hand, and after popping one into her mouth, she passes the box to me.

“Hey! That’s cheating. I think I should get a bite of la’ssant,” I say.

She shakes her head and turns her body toward the window in a protective move. “No way! You can’t bring my favorite donut and expect me to share.”

I can see her smile from the reflection of the window thanks to the gray sky. Our icy start to the day is thawing, and I hope it continues that way. Understandably, she is beyond mad at me for my grandfather naming me president. She needs to get in line; everybody seemed mad at the meeting and rightfully so. I know my reputation. I know I’ve been at Bliss for less than a year, while many of them have put in their time. More importantly, though, I hoped we maybe were kind of friends. Work friends. In July when Natalie was in Hawaii, Kate and I worked to save the fundraiser. I thought if nothing else, I’d earned her respect. We had spent long hours at the office putting everything together, and I tried my hardest to pull my weight; at least as much as she would let me.

She tucks a napkin carefully into her emerald green ruffled top and pushes up the sleeves of her navy suit jacket before taking a bite. It is the same suit she wears whenever she assumes a day will be of particular importance but usually she wears a white or gray top underneath. I like this new one and am about to tell her, to give her a confidence boost, when she opens her mouth first.

“I—” she begins but pauses to take another bite.

I eat a donut hole and let her formulate her comment.

She straightens herself and sets the box back in the bag, placing it between her feet on the floor. Body turned toward me, she finally says, “I’m ... impressed.”

I stifle a laugh. “Wow, that was hard for you to say.”

Her face is completely serious. “I know. I almost couldn’t do it.”

“Thank you?” It comes out a question more than a gracious expression. “Really, I spend more than enough money there to pull a few strings.”

“While I appreciate the breakfast, I’m talking about the report.” She faces forward and opens her laptop. “I’ve been looking over your game plan, and it’s good. I mean, you really spent a lot of time on it this weekend, didn’t you?”

She clicks through my spreadsheet again. I went home Friday evening and didn’t leave my apartment again until Sunday night to go for a run. If my grandma knew how much effort I had put into this document, she’d think the apocalypse was near. School was never my cup of tea. I was smart enough to hold my own, but I never wanted to put in any kind of expected effort. I was the poster boy for the motto “Cs get degrees.”

My first look at the information the research team had given to my grandfather was nothing more than a messy collection of possible clients and their locations. I spent the next forty-eight hours taking each prospective client and looking up websites, social media, and reading through traveler’s reviews. Taking all of that information, I created a

three-tiered system that divided the lodging possibilities from highest priority to lowest. I based it on exposure to tourism dollars for them as well as getting our name out there. I also took into account my grandfather's wish to save the oceans and forests and looked at what projects we could invest our charity dollars into, based on the lodging options in each town. Finally, I determined what kind of contract we could create with them—long term, one-time, or some kind of specialty.

Porter has received eighteen pages of my blood, sweat, and tears.

And I finished the weekend with a major migraine to boot.

"I'll have you know I spent *all* weekend on it," I smugly reply. "And what did you do over the weekend to contribute to this trip?"

"I did Pilates and meditated. A *lot*."

"You meditate?"

"You know it. I had to make sure I was centered for this trip—enough that I wouldn't kill you sometime in the next week." With this, she laughs. Dryly.

She's not kidding.

Maybe thinking we were friends was a long shot at best.



HIGHWAY 26 MEETS up with the 101, and I turn north. We ease through Seaside and keep going half an hour up the road, toward the most northern coastal town of Astoria, sitting on the mouth of the Columbia River.

Clearing my throat, I tentatively say, "I want to pitch to the first place we are going. It's a bed-and-breakfast called Jacqueline's."

"Fine, fine," she replies, waving me off.

Her quick agreement shocks me. Looking over, I see her squint around me as if trying to catch the ocean as we pass

through the still-sleeping coastal town. We get outside of the city limits and she sits back, dejected. The stretch we are on won't give us any glimpses of the beach, and that is when it dawns on me.

“Have you been out here much?” I throw another donut hole into my mouth.

Kate shakes her head. “I've been to Cannon Beach twice for a long weekend but that's it. Which seems crazy since we live so close to all of this but you know, work.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “I know Thatcher likes to hold a lot of events on weekends. I think he forgets his employees have lives.”

She smirks. “So we're calling him Thatcher now?”

I can feel myself blush as I quickly justify it. “I'm trying it out. Calling him Grandpa when you and I talk seems weird, since he's your boss. And mine. Mr. Banks is way too formal, as you pointed out last night.”

She seems to accept this and politely volleys the next question. “Do you make it to the coast a lot?”

“I used to come all the time. My grandparents have a beach home just north of Florence, near Heceta Head Lighthouse, that I have spent a lot of time at.” I can feel the major side eye she sends my direction. I wait for her to comment on how I have the perfect life, but she surprises me and opts to say nothing. It doesn't take her long to remember she has breakfast waiting for her, and after another bite, she appears to bounce back.

“Okay, let's focus. You're going to walk into Jacqueline's and say what, exactly?” she presses.

“I'm going to introduce us and tell them how we can best serve them and why we would love to collaborate with them.” Is that what she is looking for? Does she want me to have a memorized speech? A prepared PowerPoint? My stomach drops—was I supposed to have made a digital presentation of some kind?

The pause is too long again. She is back on her computer, while one hand scrolls something on her phone.

“Porter?”

“They are a waterfront property. We need to push our focus on Columbia River conservation. You’re going to use the angle of ...” She looks at me with her eyes wide, head nodding, prompting me to continue her train of thought aloud. She is silently directing me on how to run the meeting.

I dig in my heels, reminding myself I am the president, not her. “I’ve got this. I’ll take in a few samples”—I thumb toward the backseat where there are plastic storage containers of bagged product I barely finished putting together in the early morning hours—“and let me do the talking on this one, okay? The way I want to approach it?”

She closes her laptop and sets her phone on the center console. Taking the box holding my last three donut holes, she pops them into her mouth, one after another, glaring me down.

It took three gruffly-delivered sentences from me to ruin the progress I thought we had made. Just in time to pull into Jacqueline’s parking lot.



# **CHAPTER FOUR: LUCA**

TUESDAY

“Admittedly, that last one didn’t go great.” I fasten my seatbelt.

“I have a few thoughts,” Porter replies in an even tone.

I look over at her, expecting her to have her arms crossed, her lips pursed, eyes narrowed at her kill—in this case, me. She loves giving me that look; at least I feel like it is saved only for me. I have never seen anybody else be lucky enough to be on the receiving end of it. Instead, she busily answers a text, her face lax.

“Hit me.” I take a deep breath, steeling myself for her verbal rundown.

“I think HR *and* the law would frown on assault,” she says deprecatingly. Then she gives a smile so quick I almost miss it. Either she finds herself funny or she is picturing decking me. I am afraid to ask which.

Clarifying, I say, “I mean, tell me your thoughts, please.”

“Food first.” She points to the clock near the dashboard. “It’s dinnertime, and we have been to eight meetings in seven hours. Thatcher would be disappointed to know you aren’t taking care of your employees.”

“Fair enough,” I agree, pulling onto Seaside’s main street and follow it all the way to the promenade. “Let’s get you food with a view.”

WE WALK into Mo's seafood and are seated in front of the wide windows overlooking the beach. The morning haze had burned off as we got closer to the 101, and the bright sun shines overhead. Though it is the end of September, there is still an abundance of tourists enjoying the warmer fall day. Families park out on towels, taking in the last of the nice weather and build sandcastles on the wet sand as the tide pulls out.

Plates heaped full of breaded cod and clams are a nice buffer. Porter is still playing it cool and collected but underneath she has to be seething. I've learned her tell over the last few months: she twists the one bracelet she always wears back and forth a few times. Today, she has done so all afternoon on the half hour.

After I told her I wanted to give the pitch at Jacqueline's, she didn't offer to help again at any of our other appointments. In fact, she hardly said more than the bare minimum through all of our meetings and stayed quiet on our drives. It terrified me. It also was frustrating. Why does she think she can undermine me and what I have planned for our division? She isn't in charge. This silent pouting is not a good look on her.

"I've fed you"—I gesture my arms toward our platters—"now you need to release that *constructive criticism* I know you're harboring."

"You really want to know?" She pulls her attention from watching out the window and props her elbows on the table.

"Yes."

"Okay. You're arrogant." She runs out the gate at full steam, holding nothing back. "You walked into every meeting today thinking you're God's gift to the world. You assumed smiling and flattery would get you the sale, but despite all the homework you did this weekend, you still don't know your clientele. This is not Gucci-suit country. These are honest, hardworking people who are a little more casual than your normal crowd. You're going to single-handedly sink the company." After she finishes, she reaches over and pops one of my fries into her mouth.

“Mmm.” I mull her outburst. “How’s your food?”

“It’s really good.” She momentarily looks back outside and then tucks a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear and clears her throat. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No sweat. I did beg you to tell me,” I interrupt and give her a half-smile. Her response isn’t quite what I expected—I assumed she would be more diplomatic. Kind, perhaps? It also could’ve been a lot worse. She isn’t the first one to point out these faults. How nice of her to remind me I’m not worthy of the title I’ve been given.

“Looks like we have a long day tomorrow,” she says a minute later, changing the subject as she scrolls her phone. “We stay tonight in Cannon Beach and have six meetings there in the morning, a few in Manzanita and Rockaway, and then another in Oceanside, where we’ll be staying tomorrow night.”

“Feel up for some karaoke tonight? There’s this place tucked off the main strip near our B&B that is usually fun.”

“What is with you and karaoke?” A crease forms between her brow. “Can’t let go of the good ol’ frat days? Always need an audience?”

I hold both my hands up in surrender. “Okay, I have a better idea.” I pull up the tide chart, look at the current time, and stand up. “But we have to go right now.”



FINDING parking is a lot harder than I’d anticipated, even for being at the end of the major tourist season. After convincing Porter it would be worth her time to rummage through her suitcase and change in a public bathroom, she emerges wearing a plaid flannel shirt and wide leg linen pants. The very few times I’ve seen her dressed casually, her whole demeanor changes with her attire. This evening is no different. She lets go of whatever inhibitions she has with her job title, whatever she has against me, and becomes this version of herself I want to see all the time. She pulls her blonde hair into a high ponytail, and I take note of bright red toenails peeking

out of her Birkenstocks. Her furrowed brow is replaced by bright, excited eyes, which rove over the entire block, taking in each souvenir shop and ice cream parlor as we make our way down the street.

Those eyes also take me in, noting my change into designer shorts and T-shirt. She doesn't hide checking me out from the top of my head to my toes and back again. Women do this often, but when Porter does it, I lose all ego. She's let down her wall briefly. I swallow hard and she looks away shyly.

"Where are we going?" She adjusts her fanny pack around her shoulder and onto her chest, moving on from that blip of a moment like it never happened.

"You need to see something, but we have to hurry," I tell her, looking at my watch.

We maneuver quickly down Second Street, dodging those out enjoying an evening stroll before the shops close. Once we hit the beach, Porter exclaims, "Look at that sight! I do love me some Haystack!"

She kicks off her sandals, scooping them up as she marches toward the beach's famous rock. I charge after her, slipping off my Olukais to keep up.

"You said you've been here before?" Matching my stride to hers, I watch her radiate happiness. Her eyes unwaveringly look ahead, mesmerized by the view.

"Yes, a couple of times. I love it here."

"Have you stayed for the sunset?"

She stops and pulls her phone out of her pocket, snapping a few shots. "Of course I have."

"Okay, but did you watch it from the south end of the rocks? The hidden spot?"

This piques her curiosity, and she looks over, lowering her phone. "No."

"Then you haven't *seen* it. But we have about six minutes to make it all the way down there," I tell her, pointing to the

far end of Haystack.

Without warning, she takes off at a jog, feet initially splashing along the water's edge, before completely dodging the waves as they wash up.

"I forgot how cold it is!" she squeals, and I chase after her, passing her playfully. This only seems to ramp up her competitive spirit, and I catch her in my peripheral pushing harder to squeak past me. I lose my footing when I stub the ball of my foot on a rock and she smirks as she pushes ahead. This back and forth continues until we're parallel with the Needles, an outcrop of rocks just south of Haystack. Out of breath, I motion her over to a spot next to a pile of driftwood. Tossing my shoes on one log, I take the sandals out of her hands and step behind her.

"We have to get this just right." I turn her toward the waves. When my hands first rest on her shoulders, she tenses slightly before releasing a large exhale and finally relaxing. Over the smell of the ocean, I catch a whiff of lime and coriander.

"You smell like Bliss." The scent is warmly familiar—this particular combination was from the summer line two years ago—but feels like it has been designed just for her.

"I wasn't expecting anybody to smell my hair." There's a defensive embarrassment in her tone. Even with the changing light, I catch a subtle blush creep up her neck, and she shifts her weight nervously. "Natalie always told me I could help myself to a bottle of shampoo and conditioner if I needed to."

Before I can ask her why she seems bothered by being caught using company products, the sinking sun distracts me.

I shift us a few steps to the left, a step forward, one more to the left, until our view places us between the Needles and a lone, tall rock. I drop my hands and step around next to her. The last dregs of light reach the shore. Tangerine, midnight blue, a sliver of bright pink illuminate the sky above a few low lying clouds. The tide is out, and the sea gifts us with hundreds of tide pools. A full moon rises high, promising to shine its

light enough that we will be able to poke around in them for a few minutes once the sun has fully set.

“See the space between the cropping of rocks to your left and that solo rock right there?”

Kate nods.

“Okay, watch.”

The sun dips below the horizon, bouncing a splash of color off the waves between the stones, washing everything in a golden hue for the shortest of seconds. It is my favorite moment of the day and something I look forward to watching whenever I am here. I don't understand why the light bounces the way it does in this particular spot, but it is a marvel and every time I've brought a date here, she's responded by cozying up to me with a look in her eyes that begs me to kiss her. I don't necessarily want Porter to respond like that, but I am at least hoping for her to be happy with the enchantment of mother nature's display; the same way she'd been with the donuts from NOLA's.

“Mmm, not bad.” She rubs her arms and heads toward the tide pools.

“Really? That earned a ‘not bad’?” I hurry after her. “What in the world would impress you?”

She looks over her shoulder and challenges me, “Guess you'll have to stick around and find out.”

# CHAPTER FIVE: KATE



## TUESDAY

Luca tried. I mean, I have to hand it to him. The whole day had kind of fallen apart for the guy, and yet he wasn't giving up. That earns major points from me. He did surprise me a few times today, but the slog of meetings I politely sat through were dismal. I mentally make a note to update my resume. If he ever truly becomes CEO of the company, Bliss by Banks has two weeks max before it sinks harder than the Titanic.

Truth be told, I will never admit it aloud but he isn't the worst guy in the world. He just has no idea how to be a leader, how to talk to people who don't drive an Audi or better, and how to be likeable in general. Eh, that's not fair. Plenty of people blow smoke up his butt all the time and he seems to enjoy their company. What he lacks is being authentic. Not some version of himself that is on all the time. That said, he really wanted me to be impressed with the sunset. It was beautiful, sure, but did he want me to applaud? Swoon? Jump up and down with fits of giggles? He needs to see a sunset on the farm after a rainstorm, when everything glistens and cotton candy colors wash a sky backlit by moody black clouds. That was the kind of awe he didn't know he was going for.

But I had never gone tide pooling in the dark, and there was a sense of romanticism to it. Although sharing the moment with my boss was not how I'd recommend participating in the activity. Luca crouches down and excitedly points out a few hermit crabs scuttling amongst the sea anemones and abundant purple and orange starfish. One pool

has small fish darting wildly in the shallow rock indentations, waiting for the tide to come back and sweep them out to sea. We even find a bioluminescent sea slug that looks to be covered in orange fur.

His phone buzzes, and he scowls at the number, quickly excusing himself before walking off to take the call out of earshot. I watch him twirl his hair with his free hand, pacing in a figure eight as he throws his head back more than once in exasperation.

Trying not to appear nosy, I focus on the towering rock. I watch the waves crashing around it in methodical beats, take in the stars slowly littering the sky like the fireflies back home. The chilly wet sand envelops both my feet when I stand in place too long, numbing my toes. Up and down the beach, bonfires glow as people are taking advantage of the unseasonably warm night.

“Are you ready to go?” Luca catches up to me in a few long strides, reaching his arms overhead and stretching, picking up our conversation like he’d never left. “The tide’s going to start coming in.”

“Yeah.” I don’t move right away, choosing to stand still for two more waves; trying to commit the scene in front of me to memory. For the first time all day, I feel relaxed.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, you only have one room for us?” I ask the owner of the bed-and-breakfast, hoping not to lose my cool while Luca stands back, glued once again to his phone, his brow furrowed in disgust.

The middle aged woman pushes her glasses up her nose and looks back at her laptop, busying herself to hopefully rectify what I know *has* to be an error. “My system is showing only one room reserved by Bliss by Banks for this evening. I’m so sorry.”

My nose scrunches. “There are two beds at least, right?”

“All our rooms come with a nice, extra-large king sized bed and soft Italian bedding.”

I take a breath and try my nicest smile. “Okay, fine. It’s late and we’ve had a long day. Luca, you stay here. I’ll just grab a room somewhere else.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that will be possible, Ms. Porter,” she tells us. “This week is our Cannon Beach summer sendoff wine and cheese festival”—she points to a small poster sitting on an easel next to her—“and rooms have been booked solid all over town for months. I doubt you’ll find anything.”

“Do you have a rollaway bed we could get for our room?” I hold up my hand with crossed fingers, hoping she catches my desperation.

She pulls off her glasses and shakes her head. “Those were gone hours ago, dear. I can send a complimentary basket of gourmet cookies to your room?”

“Sold!” Luca pipes up, pocketing his phone. “Let it go, Porter. We’ll be fine, thank you, Sue.” He squints as he reads the woman’s nametag and gives her one of his charming grins and a wink. “We love cookies. Especially if they’re warm.”

Room key in hand, Luca grabs both our rolling suitcases before I can protest and heads up the winding staircase and down the hall to the last room. Propping the door open with his foot, he nods his head to let me go inside first. It is spacious and the four-poster bed is the largest I’ve ever seen. The room is swathed in blues and grays, matching the vibes of the coast. I drop my leather computer bag onto one of two fabric chairs by the large window looking out at a dark, lush forest. Closing the curtains, I turn around.

“This isn’t ideal,” I tell Luca, eyes scanning the room. “HR promised me we’d have our own accommodations the whole trip.”

He shrugs. “It’s out of our control. Somebody messed up or there was a miscommunication when they made the

reservation. If you're that upset by it, I saw a couch downstairs by the fireplace you can sleep on."

"Me? Not happening. You go down there."

He laughs. "You're funny, Porter."

"I'm serious," I say, two seconds away from stomping my foot and throwing a tantrum like a toddler.

We are interrupted by a knock, in which the promised cookies are produced. Luca thanks the runner and closes the door, placing the enormous basket on the coffee table, and begins poking through it immediately.

"They're bagged by type. That's a nice touch—no unfortunate mixing of the favors." He holds up one package to show me the cellophane wrapped treats secured by red gingham ribbon. "Looks like we've got regular chocolate chip, snickerdoodle, a peanut butter chocolate chip, sugar cookies, pumpkin cookies—how festive—and oatmeal raisin. Wait, does anybody actually eat oatmeal raisin?"

I walk over and swipe the offending bag from his hands. "I do."

"Suit yourself. Milk?" He pulls a glass bottle from the basket and hands it to me.

Taking the treats to the empty chair, I sit crisscross, glaring in his general direction as I bite into the warm cookie. Lots of people turn their nose up at oatmeal raisin, but I have always found the combination of flavors underrated and the texture appeasing. "What's your plan if you won't take the couch?"

Luca opens the bag of peanut butter chocolate chip and sits on the edge of the bed. He takes a bite and swallows before speaking. "Hear me out. I'm exhausted. You're exhausted. We need to make an early start tomorrow, so let's just put down a pillow barrier if it will make you feel better, and go to bed."

"You're kidding," I say incredulously.

"About what?" He takes another bite. "These are incredible. Want to try one?"

I shake my head at the offer, but don't hide my disdain as I say, "You are proposing we share a bed?"

"Porter, either we can argue about this until the sun comes up or we can get some actual sleep and hopefully make a sale tomorrow to keep our jobs. Unless you have a better idea, this is where we are at."

Dissatisfied by his lack of concern for the way this situation makes me feel, I stand and make a scene of putting my milk in the small refrigerator, returning the cookies to the basket, and opening my suitcase. I pull out my toiletry bag and pajamas, slamming the bathroom door behind me.

Finally in a moment of privacy, I let the frustration of everything bubble to the surface and release a few tears while washing my face. Of course, Luca doesn't care we have to share a bed. He is always linked to some beautiful Portlander, life is one big game to him. This was just another story to share next weekend with his buddies: the time he had a fussy coworker, who nitpicked his first day of meetings and then refused to sleep on the couch in the common area downstairs when the bed-and-breakfast only had one room left.

As I brush my teeth, I stew further. He didn't ask me if I wanted to go on this assignment with him, he didn't ask if I wanted to drive with him, he didn't take charge when we got stuck with this arrangement tonight. While I'd tried to fix things downstairs, he had been busy on his phone, probably updating his social media pages with his next karaoke appearance. Why wouldn't he consider my needs? Has he ever voluntarily inconvenienced himself for the sake of someone else?

Mid-brush, my shoulders slump. He *did* get us breakfast from my favorite bakery. But one could argue that was his favorite bakery too. And I can't forget he did spend all weekend creating that extensive spreadsheet, so we'd be prepared for this trip. But I mean, that is his *job*, after all.

After changing, I gather my things and release a resigned sigh before opening the door. This is happening, and Luca is

right. It is only one night. Also, I'll probably feel better about everything after some good sleep.

Stepping into the room, I see he has turned the covers back and put a quilt down the middle as a barrier. His eyes watch me cross over to my suitcase. Instead of looking triumphant in his attempts to create the best from an awkward situation, he looks sheepish and his hand slides down his shirt, smoothing it out. "There weren't enough pillows to make the wall I promised but this quilt is thick and should do the trick. Which side of the bed do you want?"

"Oh." I clear my throat. Something about vulnerable Luca edges into my heart. I don't like when he isn't peacocking around like he owns everything he touches. It makes him human, and there is no way I am going to let myself soften toward him. "The right side is fine. Thank you."

"You were in the bathroom for a while, but um, I had the front desk bring us up some waters." He nods to the coffee table where two bottles sit next to the cookie basket.

I scoop one up on my way to the bed, placing it on the nightstand. "Again, thank you."

While he takes his turn in the bathroom, I run my hands over the sheets before climbing in. Sue was right, this bedding was the softest I have ever felt. A tiny tag on the comforter reads Frette, a brand that means nothing to me, but as I pull it high over my chest and nestle against the goose down pillows, I know I'll never appreciate my simple blended threads again.

Luca flips off the main overhead light and crosses the room. In the glow of the bedside sconces, I can make out his hesitancy. It is almost as characteristically misplaced as his attire. He wears black jogger sweats and a simple gray University of Portland hoodie. Not at all what I pictured for him. What stands out most are his bright blue rimmed glasses. He pauses as he approaches the bed and slowly peels away the top sheet on his side.

"I don't bite," I say, throwing him a half smile.

He gives me a small smirk and climbs into the bed, shifting around a few seconds until he seems comfortable. “Are we good?” It takes him a second to look at me after asking, almost as if he’s afraid to even broach the question.

“Yes, I promise.”

“Then what is it? You’re looking at me weird.”

“It’s just ... well, I was expecting Armani pajamas.”

He releases a laugh. It unexpectedly fills the whole room in a way I’ve never heard a laugh do. It is full of warmth, like the perfect summer evening. It takes me a second to separate the feeling evoked from who made it. I shake myself back to reality as he explains, “I do have some. I just—”

“Stop. You do not.”

“I do! They’re cotton and feel the way being hugged by a bunch of baby ducklings would feel. I can get them out of my suitcase and show you if you don’t believe me.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“I’m not kidding, Porter. I would’ve worn them but it seems it’s college night.” He raises his chin toward me. “I saw you proudly wearing your Truman University tee before climbing into bed.”

“Portland. Best four years of your life?” I question. “Greek life forever?”

He chuckles. “I didn’t pledge. How could I have narrowed down my choices? Everybody wants to be a part of this.” His hands sweep down the sides of his body like an offering.

I scoff. “Keep telling yourself whatever you need to get up each morning.”

“What’d you study?” He ignores my comment and turns his body toward me. He removes his glasses and cups his hands under his head, keeping his dark chocolate eyes on me. It is almost as if he thinks we are going to share important secrets or engage in pillow talk, like an actual couple.

Despite never wanting us to be an actual couple, I mirror his body language. “English Language and Literature.”

“You’re a classical book snob?”

“No. Not even remotely.”

His eyes search mine, willing me to expound.

“I went into literature so I could get my Master’s in Library Sciences. I wanted to eventually work at a big library—maybe in New York or Washington, D.C.”

This small piece of my life earns me a grin. “But you ended up in Portland, selling luxury toiletries.”

“You wear glasses.” I change the subject.

If he found the shift odd, he doesn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he gives me a closed lip grin that accentuates his dimples. Those perfect dimples I’ve only just been introduced to in the last week. “Yeah, I guess you haven’t really seen me outside of work, huh?”

My brain struggles to force my hands to stay tucked under my ear before one breaks loose and pushes an unruly curl behind his ears. The room warms to a thousand degrees and the bed feels no larger than a twin. What is happening? Focus. “I like them,” I admit quietly.

Color rises to his cheeks, and he dips his head. He rolls over to grab his phone off the nightstand and asks, “What time did you set an alarm for?”

“I don’t set alarms. I naturally wake between five-thirty and six,” I tell him.

“Every day?” This seems a foreign concept to him.

“I don’t remember the last time I slept later.”

He grimaces. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Well,” I cock an eyebrow, “I would agree with that if I hadn’t just seen you climb into bed wearing socks.”

“I’m always cold at night,” he states matter-of-factly.



I want to roll my eyes and tell him that can't possibly be true with his reputation, but I stop myself.

Instead I say, "But these are Frette sheets. They're glorious. They're meant to be felt with bare feet."

After placing his phone back on the side table, Luca rolls back to face me. "I know. I have a couple sets of them at home. They are pretty great, right?"

"For reference, I normally buy clearance sheets from Target. They'd be way beneath you."

He blinks once, letting that fabric comparison register. "No, they're not. I once slept on a polyblend at flyfishing camp, and I survived to tell the tale."

This draws a chuckle from me, but mostly I enjoy the small admission he went to flyfishing camp. I try to picture preteen Luca standing on a riverbank in waders and a floppy brimmed hat, holding a fly rod and patiently determining which fly would make the fish bite. "You had to go to a camp to learn that? Didn't your dad teach you?"

Pulled from a memory, his mood turns fast. "He wasn't around a lot," Luca replies gruffly, rolling onto his back and staring up at the ceiling. The way he lets the end of the sentence linger in the air, I sense we have crossed into territory beyond the allowed trivial topics per our professional relationship.

I watch his profile, the internal struggle taking place, and give him the floor to continue or call it a night. After four long beats, he rolls back onto one shoulder. His signature unbothered-by-anything vibe returns. As if attempting to overpower the insecurities he's unconsciously admitted, he shifts his body and smooths back his hair.

Clearing his throat he announces, "I'm going to call it a night. You know, late night performance last night at Tidal and all." He recycles my comment from the morning and I chuckle. "I always listen to music to fall asleep. Want an earbud?"

Usually I read on my Kindle until it drops on my face, rendering me barely conscious enough to tuck it away next to me. It has been on my mind all day—the minute I would finally be able to be completely immersed in another world, watching characters overcome hardships, have adventures, fall in love. No, no I do not want to take an earbud and listen to one of Luca’s sleeping playlists. Ready myself to politely turn him down, another memory from earlier in the morning pops into my mind. While poring through the impressive document he had put together over the weekend, Luca asked if I wanted to listen to some music but changed his mind after I all but brushed it off.

This was him offering an olive branch and pulling me into his world.

Holding my hand out to take a bud, I say, “I’d love to.”

This seems to perk him up a bit. Such an easy compromise and one that makes me oddly happy to give him. I place it in my ear and squeeze my eyes shut for an extended breath. It has been a really long and disappointing day. While I’d definitely expected and would have preferred my own room, I have to be grateful for the circumstances we find ourselves in: the nicest sheets I’ll ever sleep on. And more cookies than anybody should have in their possession. We both turn onto our backs and pull the covers high.

“Hope it’s okay with you, but I’ve been listening to a lot of Coldplay the last few nights.” I look at him and nod my approval. He puts in his bud and grabs his phone again, swiping around a moment before the opening stanzas of “Trouble” fill one ear.

The song feels fitting for him. I shake the thought; I don’t really know him. And that is entirely my fault. He keeps attempting to be my friend, and I keep pushing him away. I turn off my bedside sconce and the room goes dark, save for the light from his phone. In the sliver of the glow, I notice Luca close his eyes, and the muscles in his face relax. His breathing slows and by the end of the song, he is out.

## **CHAPTER SIX: KATE**

WEDNESDAY

**F**rom my spot in the corner of the breakfast room, I look out the window, watching two blue herons perch on a piece of driftwood while the sun comes over the mountains. They expanded their wings, stealing as much morning warmth as they can. With a fork in one hand, I push my vegetable omelet mindlessly around the plate and pick up my phone to scroll emails.

A pair of shiny black Tom Ford dress shoes pop into my peripheral vision. I look up to find Luca holding a plate piled high with bacon and eggs and berries. I take in his dark gray three-piece suit, liking the color better than yesterday's navy. I have no idea who designed it but it screams expensive. His longer, wavy hair is carefully slicked behind his ears, but he hasn't shaved, last night's stubble is more pronounced. Those blue-rimmed glasses rest atop his nose, and he has matched his tie to them.

My stomach does the quickest somersault, and I force myself to glance away. He has to know he owns the room looking like that. But I can't give him the satisfaction of catching me reacting to his purposeful decisions. Stupid loose tongue last night. I go back to my phone, whittling down my inbox further before greeting him. "Hmm. Six forty-five. I'm surprised to see you this early."

He sits and puts the cloth napkin in his lap, lifting his arms in bewilderment. "I've shocked even myself, but here I am."

"I told you no more suits."

He takes a bite of bacon and gives me a close-lipped smirk. “You didn’t seem to object to it a moment ago.”

My eyes find something of interest out the window again to save face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” When I brave a look at him, he’s watching me with delight over my discomfort. “But now we look wrong when we show up together. I’m in a long-sleeved boho dress ready for a farmer’s market, and you’re ready for a big corporate boardroom meeting.”

“We don’t look wrong together. See”—he points to his face—“I didn’t shave, and I didn’t put in my contacts. I met you halfway.” Before I can protest, he adds, “Give me today. If we don’t make any sales, I’ll go your route. Kind of. I’m willing to do chinos and a button up with a tie and blazer, but that’s where I draw the line. I’m not walking into one of these meetings dressed like a lumberjack just to appease the locals.”

“Drop the cufflinks,” I order.

“These? No way.” He points at one, like I can’t possibly be speaking of *those* offending cufflinks but of the other ones he has hidden on his person. “They’re Hermes, from Fashion Week in Paris two years ago. They bring me luck.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed by that?”

“These people know I’m representing Thatcher Banks, that he’s my grandfather, and he would fire me faster than you can glare at me if he found out I wandered in like I didn’t respect myself or him. They stay.”

“Fair enough. Too bad you caught onto my plan, I almost had your job.” I wave my fork at him and smile. It feels genuine crossing my face. As if joking around was something we do all the time.

“I knew it, Porter! It’s always those Midwesterners you have to watch out for.” He playfully tosses a small blueberry my way. It lands on my plate and I am more than happy to pop into my mouth.



WE SIT IN A SMALL, worn-out motel lobby on a sinking couch, waiting to start our third meeting of the morning. The first two went okay, we didn't get final decisions from either of the owners, but it's still early. I absentmindedly pick at a loose thread on my sleeve, trying not to grow impatient at being kept waiting. If we get started too late here, the rest of the day will continually get bumped. I like and respect punctuality. Order. Rules. Routine.

Running a hand down the front of my dress to smooth out the non-existent wrinkles, I stand and pace, powering on my iPad to read the stats Luca had found about this establishment. The contract with their current toiletry supplier is up at the end of the year, and the motel does modest revenue and is constantly receiving rave reviews from travelers. Rumor has it they are looking to upgrade their establishment, which would inevitably boost sales with more consistent bookings. I scan the lobby once—a remodel would not hurt at all. In all his researching, Luca has found a free little library system on the corner they can sponsor as our community component. Seems like an easy sale.

“Mr. Banks and Ms. Porter?” a man's voice calls from across the room.

Luca stands, extending his hand. “Yes, Luca and Kate, please. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson, I presume?” he says, nodding at a smiling woman who comes up alongside the man.

I make a quick evaluation of the owners as we follow them back to their office. They are in their late forties, dressed casually, stiff body language. Maybe this will not be so easy.

Sitting in a folding chair, Luca opens the PowerPoint presentation I'd had the foresight to prepare on his iPad and launches into his soft opening.

“I'm going to stop you right there,” Mr. Johnson cuts him off before he can get to the third slide. “We aren't really

looking to switch suppliers.”

“May I ask why you even took this meeting, then?” Luca sits ramrod straight and keeps a friendly tone of voice.

“Well, your grandfather was a dear friend of my husband’s father,” Mrs. Johnson starts. “We felt meeting with you two was a courtesy more to them than an actual sales meeting.”

Luca’s frame tenses, and I catch him momentarily clench his jaw under his tight smile.

“Oh, how did they know one another?” I jump in to give him a moment. He has walked into this meeting frustrated, defeated. The last thing we need is for him to get defensive.

“My father owned this motel first. He passed last spring, but we had bought it from him a few years ago,” Mr. Johnson explains.

“I’m so sorry to hear about your loss. Had you grown up helping him here?” I try to warm them up.

“Oh yes, I learned how to run the place before I could drive,” Mr. Johnson chuckles to himself. “Your grandfather used to come this way every few months and stop at the bakery next door for coffee and biscotti. That’s how he met my father. They would drink coffee and swap business ideas, restaurant recommendations, golf tips.”

“That sounds like my grandfather. He makes friends everywhere he goes,” Luca jumps into the conversation again. “May I ask where your current supplier is based?”

“Mm, I’m going to defer to my wife here,” Mr. Johnson says almost apologetically, looking at his companion with adoration. “She is the one who does all of that. I fix things, do the online booking stuff.”

“They are based in New Jersey,” she replies.

“What if we told you our products are all locally sourced and produced here in Oregon?” I ask.

“I’d say you still cost too much. I’ve looked into the company before.” She shakes her head. “No offense to you two. I like you both, but at the end of the day it’s about the

bottom dollar. We're looking at a very expensive update to the property early next year—"

"And part of the new style and branding could be new local luxury toiletry products for the rooms," I say hopefully, shrugging one shoulder like it was a novel idea.

"I'm sorry," she says again. "We can't justify changing companies when the one we are currently using fits our needs and our budget. I mean, we really like your grandfather, but at the end of the day we have to do what is best for us. And honestly, it's just bottles of shampoo and lotion that get used without a second thought before being tossed away, so what does it matter?"

Luca does an exaggerated double blink, and I am sure his eyes are going to pop out of his head. His sudden defensiveness of the company surprises me. Before he can say anything he will regret or anything that will find its way back to Thatcher, I stand and put my hand on his shoulder, giving it one light squeeze. "We understand. Can't say we didn't try, huh, Luca?"

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson push back from their chairs, showing visible relief the meeting is over without too much contempt, and wish us the best of luck.



"THAT WAS A WASTE OF OUR TIME," Luca spits out, easing onto the 101, heading south out of Cannon Beach. "This whole thing is a giant waste of our freaking time."

"We're only on the second day. The first two places didn't give us a straight no, they said they had to crunch numbers and they'd call us," I remind him.

"That's the polite way of turning somebody down," he sulks. "Let me have it. What did I do wrong this time?"

"Nothing."

"You don't have to spare my feelings. I can take some constructive criticism."



“This is how sales go, Luca. Sometimes it’s a slow day. It has nothing to do with you.”

“But I’m wearing my lucky cufflinks.”

“It’ll happen. We’ll find a cute little inn that is the perfect fit for our product,” I try to keep optimistic. “Want a cookie?” I turn around in my seat to grab a bag from the gift basket we’d happily hauled out to the car after checkout.

“If you try and feed me that hippie oatmeal raisin nonsense, I’ll leave you on the side of the road.”

“You’re absolutely delightful to be around after being told no. It’s like it’s never happened before in your life,” I point out.

He gives me the side eye as he accepts a sugar cookie, and his lips quirk up. “I haven’t heard it very often.”

“Well, you’re not very gracious when it happens, you know,” I add salt to the wound.

“My therapist says the same thing.” Licking stray frosting off his finger, he begins drumming on the steering wheel with both hands, his usual confidence returning to his voice. “Okay, D.J., pick a playlist off my phone, please. Just randomly pick one without looking at the songs,” he instructs.

I glance at his titles and snort. They are listed as “Best Karaoke 1” “Best Karaoke 2” “Best Karaoke 3” “Sleeping 1” “Sleeping 2” “Sleeping 3” “When I Want to Impress 1” “When I Want to Impress 2” “When I want to Impress 3.” Classic Luca. I select a karaoke one and smile, hearing Bono’s voice after the introduction.

“Yes! ‘With or Without You’ is always a big hit with my audiences.” He begins singing along softly, and just like the night at the karaoke bar, the smooth timbre of his voice carries the notes, heading into an unabashed crescendo as the song goes along.

I watch the trees lining both sides of the highway blur. The beginning hints of fall’s reds and oranges peeping in pockets between the evergreens. We whizz through a small town

hugging both sides of the 101 and entered Oswald West State Park before the final chorus.

Luca abruptly pulls into a large parking lot and grabs the first open spot. “Have you seen this beach?”

Unbuckling, I look around. We are parked in the middle of the forest. “Where?”

“It’s a bit of a hike, so throw on something you can walk in and be sure to grab a jacket.” He slides out of the car without a care for our next meeting in an hour.

“I don’t know about this.”

“Relax. It’s not that far. Really.” Leading the way, he takes us on a path that dips under the highway and opens out onto a dirt trail flanked by mossy-dripped trees, gently falling leaves, thick underbrush on both sides of the path and nurse logs covered in new growth. Dew gleams, birds sing, and the sun is attempting to shine through the canopy. A babbling creek follows us on one side as I keep up with Luca’s brisk pace, wishing we could take all the time in the world. Never have I been anywhere that has a lush rainforest right next to the beach. It truly is mesmerizing.

I pull myself from enjoying the sounds of nature and look over at Luca. “Can I ask you something?”

He pushes his hands deep into his coat pocket and keeps leading us along. “Yeah.”

“Back at the motel, you got really ... defensive when the Johnsons said it was just shampoo. What was that about? I-I didn’t think you cared all that much about Bliss.” I stop walking to take a photo of a tree whose trunk was split high enough a child could maneuver through it.

He considers my words. “I don’t care what people think about me, but I care what they think about my grandfather. And he has poured his whole life into his company, so I guess I took it personally when they treated his life’s work like an afterthought.” He toes the dirt and blows out a sigh. “And I know to most people it’s *just* shampoo—they use it and toss the bottle and go on with their day, but I’ve always respected

that for him, it's more. He's giving people a little boost of something special first thing in the morning or the last thing before they go to bed. Plus, he's cared about the planet his whole life—before it was trendy and expected. I may not be the model employee, but I do admire him for everything he's done.”

We silently walk for a few more minutes while I process what he tells me.

“It's okay to care,” I finally say, giving him a playful bump of my shoulder into his forearm.

“I know.” He eyes me with a smile. “But it's weird that I do. Is this what being a boss is going to feel like?”

“I think so.” I scrunch my nose.

We make our way to an overlook, complete with picnic tables and a bench holding a front row view to the beach below. I practically skip down the remaining path to the rocks that lead down to the sand. Carefully making our way to the shore, I turn in a slow circle and take in everything. The beach is cove-like, a wide expanse with a waterfall at one end cascading into the high surf. The creek we had followed empties out like a fan into the ocean, and where the two bodies of water meet, a group of kids are building sandcastles. Surfers are in abundance: putting on wetsuits to head in, taking off wetsuits to hike out, discussing the waves with one another as they passed. Dozens of them sit out beyond the break, studying the pattern of the tide. A game of frisbee here, a bocce ball match there. People spread out in chairs, dogs close by, enjoying lunch and basking in another beautiful fall day.

Luca holds out his arms and nods at me. “Incredible, right?”

Before I cave and give him the satisfaction of showing me what heaven must look like, a surfer approaches us, carrying his board, his wetsuit rolled down to his waist. “Luca? Man! I haven't seen you in a long time.”

“Baker! Still living the life, I see. Yeah, I haven't made it this way in a while.” They greet each other with an elaborate

handshake before Luca stands back and takes in his friend.

“You’re a suit now!”

“It would seem that way,” he grins and turns toward me. “Baker, this is Porter.”

I smile, but before I can say anything, Baker throws back his head in amusement. “Luca, Luca. You’ve always got some lady with you. How long have you two been dating?”

Both of us put our hands up defensively and shake our heads with me loudly protesting in clarification, “Oh, no. No. No. No. Not dating. He’s actually my boss.”

“Boss? Somebody put him in charge?” Baker looks at me disbelievably. “Be careful, he’ll try to date you. You’re just his type.”

I roll my eyes and walk away from the conversation, as Luca asks his friend, “Don’t you have somebody to sue? Or some wetlands to save?”

A stunning wall of rock and tidepools sit at one end of the cove. Fringed with thick, bright green moss, I watch the way the waves splash up the sides. It’s one of those things in life a camera won’t properly capture, but I try anyway. Coming from life on a farm in the Midwest, when I’ve thought of the beach, I’ve always pictured warm, white sand and palm trees. This is so much better than that. A few minutes later, Luca jogs alongside me.

“Sorry about him. He’s an arrogant lawyer who lives in Cannon Beach, but we met here once when we were both surfing, and I run into him from time to time when I’m here. That was fun.”

“You know people in the most random places.” Pocketing my phone, I take one last look around. “We should get going.”

“Hey, you never told me what you thought about this place.” He looks at me eagerly.

I scan the area with what I hope comes across as disinterest. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t buy it. Before Baker interrupted us, you were spellbound.”

“Spellbound?” I scoff.

“I saw it in your eyes. Just admit you love it—it’s totally that kind of place. Tucked away from the beaten path and magical.”

“Eh.”

“Fine. Play hardball. There is more where this came from,” he says with a mischievous look in his eye that should absolutely annoy me, but instead sends a traitorous thrill through me.

# **CHAPTER SEVEN: LUCA**

WEDNESDAY

Porter jumps on her phone and iPad the minute we get back into the car, before I even turn on the ignition. How she works, so focused and determined, was something to aspire to. I have not been the most diligent employee in the past—at any job I’ve held—and I am committed to changing. For my grandpa and grandma, for the business, for all the employees counting on me. The responsibility feels absolutely crushing, but it is time I rise to the challenge.

My phone rings as I am about to ask her what she is figuring out and how she feels we should tackle our next meeting. The name Josephine comes across the infotainment system. Quickly I decline the call and see from the corner of my eye Porter scowl toward the system before she returns her attention to work.

“You could have taken that,” she says.

I let out a deep breath. “I’ll deal with it later.”

Then three text alerts come through, and again, I see Kate raise an eyebrow as the name Josephine flashes each time. “Really, if you need to pull over and take the call outside for privacy, go for it. I’m just looking over a few things for the team in Portland.”

“I’m fine,” I tell her, watching the road.

We wind out of the forest and down the mountainside to our next town. The blue skies give way to postcard perfection where the sand meets the ocean. Kites abundantly blow on the beach below. I can’t help but care she is missing all of this, but

Porter is suddenly in a standoffish mood, and I have no idea what I've done.

“CAN you please start the next song? The call threw off the system and the playlist didn't start back up.” I hand her my phone. She barely gives it a second thought, tapping the phone to life and starting things again.

“Oh, yes. Another good one.” I hope I sound upbeat. We need to talk about a few things: Josephine. Kate's mood. Our next meeting. Those are all longer conversations than we have time for. “If you know it, sing along. This car is a safe space,” I say, trying to tease her.

“I don't know the words,” she says with disgust.

“You don't know Harry Styles?” This is most curious to me. What does Porter listen to? She did not appreciate my Lady Gaga performance, so I am guessing she is not a Gagaloo. Mentally adding music to the list of things we needed to discuss, I weave us down the highway and look over at her.

“Nope,” she says with a pronounced ‘p’ and closes the iPad, meeting my eyes. “But you seem to.”

“The ladies love Harry. It's always a big hit at karaoke when I sing ‘Sign of the Times.’”

She lets that sink in for a second before shifting her whole body in my direction. I brace myself. The look on her face was her for-Luca-only death glare. “So much to say. Where to even start?”

I know it is a risk to cut her off before she blasts me with all my faults, but we are edging into the town of Manzanita and coming up on the Mystical Mermaid Inn. “We have about two minutes before we get to our stop, so let me have it.”

“First of all, do not classify me with ‘the ladies’ of which you speak. I am not part of the co-ed bar scene. Secondly, I may be going out on a limb here but you take lots of dates to karaoke. True?”



I nod like I'm not embarrassed she's asked me, excessive judgment lacing around her question. "Yes, it's a good place for a first date because it's got decent food and something to do and lots of fun people..." I stop. Even I can't sell it. It sounds stupid to my ears as I try to defend it. I took one woman there one time years ago, and she loved it, so due to my lazy nature, I chose to never think outside the box again. First dates are the only dates I am interested in, and doing the same thing every time keeps it simple. I do not need to explain how I consider—and enjoy—that environment for a date and risk her thinking even less of me.

She narrows her glare. "Yeah, what we went on was not a date. Repeat after me, 'Kate, we did not go on a date.'"

"Porter, we did not go on a date."

"Why did that surfing lawyer say I was your type? I've seen the women you hang around, and I don't look or act a thing like them. I feel like I should be offended."

My knuckles grip the steering wheel, but I relax them before she notices. I hope. "He's an idiot and says stuff to rile people. It's what lawyers do. Ten seconds."

"We'll table this for the time being, and ... I will admit I don't hate this song. But I don't care to hear any of his others."

That last part makes me smile. "Hang with me long enough, and you'll change your tune. Wait a second, are you a T-Swift fan? You're a closet one, aren't you?" I can't imagine her openly screaming front row of a Taylor Swift concert, but I can picture her belting out all the songs in the privacy of her car.

"Any woman who claims she can't relate to 'All Too Well' is lying to herself. It's probably the anthem of every woman who's ever dated you." She chuckles. "Ha, I'm going to have to look up if there's a Reddit thread dedicated to this. I'll bet there is."

I pull into the parking lot and shut off the engine. "I don't know what any of that means."

She wraps her hand around the door handle but doesn't open it. "Yes you do. You are all about numbers and notches and popularity. You're about fun and being the center of attention. You think you're one in a million."

Her words punch me in the gut and suck the breath from me. It takes me longer to recover this time than after her verbal barrage at dinner yesterday. When given the chance to speak her mind, she doesn't hold back, and I don't think she realizes how biting her words are. Or maybe she does and is heartless enough she simply doesn't care. I climb out of the car, and she follows suit. Brightly colored shells are scattered up and down the walkway, leading to the focal point near the entrance of the motel. The life size bronze mermaid statue, flanked by wooden anchors and life preservers greets us. So does a tabby cat who desperately wants attention, weaving around our legs. I snap a few photos of the establishment as the door swings open.

"I see you have met our fearless and overly friendly mascot, Tempest!" A middle aged woman meets us at the threshold. "Welcome, I'm Gayle. Am I wrong to assume you're Kate Porter and Luca Banks?"

Her smile stretches ear to ear. It is inviting, offering me a bit of hope. Perhaps false hope, but after the last couple we'd met with, I was willing to take the positive and run with it. Dressed in a flowy skirt and oversized top, she claps her hands, causing the many bangles circling each arm to clink. Bringing one hand to her cheek, fingers covered in rings of all sizes, styles, and stones, she says, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Porter stiffens beside me, hand frozen halfway to Gayle in offering.

I step inside, shaking Gayle's hand and walk over to a loveseat in the reception area. "Yes, I'm Luca Banks and this is my associate, the VP of contracts, Kate Porter."

Gayle lowers herself onto an eccentric teal chair across from us and motions for Porter to sit. She pauses a moment before sinking next to me.

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to meet with us,” Porter snaps out of her fog, pulling up the presentation.

“Pleasure’s all mine. I just—I hope I’m not overstepping, but really, are you two okay? I saw you pull up, and it looked like you were in the middle of ... well, quite frankly, a lover’s quarrel.”

Porter lets out one loud *ha* and shakes her head. “Definitely not. We just—we just got lost there for a minute, but still made it here on time! This is a great Inn—I love the way you’ve decorated it.”

Gayle’s lips turn up and she points a jeweled finger between us. “In a previous life, before buying the motel, I was a marriage counselor. Call it what you want, but you weren’t lost—at least as far as driving is concerned.”

I smooth my hands down my pants and readjust my posture. Porter places the iPad on her lap and spins her bracelet around a few times. The pause stretches a week, and I am ready to refocus our meeting when Porter speaks up.

“Before we get started, can I ask why you called it a lover’s quarrel?”

She looks straight at Gayle with confidence, and while her voice was even, I see the tops of her cheeks flush.

Gayle crosses her legs and throws one arm into the air nonchalantly. “I’ve seen a lot of couples in my day, I’ve watched a lot of arguments happen in front of me. You”—she looks at Porter—“were mad at him. Your actions were animated, I’m assuming your voice was a little raised or perhaps snarky. But he”—her eyes meet mine—“never once furrowed his brow or crossed his arms. His body language never got defensive in any way. It simply reminded me of a couple who has been together a while and respects one another. One who knows how to communicate.”

Next to me, Porter’s always perfect posture caves and she hunches her shoulders slightly. “Guess we fooled you,” she

says quietly. “We haven’t known each other that long, and we aren’t all that great at communicating.”

“Ah,” Gayle replies. “So, not a lover’s quarrel but a misplaced-affection-tension quarrel. Those are fun. They usually lead to great things.”

Porter turns her head and looks me over. Her blue eyes give away nothing. I offer her a small half smile and a nod.

Clearing her throat, Gayle rubs her hands together and snaps us out of our moment. “Okay, let’s chat shampoo. I need something that smells like a mermaid on a sunny day.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT: LUCA

WEDNESDAY

“Sit in the bus,” Porter says, pointing to the mini-sized Tillamook Yum bus that jets out of the wall at the Tillamook Creamery.

“You sit in the bus,” I reply, realizing after it leaves my lips how childish the retort sounds.

She ignore the response and puts her hands on my arms to guide me toward the short line of tourists lined up for the photo op. I hate how much I like when Porter seemingly sets aside her grudge and accidentally brushes her arm against mine or in this case, purposefully touches me. It feels like a little win; like she’s breaking down her wall and we are friends.

“You’re president of the department. It’s *your* duty to take the kitschy photos for social media. I’ll even post them if you will just cooperate.”

The creamery dining hall is in full swing. A maze of customers meander, hot off the self-guided tour of the cheese production lines, looking to grab a quick bite before the factory closes. With our pizza orders placed, Porter has wandered over to take a look at the iconic half-bus, luring me into her marketing trap.

“But my suit is expensive and—”

“And that is exactly why I told you not to wear a suit.” She points to the open driver’s seat and nudges her head in its direction. “Lose the tie, pop open the top button of your shirt — you know, a little casual fun. Go and smile for the camera!”

Tie tucked safely in my suit pocket, sleeves rolled to my elbows, I obey orders and sit down behind the steering wheel, offering my best smile. Taking half a dozen photos from different angles and distances, she smiles triumphantly, and a moment later, I feel my phone buzz in my pocket.

“I don’t need these,” I chuckle, waving my phone at her with the pictures pulled up. “I modeled, you post.”

“Oh, my bad. I thought you were interested in some new headshots to sign after your performances.” She smirks. My face drops, and she quickly adds, “I’m teasing. But flag on the posting play—I need you to do it, while I finish putting out a fire. Hurry, it’s the golden hour for the Bliss algorithm to do its thing, so hesitate no longer! The next ones are my responsibility. I promise.”

We grab our food and find an empty table, sitting across from one another. Porter types away on her phone while I pick the photo that showcases the creamery more than me, throw a quick caption on it, and put it on all our social media handles.

I lift the lid to my artisan pizza and let the steam waft over my face. It smells heavenly after a long day of no luck. Porter sets her phone aside and does likewise.

“Mmm, this looks incredible,” she says, lifting up a slice to let it cool. “Sorry I was on the phone the whole way here. The contract with that boutique in Old Town—Lolo’s—was sent over to them before we left, and they hadn’t signed yet. Apparently they want to renegotiate the price and volume? I will have to look at it more tonight but Purchasing was texting me in a panic.”

“Lie.” I take a bite and slowly chew, watching her reaction.

“What do you mean, lie? They’re reconsidering our partnership after *seven* years.” She rips a large bite off her slice and scowls at me before putting it in her mouth.

I pull a second slice from my box and wave it at her. “You probably dealt with that for about three minutes. You were texting Reddington or Marshall all stressed out over what Gayle alleged and now you’re worried she is some kind of

fortuneteller or beach witch and you can't picture a worse future than one with me in it."

Her jaw locks mid-bite, and she puts her pizza down.

Satisfied my assessment is spot on, I stuff the rest of the slice in my mouth and slowly sip my soda in a long congratulatory pull.

"Did Natalie text you?" she finally asks.

Hmm. It is cautious, a hint of accusatory. It makes me smile that not only had she texted Reddington about me but is worried Reddington would immediately let me know.

"Porter, calm down. I'm a good guesser. I read people." I square my shoulders and place my elbows on the table. "I know you're too smart to need an hour to solve a problem like that Lolo nonsense. They'll sign—Marshall warned me last week that they do this every other year just to cause drama."

"Jill never told me that." There is an undertone of disappointment her friend informed me and not her.

She blinks and looks off to the side, watching the cars head north and south on the 101. Her lips purse a moment before she returns her attention to me. "Doesn't what Gayle said bother you?"

I consider the evaluation made in our meeting and the feelings Porter had shared more than once regarding how she viewed me. She waits for me to respond, pulling her hair up into a knot at the top of her head and absentmindedly twisting her bracelet on her wrist, like she had at Gayle's.

"No, it doesn't," I finally tell her.

"She thought we were a couple, and then when we told her otherwise, she was bold enough to allege we would be at some point." She scrunches her nose in disgust. Despite trying to sound annoyed, I catch a twinkle in her eye as she looks down at her pizza. She blushes.

"Eh, don't take her seriously. She probably misses counseling people and thought she was onto something." I swipe my hand in front of my face, dismissing the topic. "And



hey, she gave us the most solid ‘maybe’ we’ve gotten. I like her, even if she is unconventional.”

“She was wrong, though. We’re not good at communicating,” Porter says almost reluctantly.

I take a drink of my soda and smile. “So let’s fix that. Separately, we’re not bad. I mean, I’m a *great* communicator. People love talking to me. You’re a *good* communicator—and you’re fantastic at yelling at me.”

This elicits her to throw back her head and laugh. An actual, genuine laugh. It makes my heart jump and makes my hands sweat slightly. I’ve made lots of women laugh over the years, but making Porter laugh feels like I win the most coveted of life’s prizes. In that moment, I vow to do whatever I can to make it happen again as often as possible.

She collects herself and sighs, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. “I’m really sorry about that. I’ve been *way* out of line a few times. I’m kind of working through accepting this new president and vice president arrangement.”

“Hey,” I say softly, making sure she meets my eyes. “Water under the bridge. I probably deserved all of it, okay? Let’s not start being great communicators on such a bumner topic.”

She seems to consider that for a moment and smiles. “Okay, then. What do you want to talk about?”

“That’s a loaded question,” I tell her, standing to gather our trash. “Let’s start simple. What kind of music do you listen to?”



SURFER’S Inn Motel is right on the beach in Netarts. Off the beaten path of the 101, a whole slew of little towns hold what I hope is going to be the Holy Grail of sales for us. This place is our first meeting in the morning, making it an easy option for staying overnight. We are placed in rooms next to one another with a little shared porch.

Porter and I had spent the quick drive from dinner debating our favorite musical artists. She unapologetically prefers upbeat songs from Taylor Swift and Weezer, while I promise the ballads from the eighties and nineties are the hill I'll die on. That makes her laugh hard. She thinks I am joking. I wasn't going to correct her when I could hear that blissful sound again so soon after our moment at dinner.

Coldplay is a band we have in common, which surprises me since we'd listened to them the night before and she had stayed quiet. When she goes as far as putting them in her top five, my chest momentarily hurts. If she notices the hitch in my breathing, she doesn't say anything. Grateful, I pull us up to the motel before I take our conversation from friendly chatting to oversharing on steroids. We check into our rooms and bid each other goodnight.

The sun is getting ready to set, casting that perfect lighting that makes the world seem like a happy, safe place. Part of me wants to go next door and ask Porter if she'll wander across the street to watch the sunset with me on the beach, but I don't need to push my luck. We are closing in on thirty-six continuous hours together, and she deserves a breather. I rummage around in my suitcase and pull out shorts and a shirt, grab my resistance bands, and head down to the water's edge. I turn back to the motel and see it swathed in the perfect glow of evening light and can't help but take a few photos with my phone.

Earbuds in, I find a recommended Spotify playlist and work through a series of exercises targeting my arms and back. A few people join me on the stretch of sand as the sun dips below the horizon. An older man slowly inches his way to a log and lets his chocolate lab off its leash. The dog comes straight for me, tail wagging, ready to play.

Music off, earbuds out, I watch the gentleman huff, trying to push himself off the log. "Oh, Winston! Leave the poor fellow alone, he doesn't want to play catch."

I put the bands in my pocket and scratch the dog behind the ears. "Winston, is it? I like that. Here, boy!" Bending to

grab up a stick, I toss it as far as I can. The dog eagerly takes off, and I smile at the man. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” he waves. “Didn’t mean to interrupt your evening. Looked like you were doing one of those torture exercises my physical therapist made me do once.”

I laugh, and Winston comes back at a trot, happily depositing the wrong stick at my feet. Pitching it again, the dog takes off once more. “PTs are evil by nature.”

The man nods in solidarity.

Winston brings back the right stick upon his return and drops it back into my hands with his nose. Tongue flapping with anticipation, he looks at me and the stick and then over to where I had previously thrown it, as if telling me to get with the program and hurry up. I try to fake him out by pretending to throw it, but he catches on. After a step forward, he looks back at me and runs around to check if I am holding it behind my back.

“Oh! You’re too smart, Winston. Too smart. Come here.” I sprint down the beach and he follows. Pushing as hard as I can until my legs burn out, I stop and catch my breath. All the tension from the past two days leaves immediately, giving way to a surge of endorphins.

The high feels good. I’ve only ever known it from exercise or performing. Until today. Porter’s laugh produced the same effect. As fast as the thought comes, I push it aside. That can’t be. A woman like Porter is the last thing I can spend any energy on right now. And it is a complete waste of time—she loathes me. Maybe not loathes but I definitely am not a favorite of hers. I take the deepest breath my lungs will allow, holding onto my mood for an extra few seconds, before jogging Winston back to his owner.

## **CHAPTER NINE: KATE**

WEDNESDAY

**K**indle set aside and long forgotten, I sit in bed, scrolling my phone. I consume video after video—mindless entertainment giving me a better peek into the life of my boss. I hate what I see. Except I really don't hate it at all. It should mortify me to tell people I work with him. My respect should be lost. But I can't stop watching—and discovering maybe I have misread him. He has no inhibitions, nothing shames him. I want to be like that so badly. Want to embrace life without worrying what others think; truly enjoy life the way it is supposed to be enjoyed. Find something I love more than words and run with it.

He seems to be that way with everything he touches: dozens of videos with him doing karaoke, camping with friends and jumping off cliffs into freezing lakes, rowing with one of Portland's exclusive club teams—I didn't even know he does that. People appear to pull out their phones whenever he is around and exploit knowing him. But in every video, photo, message, he seems to lap it up and be the life of the party. What would that be like?

I toggle over to my texts and find the thread from the photos I'd sent Luca before dinner. Hesitating a moment, I want us to talk but not *talk*. I don't want to finish our conversation from earlier in the car before Gayle. It's over. I want to chat like we did after dinner.

He is probably sick of me and my constant raining on his parade, but after nearly two days together in close quarters, it

is weird to have space to breathe again. I don't like it as much as I imagined I would.

Finally, I summon the courage and type.

Me: Hey. You still up?

I'D SPIED on him when he left his room to go work out. Watched him play fetch and run down the beach with a dog. Through the thin walls I heard his shower turn on and then off, his feet putter around his room and finally, his bed groan under his weight after crawling into it. There was a good chance he was asleep already.

Luca: Porter?

Me: \*eye roll emoji\*

Yes. You know my number.

Luca: I didn't expect you to ever voluntarily text me.

I get it, though. I'm growing on you. It was only a matter of time.

I PAUSE and let that sit longer than necessary. Maybe I don't want to engage his ego; heavens knows he doesn't need anybody else stoking that fire. *Tell him it's about work, Kate! Make an excuse, ask something simple, and call it a night.* My brain begs me to be reasonable. Except reasonable is not

remotely what I want to do. Not right now. We'd had a normal, friendly conversation on our drive to the motel after the creamery. There were more of those to be had, right? Ugh. I was humanizing him. The one thing I swore I'd never do.

A full minute later, my internal battle is interrupted.

Luca: Are you there?

Are you okay?

Should I come over?

I REPLY before giving him a chance to knock on my door.

Me: No. I'm in bed.

Luca: So?

Me: So, I'm happily surrounded by peace and quiet.

Don't want to ruin that.

Luca: But you're going to text me. When I'm in the room next door?

Me: Seems that way.

Luca: What's up?

I SIT UP, crisscross applesauce like elementary school, pull the covers over my lap and smile.

Me: The post from the Tillamook Factory is getting good feedback online.

Lots of likes, lots of views. Next time we should do a reel.

Luca: That's what you wanted to text me about? Work? Reels?

Boring.

Me: Fine. I've been investigating this Harry Styles person you claim all the ladies love and something hit me.

HE DOESN'T LET a beat pass before responding.

Luca: And ... ?

Me: You're him. Case in point.

<attach one of the many videos of Harry from Instagram as proof>

Luca: No!



He's ME. He stole MY moves.

See that one at the end of the clip? With his hips and the way he bounces his fingers to the beat? That's the same one I do all the time. You've seen it, you know you have.

A LOUD LAUGH ESCAPES, and I cup my hand to muffle the sound, knowing our beds are sharing the wall and he can hear me.

Me: Right. A world famous musician stole moves from a karaoke bar god. I'm sure.

Luca: Fine. I'll have him text you and tell you himself.

Me: Sure sure.

Luca: Hang on. I can see if he's willing to FaceTime.

He does owe me one.

I was going to save the favor until One Direction finally has a reunion and ask to be their opening act, but I guess I'll call it in now instead.

Me: There is no way you know him.

Luca: We golfed together at a charity tournament once in London.

We bet each other an open-ended “you owe me” and I won.

THIS CLAIM MAKES ME PAUSE. In the world of Luca Banks, this is absolutely possible. Probable? I’m not entirely sure. I decide not to engage further and either let it be another crazy story of his, proving once and for all his life is superior to everybody else’s or risk looking like an idiot when he ultimately says, ‘Gotcha!’

Luca: You don’t believe me, do you?

That’s it, I’m really calling him.

CHOOSING TO IGNORE HIM, I move on to what else I have unearthed.

Me: I also found a whole bunch of YouTube videos of you. You have either quite the following or a lot of stalkers.

Luca: I’m guessing some of each.

What’d you see?

Should I be embarrassed by what you found? I don’t look myself up.

I CAN PICTURE him sitting in bed, shrugging as if he couldn't imagine why any of my

findings would be anything other than incredible entertainment.

Me: Depends on what embarrasses you.

A few of the videos have an impressive number of views—you nearly went viral.

Luca: What were the fan favorites?

Me: Anytime you have a mic in your hand.

You weren't kidding about the love ballads.

How and why do you know so many?

Luca: They're easy to sing to a drunk crowd. Everybody knows them and enjoys them.

BEFORE I CAN RESPOND with something sarcastic, he chimes back in.

Luca: Also, I spent a lot of time with my grandma growing up, and she loves that music. She's the one who introduced me to all of it.

It was kind of our thing—listening to music—singing at the top of our lungs while playing or baking cookies.

Everybody should have grown up with a grandma like mine.

THE SMALL PART of me that clings to the idea of continuing to hate him knows right then that that ship has sailed. Even though most of our coworkers despise him, Jill and Natalie have both told me he is a good guy. That has to mean something. And this last admission proves it.

I'm not sure how to respond. That feels personal and those kinds of conversations make sense to have in person, not over texting. It smells of pillow talk. When I don't respond, he baits me.

Luca: I did some digging too.

THIS GETS MY IMMEDIATE ATTENTION. I sit up straighter, mind in overdrive, wondering what videos of me could possibly be on the internet. My social media accounts are all private, but I have no idea what somebody else could have posted somewhere.

Me: What do you mean?

Luca: I listened to Swift's song.

In fact, I listened to both versions while I worked out.

Me: And?

Luca: That ten minute one was long.

Me: That's it?

Luca: No. I think you're right.

THOSE FIVE MAGICAL words curve my lips up.

Me: How so?

Luca: I think I owe some women a huge apology.

In my defense though, I don't intentionally lead women on. They just make more out of our dates than what they are.

RIDICULOUS as that is and making absolutely no sense whatsoever, a ping of jealousy goes through me. A little reminder he has dated so many women. I haven't even flirted with the idea of wanting him to want to take me out before now. I also know we are so vastly different. To him, a date is another appointment on his calendar. Something to fill the time between exciting adventures. To me a date was hope, possibility, a social engagement that didn't happen very often.

I shake my head—*that* is the problem. I expect Luca to have the same standard I do when it comes to finding happily-ever-after. He claims he doesn't lead women on, but it feels like a cheap cop out for having a good time and moving on with no regard to how his behavior makes the woman feel. His history is a mile long, and I refuse to come in second—or in his case fifty-second?—ever again. From what I've gathered

from watercooler gossip, he only goes on first dates. On rare occasions a second. Not interested in that at all.

Scowling, I pick up my phone and reply.

Me: Taking them to a loud bar screams romance and long-term relationship to them?

If that's the case, you need to find new women to date.

Luca: You're not wrong about that.

I'm ready for more.

I'm ready for the best.

# CHAPTER TEN: KATE

## THURSDAY

**S**omething shifted last night. It was a cosmic event and now there is no going back to the way things had been.

We are back to being colleagues the way we had been leading up to the fundraiser in July, when we had been forced to spend all the hours together, go on lunch runs, order in dinners at the office. Two weeks of time-intensive proximity. It had made us friend-ish.

We are there again. The switch has flipped even though nothing has *actually* happened. We texted. But in that exchange, we opened up with one another in ways we haven't been able to face to face. In ways we haven't been able to because I haven't allowed it. Luca has never been anything but friendly to me—willing to dangle himself out there to earn my friendship.

Now I crave his.

After we said our goodnights, it took hours of reading before I finally crashed hard sometime in the middle of the night. A barking dog rouses me from a weird dream, and I rush to shower and get ready. Carefully choosing to wear my suit again, I pull on the cobalt blue blouse that matches my eyes. The suit makes me feel less whimsical and fancy free, more grounded. Focused. In charge. I need to concentrate on work now and worry about sifting through feelings tonight. Safely tucked into bed while FaceTiming Jill and Natalie.

Can I even admit my thoughts to them before I know for sure what they even are? Yes. More than anything, I want



them to talk me off the ledge and set me straight. Were they right about Luca and I was wrong? It's looking that way. But was this situation with Luca as civilized as I was making it out in my head? Am I possibly experiencing Stockholm Syndrome? Probably not. Crap.

I shake my head, looking in the mirror: light eye shadow applied, mascara swiped across lashes, bangs pinned away from eyes, hair loosely hanging—waving dreamily from the ocean's humidity. Deep breath. I got this. I look like the VP of Contracts and Charitable Giving. Securing my pearl stud earrings, I walk out my door.

Luca is already standing on our shared patio, holding the last two oatmeal raisin cookies and a pint of milk. He's lost the glasses but still looks show-stopping in gray chino pants and a white dress shirt with a navy blazer. "Good morning. It's important to have a breakfast of champions before we get going."

"You got me milk?" I ask, happily taking his offering. Stepping closer to him, I feel like presence like a live wire.

He clears his throat and straightens his tie. My favorite red one. "I passed a little deli on my run earlier this morning, up the road a ways. They opened a few minutes ago, and I hurried over to get you some."

"Thank you. Wait—you've already gone running?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I got up and ran when the sun came up, then ate six chocolate chip cookies and washed them all down with two Red Bulls. It's going to be a great day, I can feel it." He smiles, dimples on full display.

"You're going to crash in an hour," I laugh, tucking away that part about him being unable to sleep. There could be lots of understandable reasons for that: worries over the meetings today, staying somewhere unfamiliar, missing somebody back in Portland. Josephine, perhaps? Whoever she was, she stresses him out every time she calls.

With a chuckle, he says, "You're probably right. Do you \_\_\_"

Question stopped short by his phone ringing, a crease forms between his brow after a glance at the caller ID. One deep breath in and out through the nose; his thumb hovers over the screen. “I have to take this. I am so sorry. I’ll meet you in the lobby?”

He jogs across the street to the beach and throws his head back, pinching the bridge of his nose, just like the night at Haystack Rock. I watch him pace for a minute, gesturing as he responds, before I walk across the parking lot to our first appointment.

The bell tinkles when the door opens and a man in a bright, flowing Hawaiian shirt looks up from the desk. “Welcome! You must be my sales pitch. I’m Patrick.”

“Kate Porter,” I offer. “I’m afraid I’m going to be terribly rude and finish my breakfast while we wait for my counterpart to wrap up a call. But please tell me a little about your place—I enjoyed my stay last night.”

He motions for me to take a seat on one of the retro accent chairs that looks across the way toward the beach. I can make out Luca’s posture. Shoulders hunched in defeat. Patrick’s tale of purchasing and renovating the motel is completely lost on me, my attention stolen by curiosity over what is happening with the mystery call. Unfortunately, I notice only too late that Patrick has asked me something.

Bringing my full attention back to our potential client, I smile politely. “I’m sorry, what did you ask me?”

“Are those cookies from Rose’s place?” he gestures to the bag in my hand.

“Um, yeah. You know Rose?”

“Her cookies are famous—do you feel it made your stay more special?” he prods, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

I tuck the remaining food away in my bag and cross my leg, attention fully on the meeting now. “No, but you know what I do think makes a stay special? What’s worth shouting

out on social media and telling all my friends about? Luxury shampoo and conditioner.”

He grins and steeples his fingers together. “Ah, so that’s the secret sauce. Tell me more.”

LUCA FINALLY MAKES it into the meeting as I am wrapping things up and emailing Patrick a cost-benefit analysis. He walks into the lobby, tucking flyaway curls behind his ears, an all-business smile plastered on his face. He profusely apologizes for missing the pitch and shoots the breeze with Patrick for fifteen minutes about the locally famous rock tunnel leading to Tunnel Beach. There was nothing in his demeanor to hint at anything beyond being on a normal phone call that took longer than it should have.

“Alright, we’ve taken up more of your time than you needed us to, Patrick. I know Porter told you everything you could ever hope to know about Bliss by Banks. Do you have any last questions?” he asks.

“I need to run a few things by my accountant, but I like you guys. I like what you’re doing to help communities and your sustainability efforts. Kate explained things really well to me, which I appreciated. You’ll hear from me in a few days,” he says, shaking both our hands.

We contain ourselves until we are back at the shared patio between our rooms.

“I think this calls for a high-five,” Luca says, excitement vibrating off of him.

What I take for jest is anything but. He lifts his hand, palm open, and waits for me to slap it. I hang back a moment and look him up and down. “I didn’t say it earlier, but you dressed down. I like it. It’s ... the real you.”

“What makes you think this is the real me?”

“I think you wear expensive suits or high-end adventure wear or linen button up shirts that are one hundred seventy-

five bucks a pop because it's the expectation, not because that's what you truly are comfortable in."

"Hmm."

"I know I'm right," I say with a single shoulder shrug. I don't mean it maliciously; I just know I'm getting to see a side of Luca he hasn't displayed at the office. And now that he is president, he probably never will. Once we get back, he'll look like Mr. Banks, wearing the traditional three-piece suits forever.

Hand in the air, still bent at the elbow, he gives me a return glance, taking me in. "And you're wearing your power suit. Which gives you an extra dose of confidence ... but I'm not sure why you need an extra dose. You're already the most confident woman I know. Now will you please give me a high-five, Porter, because my arm is starting to ache."

I indulge him, and satisfied, we go into our rooms and grab our things.



DEPOE BAY IS BREATHTAKING. The sign as we entered town claimed this to be the world's smallest harbor. I am in love with it. The weather has shifted as we've made our way down the coast, popping in and out of meetings all day, and now the water glistens with the last rays of sun peeking through the dark, threatening clouds. I sit on the harbor wall near the visitor's center, spooning clam chowder into my mouth, watching for whale spouts, and wondering if life can get any better.

Luca joins me with a burger in hand and shoves his cell phone into his pocket. He has that famous disgruntled look about him—whoever keeps calling him has put him in a real mood. But to his credit, he is quick to push the feelings aside and bounce back to his normal self once he gets off the call.

"There! I see one!" I point just outside the bay where a spray of water mists into the air. "Did you see that?"

He takes a big bite of burger and nods.

Just then, the whale's tail flips and slaps the water. I gasp in complete awe, hand on my chest, and turn to face Luca as he lets out an amused laugh. It reaches the corners of his eyes and gives way to tiny crow's feet. I've never noticed that before, and I like it.

"I think I can die a happy woman. A whale—out in the wild—waved to me. While I'm sure you've ridden one across the Pacific, I never imagined I'd see one, let alone have its tail pop out of the water in front of my very eyes."

He swallows his food and gives me a teasing eye roll. "I'm sorry to disappoint, but I've never ridden a whale. I have seen them lots of times before, sure, but this was cool, getting to watch it with you."

I note the lack of sarcasm in his voice at the last part and feel a momentary hit of adrenaline. I like sitting here watching whales with him too. "Can I ask you something?"

"Spout." He points back out to the harbor where two go off simultaneously.

We sit there watching for second or two more to see if another tail slap—or better—would happen, before I elbow him lightheartedly. "You're ignoring my question."

He raises his eyebrows expressively. "You want to know who those calls are from."

"Maybe."

He wiggles his body over a few inches closer to mine and playfully bounces his burger on my nose once before diving into another exaggeratedly large bite. "Porter! You're jealous!"

I wipe the bridge of my nose, taken aback by his action. "Hardly." Lie. My curiosity at this point is definitely bordering on slight jealousy. "I want to know who keeps making you all angsty. You tense up, throw your head back, and pinch your nose like so"—I demonstrate for him—"and then plaster a smile on your face like nothing ever happened."

My reenactment earns me a half smile. “Okay, fair. Those calls I keep getting are from my mom.”

His answer catches me off guard. We sit there a long ten seconds, watching the water.

“Spout,” I call out, scooping the last of my chowder from the bowl. With a final glance toward the whales, I stand to find a garbage can along the promenade. Luca follows me, squishing his paper into a ball. “No, I don’t buy that. Your mom is not calling you all the time. And you have her listed as Josephine, not Mom, so there’s no way ... never mind. I guess it’s really none of my business, anyway. I’m sorry I asked.”

We walk up to the car, and Luca steps around to my side, surprising me by getting my door. I think it surprises him too, as he looks away sheepishly and breaks out into a wide grin.

After closing the door, he skips around to the driver’s side and hops in. “I promise you. Josephine—the name that kept harassing me with texts repeatedly the other day—is my mom.”

“Why do you call her Josephine?”

“Because that’s her name.”

I playfully swipe at his bicep. “You know what I mean.”

“Hey!” He fakes an injury. “She’s not the most maternal. I mean, she ...” he sighs big. “You’d have to meet her to get it. I refer to her by her first name when talking to anybody but her. Trust me, I only call her Mom to her face. Although, I’m sure it wouldn’t even phase her if I slipped up.”

“That’s kind of sweet she wants to see how you are doing.”

He lets out one curt laugh. “No, she is at home with nothing better to do than check in on me all day long.”

“Why do you say that?”

His face lights up, mischievousness written all over it. “Because I took her car.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN: LUCA

THURSDAY

Porter looks around the car like I am pulling her leg. “This is *her* Forrester?”

“Yeah.”

“Um, I don’t even know where to start with all the questions running through my mind.”

“Start with one,” I say patiently.

“Did you steal her car?” She is dead serious. “Is she going to call the cops on us?”

“No, we’re fine,” I assure her.

“But she isn’t leaving her house *because* you took her car? Where’s your Jaguar? Won’t she just drive that?”

“My Jag is at home.” I lean my head back on the headrest and let out a nervous chuckle. “But no, she won’t drive it. A few years ago her psychic told her it would be unwise to ever drive any car other than this one. Something about the moon in retrograde and her aura’s tie to the spirit of this car ... I don’t even know. But the short answer is, as long as I have her car, she will just stay home. And I needed her to stay home while I was out of town, so I took her car.”

Porter pinches her eyes shut and shakes her head. “That just added so many more questions.”

“Trust me, I can only imagine, but for the time being, table them because we need to get to Newport for our next meeting. And I need you to pull up stats on this place because I think



they're going to be a near-impossible sell." I put the key in the ignition and turn. The car makes a horrific sound, backfires once, and shakes hard before dying.

"You've got to be kidding me," I hit the steering wheel with the palm of my hand.

"What—"

I put my finger up to stop Porter, phone already dialing Mom. Before she answers, I put it on speaker to include Porter in on what will definitely be a slice of my familial insanity.

"Luca, sweetheart! What a nice surprise," Mom's voice purrs.

I can picture her using her ear piece to take the call, lazily dropping herself onto her favorite lounge chair overlooking the wooded backyard of my home in Healey Heights, not a care in the world. She'll be wearing one of her silk robes over her coordinating bamboo cotton pajamas, restlessly rolling her healing crystals in one hand, holding a glass of vegan wine in the other.

"Why did your car die, Mom?"

"Luca, all cars die eventually."

My eyes close. "Right, but why did yours give up the ghost today?"

"Oh, Luca, what makes you think I did anything to cause that to happen? What did you do to it?"

"Mom," I stop myself from pinching the bridge of my nose; Porter is so right—it is my go-to. "I didn't do anything. It's been fine, but just now it made an awful sound and shook before dying."

"Hmm," is all she offers.

Porter silently points to a sticker in the corner of the windshield. I squint at it, then glance at the odometer and back at the sticker. "Mom! When is the last time you got an oil change?"

She scoffs. "Well, how should I know?"

“The sticker in the window tells me you should’ve taken it in three thousand miles ago! Do you not look at that ever? Why didn’t the oil light come on or something?”

“All those lights quit working ages ago. What’s the mileage? Somewhere near two-hundred thousand?”

“Yes, which is why you should have taken it in for a servicing on time.”

“Luca.” She is nothing but calm and unbothered by what she is being told. Typical Mom. Once we end the call, she will go out on the balcony to do some yoga, drink one of her toxin-freeing green smoothies, then call her psychic to pray over her car. Which leaves this problem for me to resolve. “I don’t deal with things like that. You know this. My life coach told me I needed to rid myself of any task that didn’t bring me joy.”

“But you need a car to get around,” I chide.

“Oh, sweetheart. I can just get a car service like your grandfather uses. It’ll be completely fine. In fact, I think this is all very poetic. You were mean to your dear mummy by taking her car, and Mummy’s car is now being mean to you.”

“Sounds about right. What would you like—”

Her voice perks up, cutting me off. “Oh! Luca! My Reiki master is calling. I have to take this call. Did you know I’m almost done with my level one Reiki training? I love you loads.”

She doesn’t even give me the chance to tell her goodbye before the call ends. As if on cue, the dark skies stop threatening and explode open. Rain drops fall hard, big, fast. They plop against the windshield, rolling in streaks down to the hood of the car and onto the ground. People along the sidewalks scatter, finding cover in shops and the town visitor center. Allowing the moment to stretch to near discomfort, I break the silence.

“So ... that was Josephine,” I say, daring to peer over at Porter. To her credit, she doesn’t laugh or seem bewildered by what just transpired.

“Hey,” she says quietly, placing her hand on my forearm, “moms can be hard. Is that what all your conversations are like?”

Her hand lingers and concern swims across her eyes. My head fogs briefly, and I don’t want her to pull away. I’m suddenly extremely aware of her and I in this small space.

Taking a deep breath, I answer her. “Mostly. This morning the grocery order I placed for her arrived, and she wanted to know why I had ruined her life by having one-percent milk delivered instead of hemp milk.

“The other day she wanted the number to a Shaman who could bless the older polar bear at the zoo because Josephine is on the zoo’s board of trustees and ... I don’t know. I tuned half of that discussion out.”

“Can I ask one of my questions you said we had to table?”

I chuckle. “Sure, I’ll let you have one.”

“You said you didn’t want her to leave home—were you talking about your house? Does she live with you?”

“Yeah, she does.” I’m not sure how much to share. Porter is easy to talk to—and a part of me wants to just open up my whole life’s story for her—but I rein it in and keep it to the bare bones, need-to-know. “My dad travels a lot for work, and it’s just kind of the best setup for everybody.”

“Mm,” she thinks about this. “Is it the best set up for you?”

“Not today,” I tell her, offering a tight lip smile. She sees me in that moment. Anybody else would have made some kind of deprecating joke about kids and parents living together into adulthood or offered their condolences, grateful it wasn’t their situation, but Porter is different. She wants to know how it affects me. Other than my therapist, nobody has ever asked how Mom’s living arrangement makes me feel. It had never even occurred to *me* it is an option to have an opinion until that therapy session a year ago. Everybody else has told me this was how it was going to be, and I blindly have gone along with it. She’s my mom; of course, I’d take her in.

Kate pulls her phone and iPad out of her bag. “What can I do to help? Who do we need to call?”

“We need to cancel the rest of this afternoon,” I tell her, rubbing my eyes with my palms. “I need to call a tow truck and have them haul this thing to a junk yard. We need to cancel our stay in Newport. I need to call Gus.”

“Why cancel Newport? The tow truck can take us to Newport, and we can rent a car there, right?” She is in problem-solver mode. I watch her tilt up her chin and raise her eyes toward the ceiling of the car. It is as if she were playing a mental game of Tetris, fitting all of our needs into perfect, succinct spots. “I’ll get us an Uber to the car rental. That should take what, an hour? We don’t need to cancel *all* of this afternoon. I am sure I can move a few things around. If I push our three to three-forty-five and then—”

“Porter,” I cut her off before she rearranges everything. “I am calling time of death on this day.”

“You can’t do that,” she argues.

Sheets of rain pelt the car, louder than before, and we have to raise our voices to hear each other.

“Last time I checked, I was our boss.” Distracted, I scroll through my phone contacts and find the number I want. “If you’d like to tattle on me to Thatcher, be my guest.”

“That’s not what I meant. Isn’t this something we should decide together? As a team? You and me?”

I send my text and look up. “I need you to trust me on this. I’ve arranged for Gus to come take us to my grandparent’s beach house.”

“Please don’t tell me we will be traveling by helicopter.”

“Sadly, not this time.” I wink at her. “We will have to get there by car. Thatcher thought about going the helicopter route a long time ago but refused to cut down any of the woods on his property to build the landing pad.”

“Naturally. That would be the only thing holding me back as well.” She cracks a half smile. “Who is this Gus you’ve

mentioned twice?”

I rub my jawline. “He’s the family concierge. Anything we need from him while we are at the house, he will arrange.”

“Question—”

“You only asked for one.”

She smirks. “But now we are stuck in the car until Gus can get to us, so that’s changed everything.”

This won’t end well. Her eyes light up, ready to question me rapid-fire style. I am saved by the buzzing of her phone, which she answers as she plugs her other ear to hear over the weather beating down on us. *Gayle*, she mouths at me. Our therapist-beach-witch and now possible saving grace. We both hold our breath.

I watch her bite her lip and bounce once in the seat, nodding along. Finally, she speaks calmly.

“Absolutely. I’m so happy to hear you want to move forward with Bliss by Banks and we look forward to getting our product to your guests.”

She wraps up the conversation and shifts in her seat to look me square in the eyes. “We got one.”

“You got one,” I say.

“No. *We* did. Gayle did request we realize we are in love with each other before too long to save ourselves wasted years and needless heartache.” Her smile stretches and she raises her hand. “I think this calls for a high-five.”

## **CHAPTER TWELVE: LUCA**

THURSDAY

**G**us pulls into the parking area along the highway in Depoe Bay in Thatcher's restored matte gray 1986 Range Rover. The rain is still steady as we pile all of our bags into the back. I get the front door for Porter, and she looks at me, hesitating a moment, before climbing in. Settled in the back seat, I pull up our schedule.

"I'm going to reach out and reschedule some of today's missed appointments for Zoom calls tomorrow."

Porter flips around in her seat. "If you give me half the list, I can help."

I shake my head. "I've got this. What I need you to do is watch the coast. And keep Gus awake if he looks sleepy."

She eyes me skeptically. "You only want me to watch the coastline?"

"Yeah," I say. "You've never seen it before. Just enjoy—I hope the rain lets up so you can really see it."

"Thank you," she replies, turning around and buckling her seatbelt.

"Music, Mr. Banks?" Gus asks.

I eye him, as he looks back at me through the rearview mirror with a smirk. "Gus! We go through this every single time. Stop aging me—Mr. Banks is my grandfather. Luca. I'm simply *Lu-ca*. You've been around as long as I've been alive."

“Sir, I was brought on when you were four,” he reminds me.

Gus owns a home near the Banks Estate and while he is now a retired crabber, he has helped on the side to manage the property and prep it for our family’s arrival as long as I can remember. He is easily my grandfather’s age, built like a seafaring man with a short, white beard, and we never see him without his signature fisherman’s cap. Of anybody I’d ever met, he would be the one to have ridden a whale across the Pacific.

“Porter has the front seat, she gets music dibs.”

Placing the first call, we pull onto the 101 and head south. Porter opts for the quiet beat of the windshield wipers and plasters her face to the window like a little kid, not missing the chance to see something through the drizzle. The road winds out of Depoe Bay and past Otter Rock, then through the forest before opening up to Beverly Beach. Porter makes small talk with Gus, engaging him with questions about his family and work history. She asks him how he’s managed to survive me all these years, and he very diplomatically says it has been a pleasure to watch me grow up and find my footing in life.

He isn’t like the other crabbers with their gruff replies and tall tales, elbowing around the room to share the best larger-than-life story. Gus is friendly, a talker, and the two of them get along like old friends while I work. Porter is excellent at listening to people, knowing just the right question to engage them and keep the conversation going. She is more closed-off when it comes to her personal life, but I hope eventually she’ll warm up to me.

A few times along the highway, Porter gasps, calling out, “Stop!” and hops out of the car to take in a view. A few photos later, she jumps back in the car, brushes her wet hair out of her face, and picks up the conversation where she and Gus left off.

We round a bend and come upon a parking lot for Devil’s Churn. Gus is ready for Porter’s request and turns in before she can ask him to. Bolting out the door, she motions for me to follow her. I grab two umbrellas and obey, handing her one as



we head down the paved trail. The switchbacks take us across a small footbridge before a fork in the path heads to the coastal feature. Down below, waves crash and churn in and out of a narrow, carved inlet. The backdrop of dark rock walls, thick foliage, and well-rooted evergreen trees adds to the force in front of us. With the weather, it is menacing and unforgiving.

“It’s breathtaking,” she calls above the noise.

“Even with the clouds and rain, it’s something.” I nod. “This has always been one of my favorite spots. On a sunny day ... there is nothing to compare it to.”

“I can only imagine.” She pulls out her phone and shuffles closer to me.

Over the smells of the ocean, I faintly make out her lime and coriander shampoo. It invades my senses and carves out a permanent place in my memory. From now on, I’ll always associate her with it.

“Here, pretend we are having the best time!” she says, holding up her phone and snapping a few photos. We stand next to one another, huddled under her umbrella. Our shoulders brush and I smile as brightly as I can with the rain cutting us.

“You think I have to fake having fun with you?” I ask her while she pockets the phone and looks around a last time.

Her eyes hold a secret, and she nonchalantly responds, “I don’t know. Do you?”

I don’t even hesitate. “Never.”

Her breath hitches slightly, and she blinks a few times, probably trying to determine the validity of my answer. The wind whips around us, shifting the rain once more.

“Oh man.” She shivers. “We should go. I’m so sorry, we are not dressed appropriately for my stops.”

“Ready?” I study her, wondering what she is thinking. Does she believe my actions are pretend? Does she feel my excitement is just an act?

She nods and leads the way back up to the parking lot. Gus beats me to it and runs around to open up her door, and I shake off our umbrellas, chucking them into the back. Once Gus eases us back onto the road again, I point out a few of my favorite parts of the Siuslaw National Forest. Cape Cove Beach, the direction of a couple trailheads I have hiked many times, Thor's Well. Gus pipes in, preferring Spouting Horn to Thor's Well, and a lively debate follows before he slows slightly and points out Bob Creek to Porter.

The unassuming parking lot means a lot of people whip on by, not giving a second thought to the spot, but locals like Gus know the place is magic. When I make it out here on hot summer days, one of my favorite places to suit up and surf is off this beach.

“Me and the wife got married there fifty-five years ago. It was a stupid spring day, raining one minute, next minute cold as ever with the sun out. But she wanted an April wedding, and I couldn't tell her no. We had the quickest ceremony during low tide—nobody would let us linger much longer than it took for the priest to have us exchange vows—and then I whisked her off to Florence for our honeymoon.” His voice lends to a smile I couldn't see. “We were young and broke. Crabbing season wasn't in full swing yet, and she was training to be a teacher but didn't have a contract. I don't know how we managed to survive those days.”

“Congratulations on five and a half decades. That's incredible,” Porter chimes in.

Gus lets out a laugh. “Oh absolutely. She's the best. She's put up with me all this time, and I'm not an easy one to live with. I was probably more like this younger Mr. Banks back there than either of us cares to admit.”

“What's your secret to a half-century of happiness?” she asks him.

“The secret? We let each other say our piece—whatever is on our mind—and we don't respond defensively or reactively. She wants to call me out for something I do? I let her, and I take it to heart. I might not agree, but I let it sink in, validate

her feelings, and I figure out a way to compromise so both our lives are a little better. She does the same thing. We're not out to change one another. We are both trying to become the best versions of ourselves but still be who we are at the core."

In all fairness, I've never asked Gus much about his life, but what he says makes me stop and think. That was a relatively simple recipe for a good marriage. A good way to manage employees too, and if nothing else it was a good way to simply live my own life.

"Here we are, Ms. Porter. Mr. Banks. The Banks Estate," Gus announces, slowing and turning down a long wooded lane. Nothing about the entrance itself would raise eyebrows—something Thatcher had purposely designed. The dirt road is covered in pine needles, overgrown shrubs following along both sides. He loves keeping things wild, didn't want a gate or any kind of signage that would catch curious eyes. At the end of the long drive, the trees clear and Gus drives into the garage, idling the engine.

I can't see Porter's face, but I see her shake her head, like she is judging me.

"Sir, do you need anything else tonight? I wasn't sure what groceries you wanted or how long you are staying, but I could go run and get them. Henrietta could come make you something for dinner," Gus offers, handing me the keys.

"We're good for tonight, Gus. Thank you."

The three of us climb out of the car and Gus tips his hat at Porter, telling her it is a pleasure to meet her, then gives me an embrace and whispers, "She's lovely" into my ear. Before I can recover and respond, he zips up his jacket, jogging slowly out to his car in the driveway, and takes off.

# **CHAPTER THIRTEEN: KATE**

THURSDAY

Jill: You surviving? I haven't heard from you at all.

Was about to send out a search party.

Me: Sorry. It's been kind of crazy.

Guess where I am?

Natalie: The Little Chapel in Vegas.

Me: No. I'll send you a picture.

**L**uca has gone inside with the first load from the car, and I can't help myself. Rain won't stop me from running a few yards down the driveway and taking in the front of this house again. My jaw had nearly hit the car floor when we'd pulled in. I knew the Banks' had money. Mr. Banks' empire is solid, and I've been to his summer parties in the swanky Lake Oswego suburb where he has a midcentury lake front home. I totally understand how his surroundings inspired him to start his business with the natural wood beams and stone used throughout his main residence.

But this. This is beyond money. The word *estate* was wisely chosen. The only home in the area, I wonder how much of this land belongs to Mr. Banks. The house itself blends into the surroundings, a low lying expansive brick rambler with a granite exterior and windows that seem to give the house an inside-outside living vibe. French doors at the entrance are painted a brilliant ocean blue, the same shade as the paneled shutters. Despite keeping the property natural, the immediate yard around the house is well-manicured with groupings of hydrangea bushes, redbud trees, and dahlias dotting the walkway toward the front door.

Framing it just right, I send the photo to Natalie and Jill and run onto the covered front porch for shelter.

My phone buzzes an incoming group FaceTime.

“Is that the famed Banks Estate?” Jill’s eyes are wide.

I love her lack of greeting, opting to jump right into it. “Yeah. It ... I have no words and I haven’t even gone inside yet.”

Natalie’s propped her phone on a shelf in her food truck and pauses from chopping to look at me. “Um, I don’t care about the property. I care about how you ended up there. Was that on the itinerary?”

“No!” Jill cut in. “Newport was tonight.”

“Hey! How do you know?” I laugh.

“I got myself a copy of your schedule in case I needed to meet up with you to bury a body,” she says with a gleam in her eyes.

“Shhh!” I tell her. “You’re still at work! Somebody might hear you.”

“They’d welcome you back with open arms and a three-tier cake if you came back alone. Morale is not incredibly high in your department right now.” She grimaces. “Everybody has all kinds of bets going. Two-to-one odds you’ll end up dating. Four-to-one odds one of you will end up in jail.”

I raise my eyebrows in disbelief.

“I also don’t care about the bets,” Natalie takes over. “Spill the actual tea. What are you doing in Oregon’s paradise with Luca? And can you somehow get us a video of the inside? I’ve heard about this place for years, but now that I’ve gotten a sliver of it, I need to see the whole thing. It looks like a dream.”

I glimpse through the window by the front door. Luca is looking out the back the house, on his phone, leaning against a counter in what appeared to be the expansive open-concept kitchen. “I only have a second, but the car broke down—”

“His Jag?” Jill says with disbelief.

“No! We’ve been driving his mom’s Forrester, which he *stole* from her, and it died in Depoe Bay today.”

“What?!” they both exclaim in unison.

“Yeah, it’s a long story.” I glance inside the house again. Luca is still in the same spot, typing away on his laptop, phone tucked between shoulder and ear.

“How many sales have you made?” Jill pivots the conversation again.

I wipe a wet strand of hair from my forehead. “One. The Mystical Mermaid Inn in Manzanita. The owner swore we loved each other—I think that’s what got us the sale.”

“That’s a fantastic account to land,” Jill muses. “I saw their stats.”

“You’re following along?”

“Don’t be mad. It’s hard to move on from something I loved for so long,” she admits. “I just wanted to see how things went for you two and help you if you needed to rein him in at all. How is it going with him, by the way?”

“You don’t trust us!” I accuse her, chuckling. I bite my lip, contemplating her question. Deciding how much to tell them.

“Us! She said ‘us’! I heard it!” Natalie squeals. “Joel—I told you! This trip was going to either land them in jail or they’d fall in love.”

I point my finger into the camera. “*You’re* the one who set up those betting pools, didn’t you? You don’t even work there anymore!”

Natalie wipes the smirk off her face. “I admit to nothing. Joel!”

“Keep me out of this!” I hear Joel laugh in the background. “I’m only here to deliver some more pineapple and get back to clinics.”

“Hi, Kate.” His face pops onto the call. I can see why Natalie fell for him. He is good-looking and doles as much sass back to her as she gives. They are perfect together. “When are you coming to Oahu? Natalie talks about you two non-stop, but I’m starting to think she hired actors to talk to her on FaceTime and pose as her friends.”

“Rude. Go! You delivered the fruit, *thank you*, but she said ‘us’ and now I need more before she has to jump off the call,” Natalie lovingly reprimands him, giving him a kiss and playfully shoving him out of the frame. Turning back to Jill and me, she says, “Your turn. Fast. ‘Us.’ What?”

“You’re digging deep with that sentence, Nat! I said Jill doesn’t trust Luca and me. That’s it.”

“You smiled when you said it,” she points out. “Give me something. We can kick Jill off the call—I don’t live there anymore, so it’s not a work-issue as far as I’m concerned. I *know* there is more than you’re letting on. I can feel it in my bones. The universe is saying it’s your turn.”

My stomach jumps at the idea. The same way it does when you’re on a roller coaster and you teeter at the top for that extra second before falling. The moment that either leads to a thrill of a lifetime or the worst nausea you’ve ever experienced. Before I can filter myself, I blurt out, “The other night in bed he was wearing glasses, and—”

“What?” Natalie blinks hard, while Jill covers her mouth. “Hold the phone. Bed?”

“Pause. Long story and right now we are focused on the glasses,” I scramble.



“Who’s got glasses?” Luca says, walking up behind me. I hadn’t seen him leave the kitchen. He must have gone into the garage and then come up the walkway. “Who are you talking to?”

I nearly drop my phone, my heart beating through my chest. How much had he heard? “I’m talking to Natalie and Jill.”

“Reddington! Is that you?” He steps over next to me, bending slightly to get his face onto the screen. He’s standing so close to me, personal space is non-existent. Even through my suit jacket, my arm hairs stand like he’s a magnet pulling them to him. “Aloha and Mahalo and all that good stuff. What is up?”

“Luca! I oddly miss you, buddy. Little birdie told us you wear glasses? I feel like I missed the opportunity to call you four eyes,” she smirks.

His mouth curves slowly as he looks at me, a moment of triumph spreading across his face. He playfully taps his lips and looks to the side. “Wonder who could’ve told you that? Tweet, tweet. Porter, are you talking about me with Reddington and Marshall? You are, aren’t you? You told them I have glasses!” He throws his head back with joy. Thrilled we are talking about him? Excited I brought him up? I can’t tell.

“It came up,” is all I am willing to say. I plead with my eyes for them to not say anything else. *Please don’t ask about the bed.*

“Marshall, I have some questions for you about contracts. I’ll email you in the morning. Right now, we have to go down to Florence and celebrate our big account win,” he tells them. At the word ‘we,’ Natalie raises her eyebrows at me. I hope he doesn’t notice. What he says doesn’t mean anything. He’s saying ‘we’ the way I do: meaning he and I.

I promise to call them again soon and hang up. He leads me into the house to get my bearings. From the front door, we walk into the main part of the house, designed in an open-concept fashion. He briefly points out the welcoming, large chef’s kitchen against the back wall, living room at the front of

the house, and dining room off to the side. From there, the floor plan splits, with the bedrooms at either end of the home. Everything I can see so far is big and spacious and decorated to be inviting and cozy. The views, even with the rain, are unreal.

The patio off the kitchen has a large firepit with Adirondack chairs around it. A long table with seating on either side sits near some outdoor couches. Hammocks are strung in trees bordering the patio. Lights zigzag overhead throughout the space. Luca flips them on to illuminate the yard beyond. The grass pushes out for a spell before dropping off a cliff to the ocean below. The wall of windows between the kitchen and dining room are the kind that opened up to the patio, and I can't help but imagine the most perfect summer day, hosting a lazy dinner and reading while the fire roared into the night. Utopia.

Luca heads to the left. "This place has a lot of bedrooms, but things are kind of wonky. My family uses this side of the house. My room is down here, off the kitchen side. Nobody goes in this room"—he knocks on a door as we pass by—"and it looks like my grandma is redoing the other bedroom down here that my mom and dad take. It's a mess. So, let's put your stuff on the other side. My uncle Everette and his family used those rooms, by my grandparent's room."

On our way back through the kitchen, he gathers my bag and hauls it down the long hallway. The house feels inviting despite its size and lack of regular occupants. Luca flips lights on all over, and I note a large pile of chopped wood by the fireplace in the living room. And the books. So many built-in bookshelves in the corner near the baby grand.

"Here you go," he announces, stopping and setting the bag inside a large room. "I'm going to change out of my wet clothes. I'm sure you want to do the same?"

I nod, taking in the space. There is a large king-sized bed, flat screen TV mounted on the wall over the fireplace, a door that leads to the patio, and another that heads to an en suite bathroom. "What's the plan?"

“We’ll drive down to Florence. It’s about fifteen minutes south, and downtown on the river is a great Italian place. I thought we could toast our one sale and our one maybe,” he says as if trying to convince himself those are good stats.

“What if,” I start, pausing for dramatic effect, and he lifts a brow, “we found some random dive with karaoke?”

“Porter!” he exclaims loudly, in shock. His eyes go wide and he makes some sort of celebratory dance move I could’ve done without. The very same one he claims Harry Styles stole from him. *Right.*

“You’ve earned it,” I sigh. “Let’s go sing. But don’t make me regret this.”

“Honestly, you probably will regret it in the morning because I’ve heard you sing in the car,” he chuckles, his eyes glowing with mirth, “but it is going to be so much fun tonight.”

# **CHAPTER FOURTEEN: KATE**

THURSDAY

Natalie: What are you wearing for your date?

Me: For the celebratory dinner, I'm wearing this.

I stand in front of the floor-length mirror and snap a selfie. I've thrown on the same pair of linen pants from the first night and pair them with a navy and white striped top and warm mid-length duster. Running a brush through my hair and touching up my makeup, I feel I am pulling off rainy-coastal-dinner-with-coworker-in-the-fall rather well.

Natalie doesn't respond for a long two minutes. I try hair up, hair half up in knot, hair in sleek ponytail. I wait. Maybe different earrings. The pearls are probably wrong. Why do I care? And where is Natalie? She is letting me sweat out my choices, waiting for me to come to realize they are all wrong. Her methods are maddening but effective. I switch out the pearls for wooden hoop earrings. Just as I am about to rummage through my suitcase for a different look, my phone chimes.

Natalie: Sorry, I was just serving the last customer of the day.

You look perfect. But one question.

What's going on with the hair? Why did you pin some back?

Me: I pulled my bangs out of my face because I didn't want to deal with them this morning.

Natalie: You got bangs? You haven't even broken up yet and you got bangs?

Me: Ha. You're hilarious.

Sometimes on the weekends I make bad choices.

Can't decide if I like them.

No time to deal with them right now.

Are the earrings wrong?

I SENT her another selfie with the swapped out studs.

Natalie: The earrings are you.

Go get him.

Me: I don't want to get him.

Natalie: Then you wouldn't care about your earrings.

Text me later.

A FAMILIAR MELODY from the piano wafts down the hallway. “Silent Night.” My lips quirk up, and I quietly make my way to the living room where Luca is seated at the piano, eyes closed. I lean against the arched doorway and drink him in. Back straight, sitting on the front half of the bench, his fingers reverently dance across the keys. Somewhere his piano teacher sits proudly, knowing her pupil is doing exactly as she taught him. His face is relaxed, just like the night we'd shared a set of earbuds and listened to music together.

The song ends much too soon, and he rolls right into “The First Noel” without missing a beat. I slide down into a leather lounge chair, tucking my legs under me, enjoying my own private concert. Luca Banks, playing Christmas songs at the end of September, was quite possibly the most perfect moment I never knew I needed. His celebratory look mirrors mine: layers. He opts for a dark gray Merino wool sweater over a shirt, jean jacket, and tailored khakis. A five o'clock shadow grazes his jawline. The glasses are back.

The steady rain has slowed to a light drizzle and droplets bounced off the patio lights, creating the illusion of falling snow within the shadows. “Oh Holy Night” comes next. Still, his eyes stay closed, and he slowly sways as the song builds up to the emotion of the final verse.

He takes his foot off the pedal, fingers lifting off the keys, and rolls his shoulders. His head stretches side to side, and he opens one eye, right where I am seated. “You're spying.”

“You love an audience.”

This earns me a half smile. Pushing back from the bench, he stands and twists at the waist from side to side a few times. “Ready? I'm starving and I know just the place to take us.”

We go into the garage and he gets my car door, like this newer practice of his is actually a long-formed habit, the way we have always functioned with one another. To say I don't appreciate it would be a lie. It feels nice. It makes me feel like I matter.

He backs out and heads down the long driveway to the 101. The drizzle has stopped, giving way to the sun before it disappears for the night.

"How much of this belongs to Thatcher?" I ask, looking out my window.

Before answering, he hands me his phone. "Music, please."

I pick the Best Karaoke 3 playlist and Weezer's "Hold Me" comes on. "Mmm. Severely underrated album."

"Absolutely." His thumbs drum on the steering wheel. "This is why tonight is going to be good. You *get* music."

"You've truly belted this song out at karaoke?"

He smirks. "Oh yeah. This particular song is a fun one because it starts off quietly and the crowd is usually only halfway listening to you while they kick back drinks and chat with friends, but then you hit the chorus and hold out the notes, add some passion to it, and they go wild. It's all about building the anticipation. And if they don't expect you to do much, it's even more fun when you blow them out of the water."

Luca leans over the center console and points out my window as he pulls out onto the highway and heads south. "My grandfather owns everything about a quarter mile north of his house all the way down to the bend in the road that's coming up. I think he has something like one hundred acres."

*Something like one hundred acres.* Up until that statement, I was feeling on the same playing field as him for the first time all day. Again, I am acutely aware our common ground stops at music and our jobs. My life definitely does not come with a concierge who saves the day in a restored vintage Range Rover and a weekend home on oceanfront property.



Lost in thought, my attention to our surroundings isn't as dedicated as it can be, and a brief panic flies through me as Luca pulls over at a scenic viewpoint. Did we get a flat? Did we run out of gas? Would Gus be willing to rescue us again?

"I thought I'd save you the trouble of yelling at me to stop the car." He nudges my shoulder with his and nods his head toward the north.

Perched atop the mountain cliff sits the most beautiful lighthouse. Nestled against the backdrop of evergreen trees, a sprinkling of deciduous leaves showing their brilliant golds and oranges, and the low tide of the beach, the white tower stands out. The vantage point where we are parked gives us a straight look at the cove that sits below the lighthouse, and I can make out the lighthouse keeper's residence downhill from the main attraction.

Getting out of the car, the cold immediately cuts through me. I hadn't factored in how the damp afternoon would affect the evening temperatures and had not planned accordingly. Luca sidles up next to me and wraps a down coat around my shoulders.

"Thank you." I zip myself into it. It hints of the outdoors and expensive cologne, making me stifle a giggle. Only Luca would make sure he smelled good before going hiking. "Don't you want this?"

"I grabbed it for you." He shifts to my left, effectively becoming a wind barrier for me and digs his hands deep into his pockets, shivering slightly. "This view is ... not bad, right?"

Using my words from Cannon Beach against me, I peek up at him with narrow eyes. His expression screams hopeful, but with a borderline fear I'll find fault with him yet again. I will be the first to admit he has every right to expect me to casually dismiss the scene as nothing more than minimally acceptable. And that's when it hits me: Luca is looking for my approval. The endless trying, the constant upbeat behavior, his attempts to make me smile or laugh. He wants me to be impressed by him.

Not hard to be when he delivers this view.

Not hard at all when he is standing so there is no gap between us, keeping the wind away from me so I'll stay warm. After sharing his coat with me. He knew I'd want to see this, so he preemptively stopped the car.

My brain wants to go to that place that says this is routine Luca. None of this is special treatment; it is just the way he is with all women. He knows how to play the game and how to do all the right things. *Don't get sucked into it, Kate.* It is merely muscle memory for him.

But I also know that isn't true. I can't exactly say why, but this Luca wasn't the one the world sees. Not completely. The happy-go-lucky persona, sure. But I've never seen him work so tirelessly on anything. On anyone.

“This ... this is my new favorite spot in the world.”

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN: KATE**

THURSDAY

“Say it again,” he whispers, blowing into his cupped hands for warmth. “Say it so the people over there”—he tilts his chin toward the lighthouse—“can hear it.”

The only thing that could take this moment to the next level would be rolling a grand piano out onto the pull off and having Luca play “Clair de Lune” while I watch a pod of gray whales breach near the cliff. At this moment, I’m pretty sure if I asked it of him, he’d do everything in his power to pull it off if it meant impressing me. It is time to give him a little earned confidence.

After a defeated deep breath in and out, I play along, loudly declaring, “This is my new favorite spot in the world.”

A grin of satisfaction creeps across his face, reminiscent of the Grinch after stealing Christmas. “I’ve done my job. Now get in the car, Porter, it is freezing out here!”

Once I’ve shed the coat and tossed it on the back seat, Luca clears his throat dramatically. “It’s time to prepare your vocal chords for tonight’s singing. Aerosmith should do it.”

He grabs his phone and taps through playlists, settling for “Don’t Want to Miss a Thing.” Merging back onto the highway, he becomes all business. Upbeat and excited business. “This song is long enough to get us to Florence. It’s good for really stretching our range and prepping our voices.”

It takes me a few lines to join in, but soon we both sing along—one of us more loudly and vigorously than the other—

until we hit the outskirts of Florence. The sky darkens and the rain starts lightly once again.

The song ends, and Luca wastes no time planning our evening. “I’m thinking of doing an eighties-slash-early nineties set tonight. Did you want to do a duet?”

His dedication to his ... hobby? ... is slowly growing on me. However, that doesn’t mean I am throwing myself into it with the same fervor. “What if I changed my mind?” I venture to ask.

He whips his head my way. “Come again?” His tone is eerily similar to Mr. Banks’ when somebody says something he means for them to rethink. Even his single raised eyebrow is reminiscent. Those family genes are a force to reckon with. I nearly change my mind right then and there, ready to promise to sing a whole set. But my once generous offer of participating was nearing the light of day, and I didn’t think I could actually go through with it.

“It’s just not really my vibe, you know? I mean, I’m more than happy to cheer you along but—”

“No! You promised we would sing. Both of us. Separate, together, I don’t care, but this is a team thing.” He points between the two of us. “You got me all hyped up, you can’t take that away now.”

His disappointment is purely childlike, and I bite my lip to hold back a smile. “But you said I can’t sing.”

Very seriously, he grimaces and slowly shakes his head. “Not one of your talents for sure, but most of the people who sing karaoke are in your same boat, so you’ll be in good company.”

I mock offense. “I’m so sorry we can’t all be naturally good at everything like you. You sing, you play piano, you look like that,” I say, gesturing up and down.

He laughs robustly. “Oh yes, I’m just a picture of perfection over here. Ask me how many songs I can play?”

“Luca, how many songs can you play?”

“Exactly three. My grandma wanted me to learn the piano, and I just didn’t have the attention span to sit and practice. She was so disappointed I gave it up. Then one year I learned those three and played them on Christmas Eve for everybody as my Christmas present to her. She was so excited, it was worth all the frustrating hours of practice.” He muses for a moment. “Turns out, I still know them.”

Luca pulls into the parking lot of Sumo Dumplings, and we dash into the restaurant, shaking the rain from our hair and clothing. He’s brought me to a hibachi grill with tableside chefs serving groupings of eight. Thanks to the weather, the place smelled damp and humid and was getting busier by the minute.

A server takes us through the place toward the back, to a u-shaped raised counter, along with another party of three. We climb up on our stools, giving our drink orders and poring over the menu before our teppanyaki chef arrives.

“I’m going to go with the steak and shrimp,” Luca declares, closing his menu and setting it aside. Then he leans behind me and addresses the diners on my other side, “Would you guys happen to know when the karaoke starts?”

Our three dinner companions share similar features and are dressed in black clothing. The man looks at the two women and back at Luca, clearing his throat before answering. “I ... I don’t know. We haven’t been here in a long time.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while for me too. Where are you folks from?” Luca asks.

“We all grew up here, but I live in Michigan, and my sisters live in Washington and Texas. We’re actually here for our father’s funeral,” the man explains.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I offer and look at Luca with eyes that scream, ‘please take over and do all the talking.’ The family needs to grieve, and Luca would put them at ease, whereas, I’d ask them way too many invasive questions and make things more awkward than they needed to be.

Luca tugs on his shirt cuff before adding in his condolences. His earlier enthusiasm has waned and I secretly hope this means we can reconsider singing.

“Thank you,” one of the sisters says. “He lived a good life and we all knew it was coming. Doesn’t make it any easier, but then again, we were all there and we got to say our goodbyes.”

“This was his favorite restaurant of all the places in Florence,” the second sister chuckles, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “We buried him today and thought we should come here one last time in his memory.”

Our drinks arrive, putting a stop to our conversation as we give our grill orders to the server. Once he leaves, the family speaks amongst themselves, and I turn toward Luca, giving them their privacy.

“You know, you didn’t have to get a Dr. Pepper. Just because I don’t like drinking doesn’t mean you can’t drink around me,” I tell him.

“Oh, it’s not because of you,” Luca says, watching his ice clink as he twirls the straw in his glass. “I uh, I actually stopped drinking.”

My mind runs through the last few weeks. Our department tries to do happy hour every few weeks to blow off steam, and Luca has been known to join for one quick drink before heading off to whatever grand plans await him. He definitely had imbibed at the fundraiser, but since then? Maybe not.

“Thatcher may or may not have sat me down and pointed out my fun days were over. I am a Banks and as a Banks I had a certain reputation to uphold. He rarely partakes, and by that, I’m talking a sip of something on his anniversary and maybe New Year’s Eve, but that’s it. Anyway, he recommended that I do likewise.” He takes a long pull of his soda and taps my menu, perking up again and changing the subject. “You really should’ve gone with the steak because the chicken here dries out, and you’re going to be sad. So I’ll tell you what, we will split the steak and chicken, that way we are both only half-sad, but I’m not sharing my shrimp. We can totally get you your

own order of that. Because the shrimp ... the shrimp is—” and he makes a gesture like a chef’s kiss.

I tuck my hair behind my ear, rest my elbows on the counter, and lace my fingers. “I don’t like shrimp.”

His gaze holds mine for a long moment, neither one of us blinking. The place has gotten so loud—the fuzzy kind of loud, where it all runs together like white noise. It also got warm, uncomfortably so. I can’t even blame the non-lit grill. There is so much to say, but I am not sure exactly *what* that is, and also there is nothing to say because this is *Luca*. Mostly I am tired. I think he is feeling the same thing because he breaks first and looks away with a soft laugh.

Holding up his glass, he offers a simple toast. “To us, Porter. We made a sale and we have a maybe. Here’s to another fantastic few days of probable disappointment.”

I clink my glass against his. “To probable disappointment.”

He winks at me. “We aren’t talking about tonight. Tonight is going to be epic once I talk to somebody about my line up.”

With that, he gets up and heads toward the front of the restaurant. I pull out my phone to find a long string of texts from Natalie.

Natalie: How’s it going?

Is he wearing his glasses?

I think the glasses are for you.

I asked Joel his opinion on the glasses theory, and he told me that I’m meddling.

I’m not meddling. Am I meddling?



You haven't replied yet so I've had time to think, and yeah, I'm totally meddling.

But hear me out, I never knew he wore glasses, and we weren't best friends or anything, but the fact that you've seen them, it's the equivalent of you seeing Bigfoot. That has to mean something.

LUCA IS MAKING his way to our table, winding around the dining room, slowly following our teppanyaki chef with his cart of food to prepare. I quickly type out a reply.

Me: You meddle? Never.

Yes, glasses tonight.

Interesting theory.

He couldn't wear contacts all night, so possibly you're getting excited for nothing?

Maybe he is out of contact solution and his personal butler isn't here to fetch him more.

Did you know he plays the piano?

Natalie: The piano!?

I don't think we know anything about him.

Me: I agree with that.

I POCKET my phone as Luca sits down.

“We’ve got ourselves a good news-bad news situation. The good: they’re starting in twenty minutes. The bad: we are fifth and sixth on the list. Eat slowly, we are going to be here a while.”

The chef sits up his station and wows us with the sleek handling of his tools and creation of onion volcanoes. He flips a shrimp in everybody’s mouths—mine excluded—but nobody is more enthusiastic about any of this than Luca.

Once our food is done, Luca carefully scoops some of his steak onto my plate before helping himself to half my chicken. After we start eating, I ask Luca his opinion on when we should reach out to some of those first meetings where things had been left hanging.

“No shop talk tonight, Porter. We are celebrating, remember? You’re killing the mood,” Luca replies, stabbing a shrimp and grinning at me. “Let’s talk about you.”

“What would you like to know?” I ask and take a bite of steak.

“The steak is better than the chicken, isn’t it?” He demonstrates by pinching a bite of chicken between his chopsticks and trying it with a frown, followed by taking a bite of steak and sighing contentedly.

I nod. “You already know the answer: you never steer me wrong on food.”

“I don’t steer you wrong on most things.” Luca lifts another shrimp and bops it on my nose before twirling it in front of my mouth. “Here. I’ll even share this one with you. Just give it a try.”

Dabbing my nose, I accept his offering, chewing it slowly and taking in the rich flavor. Shellfish aren’t usually my favorite, but this, of course, is incredible.

“Hey, did your dad ever sell the farm?” Luca asks. “He was retiring this fall, right?”

The question shouldn't surprise me. We are past the point in our working relationship where we've covered the very basics: I prefer Dr. Pepper with a wedge of lime; on Saturdays I refuse to make any kind of plans, other than the occasional brunch with Natalie and Jill, so I can simply recoup from the week; I grew up outside of Kansas City, Missouri, where my dad ran a soybean farm. Luca knew the town is tiny and my sister married her high school sweetheart. My mom helped run the books on the farm and in the town's combo doctor/dentist clinic. I've mentioned once or twice how Dad was ready to hang up his hat and focus on spending winters in Florida and summers fishing.

But the way Luca phrases his question is personal. Like this is a running conversation we touch on regularly.

"He did. My sister and brother-in-law bought it, actually. It was kind of a surprise to all of us, but I guess she isn't ready to let that part of her go." I shrug.

Luca thinks about that for a beat, moving food around his plate. "Does that bother you at all? Do you wish you were going to run it?"

I let go of a singular laugh and collect my hair, pulling it over one of my shoulders. "Not remotely. I needed to get out of there."

"Because you were going to work at a library in D.C. or New York," he states and shovels fried rice into his mouth.

A quick flash of the first night on the road pops into my mind. Luca, teasing me about it being collegiate night, as he settled into the bed next to me. Even though the conversation had only taken place a few days before, I'd assumed it had gone in one ear and out the other. A hum of energy flows through me; I love that he remembers this.

Then, my college boyfriend comes to mind, before I can push his face away. Brett Abbott and I had dated for four years. Everybody anticipated—myself included—we would graduate, marry, and take over his family's cattle farm. He'd had other plans. I shake the thought as quickly as it comes and focus on Luca.

“Something like that. Instead, I ended up in Portland.”

“Do you like it? You’ve been there how long now?”

“I just hit four years, which is kind of crazy. I came to work for your grandfather and have never looked back.”

“Bliss by Banks is definitely better for having you there,” he says reservedly.

His compliment makes me blush, and I quickly change the subject. “The other night, I saw something on YouTube about you rowing? How long have you done that?”

“Ah,” he takes a drink and calculates. “I was thirteen, kind of bouncing off the walls all the time. My dad thought I needed meds, my mom was off on some yoga retreat all summer in Thailand, and my grandma stepped in, taking me down to the Lake Oswego Community Rowing club, where she signed me up. She figured I needed some way to channel all my energy. I loved it from the moment I stepped into the scull and haven’t looked back.”

“Did you row competitively in high school? College?” The videos I saw of him were from recent years, competing with one of the private clubs in the city.

“High school yes, college briefly. Then I picked it back up a few years after.” He keeps his answer succinct, not leaving room for follow-ups. “What about you? You strike me as one of those ladies who does all the gym classes—you know, the Zumba and High Fitness.”

“Oh yes, I scream coordination and social energy, totally. You’re funny,” I say and toss a broccoli stalk at him with my chopsticks. “Actually, I do yoga and Pilates with Jill, well, and Natalie before she moved, but I recently hired a personal trainer for boxing.”

The last nugget of information makes him sit up straight with wide eyes. “Porter! You what? Could you beat me up?” He pokes me with his chopsticks like he is assessing how much of a threat I am.

“That’s my goal.” I give him a grin and reach my chopsticks over, stealing a shrimp and pop it into my mouth.

Small traces of delight dance across his eyes, but the moment is interrupted by one of the sisters throwing her arms around the two of us.

“I am a litttttle drunk,” she asserts with a hiccup and giggle. The sight of this woman, mid-fifties, wearing a tailored black skirt suit—complete with nylons, eyes glassy and cheeks rosy, inebriated at a Japanese grill—is the icing on the cake of this incredibly odd, unexpected day.

I bite my cheeks to keep from laughing. Luca looks to be fighting back laughter as well but kindly puts a hand on her arm and helps her stay upright as she teeters between us.

“Could I get you some coffee?” he asks, glancing around for a server.

Next to me, her sister and brother’s voices are quickly rising as they debate which of the three their father loved best. I count nearly a dozen glasses between them, all drained of their contents.

“Let me call you guys an Uber,” I offer, reaching for my phone.

“No, dear,” she stops me. “I came over here to tell you we need you to sing with us.” Her words come out slow. “We didn’t want to do it, we didn’t plan to do it, but Daddy would have loved to see this. Problem is, we are a litttttle drunk. So my sister and I decided we are going to be backup, and you’re going to be the lead.”

Luca’s eyes light up like the Fourth of July, and he slides off his stool, pumping his fist once in the air. “I support this completely.”

“Oh,” I try to let her down easy, “I don’t think you want me—”

“Porter, I think given the circumstances, you have to.” His voice is laced with apologetic joy.

“I appreciate the offer, and any other day I would love to, really, but Luca is already singing fifth and then we have to go.” I jump down and help her back to her stool, mentally crossing my fingers the sign up is full for the night.

She giggles again and looks conspiratorially at her sister. “Daddy knew the owners here, and we slipped them ten dollars to bump us to the first spot.”

My eyes narrow as the lights across the restaurant dim.

“Welcome to karaoke night here at Sumo Dumplings. We hope you have all enjoyed your meals so far,” an older man holding a mic stands on what appears to be a temporary stage near the front of the restaurant. The room cheers, eager for the entertainment to begin. “We lost a dear friend recently ...”

I tune out the rest as I slide away from the sisters, looking for an emergency exit. Luca catches my arm before I get very far and lowers his head next to my ear. His touch, his warm breath, his proximity. I should rip my arm away and run. But I stay, rooted to the spot, heart beating hard.

“Relax, you’ve got this. I’ll be cheering you on the loudest. I believe in you.”

My head turns and find that behind his eyes is nothing but support. I slide out of my cardigan, knowing if I wear it up there, I’ll pass out in front of everybody. He takes it from me as the second sister grabs my hand.

“We’re up!” she cries, pulling me toward what is surely going to become the new most embarrassing moment of my life.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN: LUCA**

## THURSDAY

Watching Porter get dragged to the front of the restaurant by two tipsy women my mom's age, to participate in an activity that is absolutely non-preferred by her, is endearing. She looks at back towards me. Her face screams both *save me!* and embracing the madness with a nervous laugh. The owner casts a cheap, low-grade spotlight on the three women as they huddle around the mic stand. The large, flat screen TV behind them throws up the song for the patrons to follow along, while the women keep their eyes on a monitor in front of them.

Porter takes a breath and twists the bracelet on her wrist before she hesitantly speaks. "Good evening, Florence. Who's excited to be here?"

Her voice shakes slightly, giving her away, but I beam. She is trying to engage the crowd like I do. A few people politely clap, while most go back to their meal. When she braves a glance my way, I give her a thumbs up and mouth, *ask again, be the boss.*

She gives me a confident nod, grabs the mic with both hands and says, "Let's try that again, Florence. Who's excited to be here?"

Next to her, the sisters give some kind of awkward victory dance and the whole restaurant responds with energetic cheering. That seems to put her in the right frame of mind and her lips tick up.



“I’m here with my new friends, who are celebrating the life of their father with this song.” She looks over at one of them and asks, “What song are we singing?”

I can’t make out what the sister tells her, but she gives an impassive look before turning back to the diners. “I don’t know this song, so this should be a good time. Here goes nothing.”

The introduction starts and both sisters begin swaying to the beat. If they make it through the whole number without falling off the small stage, it will be a miracle. Porter’s poise shifts again, and she looks like she might throw up, her eyes watching the door like a lifeline. I know the song playing by the first few notes: “What About Love” by Heart. She has about twenty seconds to stand there in fear before the first verse starts.

I want so badly for this to be fun for her and something we can bond over. One of those stories we’ll bring up years from now, when the company has expanded all across the country and we are opening new accounts in Vermont or Kentucky, we’ll recall this trip. “Remember that one time in Oregon when ...?” Pushing off the stool, I stand and cup my hands around my mouth. “Go, Kate!” I whoop and whistle.

Her eyes flick to mine. The panic shifts. A brief confusion clouds her features. She blushes. The beat of the song changes, and she glances at the monitor right before missing the first word, opening her mouth to deliver. It’s admittedly not great. She’s stumbling through the lyrics but she’s up there, and I am here for it.

The sisters join her in the chorus—they are all in—screaming the words at the top of their lungs. The two of them play the air guitar and the drums as Kate moves on to the second verse, finding her groove. She throws herself into the song, slipping in and out of key, but as the song progresses, Kate loosens up and almost looks like she is having a good time.

Three minutes fly by, they hit the high notes at the end together, finishing with a bow. The sisters make their way off

the stage back to our station and Kate leaves out the front door. I grab her sweater and go after her. It is dark and damp in the parking lot where she paces along the walkway near the entrance.

“You did it!” I cheer. “I’m like, incredibly impressed right now. You didn’t want to do it but you gave a solid performance. I’m sure they’re going to want an encore.”

She stops moving and looks at me. I can’t read her face, but her hand goes to her bracelet again, moving it back and forth.

“Do you want this?” I hold out her sweater. She looks at it but doesn’t take it. “What’s wrong? Are you mad at me?”

“You called me Kate,” she finally says.

“I did?” For the briefest of seconds, I fear I’ve called her by the wrong name. That has happened once or twice in my life, and women don’t like being called a name that isn’t theirs. To make sure it never happens again, I have started using last names. Over a decade later, that choice has served me well.

“Yes.”

I can’t decide if she is mad. She is ... something.

Adjusting my glasses, I furrow my brow. “Right, and that’s your name.”

“But you never call me Kate. It’s always Porter.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I got swept up in the moment of making sure you knew you had a cheerleader.”

“I liked it,” she admits shyly. Reaching for her sweater, her mood shifts and she instantly perks up. “It was so hot up there. Oh my gosh, was every grill fired up while I was singing? Luca, I sang. *Me*. I did it! I seriously hope I don’t end up on YouTube.”

Her energetic ramblings make me laugh. “Want to sing again? Maybe the brother wants a duet. Tell you what, you can have my spot.”

“No!” she shakes her head at my teasing. “I’m good. That was a very special one-time moment for you. Hope you enjoyed.”

“I loved every second,” I promise her, throwing my arm around her shoulder to lead her back inside. Instead of stiffening or wiggling out of my embrace, she leans in, placing her head on my shoulder. The spontaneity of the moment catches me off guard. She has reached out to touch my arm on occasion while telling me a story or asking a question, but usually she’ll pull her hand back just as fast as it landed. For her to lean her body against mine, and leave it there, that is new. It is vulnerable. I want to somehow make it our norm, but I also didn’t want to get my hopes up.

“I think I earned dessert. That was exhausting,” she declares.



WITH A WELL-DESERVED (whole) cherry cheesecake in front of her, and not willing to share despite my attempts to get a bite, Kate has relaxed and is busy talking to the family next to us when my name is called.

Placing my jean jacket on my chair, I amble up to the stage, ready to get my natural dopamine hit and wow the coastal crowd. Taking the mic off the stand, I settle into my usual warm up routine: start at one corner and say something rousing, do a skip-jump-powerhouse move to the other corner and get that side of the room excited. Head back to the center and put the mic in the stand so I can dance and sing and throw myself into the moment.

“Hellooooo, Florence!” I start.

At this point, after having a few other acts under their belts, the customers are ready. They shout back a greeting. Satisfied, I make my way to the other side of the short makeshift stage. “How is everybody feeling tonight?”

Positive responses and cheers go up. Kate stabs her cheesecake and plops the bite into her mouth, waving her fork

festively in the air and giving me her distinctive tight-lipped smile. She is trying to play it cool after recognizing she likes what I did.

I'll give her all the time she needs. Turns out, I like it too. I like it more than any name I've ever said.

It is delicate, fiery, and most importantly, hers.

She can nonchalantly sit there and eat her dessert, pretending she is only fleetingly taken aback by me. I am not buying it.

"I've got a song up my sleeve for you all that I love. It's one of the eighties' best hits." A few premature claps go up. I pause to acknowledge with a nod and lower my voice. "But I have a secret."

I make eye contact around the room and whisper into the mic, "Tonight is the first time this song has meant anything to me."

There were a few awws and a couple whistles. The sibling trio clink their glasses—who keeps serving them!?!—and chant, "Sing it! Sing it!"

I look at Kate and give her a half smile. Even from across the dimly lit room, I can see her cheeks redden. She doesn't break her gaze as she lifts another bite to her mouth. Game on.

Rolling my neck, I jump in place twice and gave another little ninja-kick two punch twist and nod to the owner running the music.

Tina Turner's renowned "The Best" starts. I strut and move around the small stage, throwing in a hip shake or two, feeding into the energy and dishing out all my moves. Wrapped up in the performance, I have purposely avoided looking at Kate. The first verse goes by quickly and the crowd is eating out of the palm of my hand. But despite knowing there is an upbeat tick to the chorus, once it hits, I slow down. Stilling my body, I sing straight into the mic, right to her.

Only her.

Nobody else in that room exists for those eight lines. I give her another half-smile and a one shoulder shrug. I can't believe I am choosing this moment to tell her, along with seventy of our closest new friends, what she is becoming to me.

The best.

Better than anyone I've ever met.

Kate sees me, she gets me; she pushes me, she's sometimes harsh but never malicious. She is trying to turn me into the best version of myself that I can be.

Her fork is down. Her pointer finger covers her lips. Lips that are parted and trying to push down a smile.

That gives me all the courage I need to hit the second verse as energetically as the first, adding a few spins and shuffles. During the second, and then the final round of the chorus, I matched Tina's zest and carry the mic around the stage, giving the people what they want. Kate made her way toward the entrance, watching me from the register, my jacket draped over her arm and a to-go bag in her hand. A final lap and bow, kisses blown to the patrons, and I hop off the stage.

"Nailed it," she says, handing me my jacket.

The song? The message? I can't read her; she is holding her cards close. Either way, it is approval, and I am going to take that and run.

"Ready?" I ask, taking the leftovers from her and hold open the door.

One of the sisters shouts across the restaurant as we step briskly into the night, "Kiss her already!"

# **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: LUCA**

THURSDAY

The drive out of town starts off quiet but comfortable. Kate snuggles back into my coat and looks through my music, settling on Coldplay's *Parachute's* album. On shuffle, "Yellow" fills the cabin of the car. A happy ache fills my chest. We wind our way up the cliffs, past the sea lion caves and across Cape Creek Bridge. The beam from the lighthouse rotates our way, illuminating the beach and lightkeeper's house before heading toward the forest and then back out to the ocean.

"What are you thinking about over there?" I ask her. "You're uncharacteristically quiet."

"Just thoughts."

I nervously tap the steering wheel along to the song. Sometimes I can't read her. Most times I can't read her. I suspect she knows as much, and loves having the upper hand on my fragile ego. "Anything in particular?"

"Maybe?"

"But I'm not going to find out right now, am I?"

"No, not right now."

"But I nailed the song?"

"Yes, definitely."

She is giving me nothing. Her poker face is the best I've seen. I give it one last try. "I nailed it in a good way?"

The car is dark, making it hard to see her reaction, but I will swear for the rest of my life I see the smallest curvature of her lips—like she is remembering something—before she replies flatly, “Absolutely.”

WE HEAD DOWN THE DRIVEWAY, through the woods, and into the clearing where the outside lights welcome us back. We put food away, change into sweats and hoodies, and reconvene on the back patio. I light a fire in the pit, we pull the cushions for the furniture out of the garage, and sink onto the couches. Kate wraps herself up in a big quilt, and we listen to the crashing waves, the snapping of the fire, the noises of the woods.

“Have you ever been to the lighthouse at night?” she breaks the silence.

I turn my body toward her, leaning my arm against the back of the couch and resting my head into my propped up hand. “No.”

“It’s beautiful. It’s romantic. It’s—”

“Haunted,” I cut in.

She angles her body my direction and looks at me skeptically. “No, it’s not ... is it?”

“I personally don’t think so, but that lightkeeper’s house is now a B&B and people who’ve stayed there say it is. I know whenever they do any kind of work on the lighthouse itself, the Gray Lady—that’s what they’ve named her—likes to cause mischief. People have seen her from time to time,” I explain.

Kate lets that sink in before she twists her face. “I don’t like that at all.”

“If it makes you feel any better, they say most of the lighthouses around the world are haunted.”

“How is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I’m not sure.” I admit. “Do you think our new friends made it home okay?”



She lets out a laugh, as if she is picturing them. “My guess is they are going to close down the place and never be invited back.”

“Did you have fun?” I ask her.

Her eyes get big, and she nods with a smile. Leaning closer, she confides in me. “It was kind of a rush. I’m never doing it again, but I’m still riding the high.”

She pulls back and leans her head against the top of the couch. Eyes closed, hair spilling all around her, the firelight dances shadows across her face. I commit her features to memory and will myself to remember every second of this—the smells, sounds, feelings, her—forever. Fourteen hours ago, we were in Oceanside, talking to Patrick at the Surfer’s Inn Motel. Kate has since unconventionally ‘met’ Josephine when the car broke down in Depoe Bay. We are on our third wardrobe change of the day, coexisting nicely at my happy place. Hoodie on, makeup off, she is beautiful.

I’d noticed her right away when I started at Bliss by Banks. While Marshall is the girl-next-door and Reddington is classy in a fifties glam kind of way, Kate is a natural knockout.

It takes me by surprise in a way. I’ve never wanted to fall for somebody after that time in college. The one where it ended up the girl just wanted me for my family name, and I’d vowed to never go that route again. It was fun having options and nobody to answer to. But then, little by little over the past few days, Kate wove her way into my heart without even trying. But the way she sees through my façade and stands up to me instead of kissing up to me ... it intrigues me. It makes me want to get to know her better, and now that’s happening in such an unconventional kind of way, how much longer do I have before I fall hard and will forever be hers?

The thought should scare me. Or at the least, make me stress and look for an exit. Grandpa and Grandma have a perfect marriage, the kind people would say *hashtag goals* about, but my parents are another story. Their relationship leaves a lot to be desired and makes me jaded to the idea of falling in love.

“Did you spend a lot of time here as a kid?”

Her question pulls me from my thoughts, and I look toward the back of the house, the stretch of property that can be seen from the patio lights. “I did.”

“It’s magical,” she tells me, eyes still closed. “I haven’t felt this stress-free in a long time.”

I know exactly what she means. All my best memories take place here. Life could be impossibly hard, scary, overwhelming, tiring ... and coming here takes that all away. My mom and dad would bring Miles and me for long weekends. They’d sit back here, reading in the hammocks while my big brother and I explored, hiked, caught lizards, frogs, snakes. We’d all go down to search the tide pools for starfish and anemones. Sometimes we’d find a whole bunch of sand dollars.

Grandma would bring us if my parents were busy with work, taking us crabbing off the South Jetty dock in Florence and then we’d bring our catch home to try in a new recipe. On trips where the rain wouldn’t let up, she’d do musical education, picking a random year and going through the top ten hits. We’d read comic books or build new Lego sets, earned by weeding her yard and getting decent grades, and she’d sing along to Chicago, Air Supply, Journey, Billy Joel, Elton John, Tina Turner. The year I turned twenty-two, she and I spent Easter weekend at the house. She had just discovered Lady Gaga, Neon Trees, and Adele. That was a particularly memorable trip.

“We used to come here all the time,” I say. “Thatcher and my grandma bought the house when my mom and Uncle Everette were teenagers. We would do holidays out here, long weekends—once we spent half the summer out here with the adults rotating back and forth, taking turns watching us kids.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever put this together, so help me out here. You’re a Banks.”

I fake shock. “You’re just now realizing this? I thought it was well-established.”

She swats at the air to shush me. “And your mom is a Banks.”

“Ah, I see what you’re getting at. Josephine would not surrender her last name when she married my dad. She is one of those progressive feminists, down with the patriarchy-types. My dad’s last name is Lane, but she decided her children would take her last name. So here we are, we are Bankses.”

“We?”

“Yeah.” My stomach hurts and my head pounds. *Miles*. I watch the flames, add a log, and stoke the fire.

From the corner of my vision I see her wanting to ask more but not knowing if she can. When I go back to the couch, I sit closer to her than before. She smells like a long day; not in a bad way at all, but in the living-life-to-the-fullest kind of way.

“I had an older brother named Miles, and he was my very best friend growing up.”

She waits patiently while I gather what I want to share. Even though it takes a minute, she doesn’t press. Instead, she unwraps herself from her blanket burrito and readjusts it to include me. Her arm brushes across my chest as she tucks it tightly around my hips. A deep breath in draws out the coriander and lime as her head wafts under my nose.

“Nobody at Bliss knows this story. Not Marshall, not Reddington. Nobody. Maybe the four who work on the top floor with my grandfather, but he’s a very private man when it comes to family.”

I look at her to make sure she understands that what is said on the patio at the coastal estate, stays on the patio at the coastal estate.

“Okay,” she breathes.

“The company was supposed to go to Uncle Everette, but he didn’t want it. He and my mom were total free spirits growing up and corporate life was not for them. He bought a Christmas tree farm after he married my aunt, and my two cousins only came to my house or this house, never Thatcher’s

Portland home. It was like, when Uncle Everette left that life, he left it completely.

“My mom married my dad young. He had been in the Air Force for a time and then became a commercial pilot, doing the Reserves on the side. My whole childhood he was gone, flying all over. They liked it that way. They love each other in their own weird way, but they love themselves and their lives the way they want them to be. Though, to his credit, Dad always made it here for reunion week in August and at Christmas, to be with everybody. I don’t think he’s my grandparent’s favorite, but they all played nice when we were together.

“Miles was four years older than me and was my hero. We did everything together. Because my parents were my parents, Thatcher kind of took Miles under his wing and my grandma took me. Don’t ever mention this to Josephine or my dad, but they’re the ones who practically raised us. Miles was mentored to eventually take over the business, and he would’ve been incredible. He was that All-American: quarterback, prom king, everybody loved him—he even graduated high school with some college credits.

“He went to college and after graduation, wanted to join the Air Force before devoting himself to the company. Thatcher respected this and said he could do a four-year contract with the military.”

I hate where this story goes next. Other than my therapist, I’ve never told a soul any of this. It doesn’t feel like it is anybody’s business. Mom will talk about it occasionally when she is in rare form. Grandma and I had one day, right after everything happened, where we sat overlooking the lake at their home in Portland, talking and crying, but then we were done. That’s what being a Banks means: we give ourselves permission to feel all the feelings once and then sweep additional emotions under the rug, moving onward and upward.

Kate’s hand finds mine under the blanket. She cups it and gives it a reassuring squeeze. Swallowing hard, I finish. “He was stationed in Germany, had ten months left, and they had a

rare few days off. He and his buddies went rock climbing in northern Bavaria and a stray rock fell from above and hit him. He died the next day in the hospital.”

“Oh, Luca.”

I fumble nervously with the drawstrings on my hoodie for a moment. Then I set my glasses next to me and lean my head on hers. Pity probably keeps her from moving away from me, and while it is not how I’d like to be perceived, I don’t care. Not right now.

“I’m so sorry.” Her voice carries surprised emotion.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I assure her, putting my arm around her shoulder and holding her against me. She molds into me, that spot now only for her. We sit here like this for a long time, letting the fire dim.

“Are you sleepy?” I ask her. Her breathing has slowed down, and I am afraid she’s fallen asleep.

“Yes, you?” her voice is small. She sounds far away, even though we’ve never sat closer together.

“Let’s get you to bed.” I unwrap us, immediately waking from the snap of cold. We pour water on the fire and shuffle inside. After locking up, I wish her a good night’s sleep.

The bedroom in this house has always been my favorite. It is situated in the corner and gives me lots of natural light from multiple windows. The bed is the right mix of firm and soft, and facing the view of the backyard is the best to wake up to. The room has been decked out in midcentury furniture, thanks to my high school obsession with Frank Lloyd Wright. I change into my Armani pajamas, hoping to get a laugh out of Kate in the morning, put in an earbud, and find my sleeping playlist when my door creaks open.

“You okay?” I sit up and watch Kate hop across the cold wooden floors.

“Yes,” she jumps in and nestles under the covers. Exhaustion sweeps across her face and her eyes are apologetic. “I tried. I really did. But you told me that story about the

ghost, and I'm not sleeping across an unfamiliar house in a haunted wood, all by myself."

I grin. "Fair enough. Want me to grab extra pillows to put down the middle?"

"Is that what you want?" She's burrowed beneath the layers of sheets and blankets until just her eyes and nose peek out.

"No." I slide back down, tucking myself under the massive duvet. "Want to listen?"

"Please." She takes the extra earbud and pops it into her ear.

"Goodnight," I say, turning on the music. "Sleep tight. Kate."

# **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: KATE**

## FRIDAY

Luca's bedroom is swathed in early morning sunlight. One of his strong, tanned arms is wrapped around my middle, holding me close. His breathing is slow and even. We'd fallen asleep on our respective sides of the bed but had gravitated toward one another over the course of the night, my back melting into his chest. Aware of our situation, my heartbeat speeds up, erratically beating in a ticking timebomb kind of way. Any moment now, he will wake up, see what is happening, and it will all be over. Whatever this was.

Last night surpassed any expectations I'd held. Initially, I was not excited about him wanting to have a celebratory dinner. With all the opportunities we've had for a sale, making a big deal out of *one* (and a maybe) is not worth it in my mind. Then I had the crazy idea to throw karaoke into the mix, which immediately turned to dread and attempts to get out of it.

But the sight of him dressed Luca-casual, playing the piano, making sure I stayed warm while showing me the view from that pull-off, and somehow acquiring me a whole cheesecake at a Japanese restaurant ... each little thing makes me reevaluate how I've viewed him this whole time.

Also, he called me by my name. My first name—not Porter. He was cheering me on, helping me find the gumption I needed, and yet, that one syllable changed everything. It was *my name* coming from *his lips*. Never in the history of hearing my name had I loved it so very much.

And that song.



What he said before he sang. *Tonight is the first time this song has meant anything to me.*

That preface wasn't something friends say to each other.

The way the room disappeared and left us the only patrons when he hit the chorus. His almost-apologetic I'm-feeling-this-way-and-I-know-you're-going-to-rip-my-heart-out-and-tear-me-to-shreds shrug. It seemed like he also had an ah-ha about his feelings—and hadn't expected them either.

When we'd woken up yesterday, we were friends. It took a minute for us to get there, but I felt like we had become more than just colleagues on a work trip. We had passed the get-to-know-you stage and were actually in the know. Then last night happened, and we stepped into the realm of possibly more.

The idea of more isn't the worst idea ever.

The scent of last night's fire had seeped into our hair, our skin, and now the sheets. I want to turn to look at him, but don't want to wake him up. How incredibly wrong I've been about him. All this time, I've judged his extravagant lifestyle as handed to him by birthright and deemed his behavioral choices as attention-seeking, when the reality is, he is hurting. He covers his pain by being the life of the party.

Luca stirs before I can dive any deeper into analyzing him. He wraps his free arm under my ribs and pulls me even closer until there is no space left between us. I can feel his muscles, molded by the hours he has spent on the river rowing. It's easy to forget your troubles if you stay busy.

"Good morning." His voice is thick and gravelly. He rubs his nose into my hair. "How'd you sleep?"

"What time is it?"

He lets go just long enough to pull his phone from under his pillow. "Seven. How long have you been up?"

"Just a few minutes." I smile and roll over to face him. "I can't believe I slept in."

"Welcome to the dark side, Kate," he teases.

I tilt my chin up, dangerously close to his lips. “I’ll never let it happen again.”

“We’ll see,” he tells me smugly. “Mm. I like this.” He squeezes me once and kisses the top of my forehead. The intimacy of the moment excites me.

“Even in the light of day?” I ask him hesitantly.

He pulls back and lowers his inquisitive eyes to mine. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” I dip my head and put my hand on his chest. I feel his heartbeat pounding as hard as mine. “Yesterday was *a lot*. Last night was fun, kind of dreamlike. And then when you opened up to me about your brother... I think we can both agree, things feel different between us now.

“I’m just wondering what this would look like if you were back at home with somebody else? If you’d had a regular Luca Thursday night out on the town and woke up like this? Then what? I’m assuming you’d send her home and never call her again. I ... I am wondering how that works now. Today. With me. With us being at the family estate and still days from home.” I try to wiggle out of his hold, only to meet his resistance.

“Hey. Hey, look at me. Please?” he gently asks, his thumb under my chin, lifting it upward. His dark brown eyes crinkle at the edges, his hair is disheveled. His heartbeat slows to normal. “The only person outside of family who’s ever heard the whole story of Miles is my therapist. I’ve thrown myself back into rowing the last few years as an outlet because there was a time I didn’t think I could breathe again. I not only lost my brother, but my freedom to pursue whatever I wanted for my life and the last normal-ish years of my mother ... Talking to Dr. Nicholson and joining the private rowing team have been my saving grace. I know my life looks like nothing but fun and games, but that’s because I’m controlling the narrative.” He pauses. I am certain he can sense the dozen follow-up questions sitting on the tip of my tongue. “This wasn’t a regular Thursday night. You’re not a regular Thursday night. Not for me.”

I swallow hard.

“You’re not going to tell me what you’re thinking, are you?”

I give him a half smile with an eyebrow raise.

“Are you this hard on everybody, Kate, or just me? I’m starting to think it’s just me.” His expression softens at the same time his voice lifts. “If it’s just me, I’ll take it. I can wait, I can wait all day, all week, all year. Whatever time you need to figure out whatever you’re willing to share. I’m here for it. I’ve got nowhere else I need to be.”

His bold declaration leaves me speechless. I trust him to be telling me the truth because this is Luca. He doesn’t say things because he knows you want to hear them. Not in moments like this. I know what I am beginning to feel for him, but I can’t get my vocal chords to cooperate.

My lack of response doesn’t seem to bother him. He lets me go and rolls onto his back, rubbing his hand up his cheek, over the new growth. “We have a few Zoom calls to make up for yesterday. I’m going to shower and shave—”

“No!” I reach out and feel along his jawline, the rough stubble tickling the pads of my fingers. “I’ve missed your beard.”

“I feel like you’re trying to tell me you don’t like my face,” he laughs.

“That’s not what I said. The beard is you,” I plead.

“It doesn’t matter what either of us like, the boss wanted it gone. When he gave me the job, one of his stipulations—other than giving up drinking—was I had to lose the beard and what Thatcher wants, Thatcher gets.” He gets up, looking out the back window and stretches, arms behind his head. I study him. His tall frame, the way he plants both feet and takes in the space around him.

“You’re looking, aren’t you? Like what you see?” he tosses over his shoulder and wiggles his hips.

The movement swishes his pajama shirt aside, and I notice an insignia on the rear pocket of his pajama bottoms.

A loud laugh erupts from deep within me, and Luca turns around to defend himself. “Porter!”—he wags a finger at me, crawling back onto the bed in a pounce-like stance—“Yes, you’ve been demoted to last name status. I am feeling oddly self-conscious right now with how hard you’re laughing at me. What is so funny?”

He launches himself at me in an ungraceful tackle. This only causes me to laugh harder. Scooping me up, he cradles my face between his hands. “You have to tell me now.” When I arch my brow at his demand, he adds a sing-songy, “Please?”

The desperation in his voice sets off a new round of giggles, and I close my eyes briefly and will myself under control. “You truly have Armani pajamas.”

“That’s what this is about?” He mocks offense and lets go of me. “A man can’t have nice things without being ridiculed? What kind of world do we live in?” His eyes light up with a grin, which spreads ear to ear, and my heart bursts. I want that smile to be mine. One he saves just for me and shows me often.

*Who was this woman and where did the sane Kate go?*

“I honestly thought you’d been teasing me when you said you had a pair.”

He holds up two fingers.

“Two!? You have two different pairs?” That starts the giggles all over again.

“Guess what you’re getting for Christmas? You mock them now, but once you wear them, you’ll never wear anything else ever again.”

“Baby ducklings,” I remember.

“Precisely! Okay, Lady Gray sleeps during the day, so you’re safe for now. Go shower and get ready. We have meetings this morning and then I’m taking you on a date.”



A CLEAN-SHAVEN LUCA rummages around his closet and produces two hiking daypacks, both of which are top of the line and look brand new. He gets busy filling them with the snacks Gus promised we'd find in the kitchen and bottles of water. Our meetings have been productive and promising. For whatever reason, these hospitality owners are much more open to chatting with us online instead of in person. Mr. Banks has some old school tendencies about him, and I guess because he's always done business face-to-face, he assumes that is how we should continue to do it.

A week ago, I hated the thought of being second in command. But Luca's proven he is willing to rise to the occasion. He implemented some of my suggestions on how to approach the owners and the dialogue points he should stick to in selling our product, and it is working. Well, maybe not so much working-working as it is planting seeds, but I am hopeful we'll be able to reap the rewards soon. Being vice president is going to be okay. We aren't the worst team—and just like the rhythm we had back in July, we are at it again. I am feeling good about all of it when I walk into the kitchen.

“Am I dressed right? Where are we going?” I ask him as he scurries around, refusing my help.

A date. I'm going on a date with Luca Banks. What is this world coming to? I'd thought our “date” was going to be visiting the lighthouse, but now I am second guessing myself. From the way he is stuffing the packs to their brim, I realize it involves hiking, with possibly getting lost forever. I've opted for yoga pants and a layering of T-shirt, flannel button up, and down jacket tied around my waist. I didn't bring any tennis shoes but I hope my Chaco sandals will suffice. Natalie swears by them for any outdoor occasion and gifted me a pair for my last birthday. Using a mirror by the front door, I throw my hair up in a high ponytail, pinning my bangs back out of my face.

Luca stop and looks up from the counter. He breaks into a wide beams. “I'm sorry, what happened to my friend from

Missouri because we have got ourselves a genuine Oregonian in the house.”

“Four years, Luca. I’ve been here four years. And that doesn’t answer my question.”

“Yes. Perfect. You’re dressed just right for our little outing. Did you grab your sunglasses?”

“Yes.” I tap my shirt pocket.

The weather on the coast was so wild. We’ve gone from an overly warm fall to rain and cold and back to moderately warm again. The property has been breathtaking all day, and I was thrilled when Luca suggested we sit outside for not only our meetings but a quick breakfast (protein shakes and Poptarts—his proclaimed morning pick-me-up specialty) and lunch (Greek wraps he made, thanks to his grandmother’s tireless efforts with him in the kitchen; plus the rest of last night’s cheesecake).

“Almost ready, I just need to find my favorite hat,” he tells me, bopping my nose with a piece of beef jerky.

“Why do you do that? It’s unsanitary.”

He gives me an impish smile as he bounces his eyebrows and shrugs, heading down the hall to his room. I watch him swagger away, decked out in his The North Face get up, the same one he wore the day we went kayaking as a department in July along the Willamette River. That feels like a lifetime ago.

I take a minute to pull up my text thread with Natalie and Jill.

Natalie: Is he a good kisser?

I’m only asking because you DID NOT TEXT ME last night like I asked you to, so you must have gotten lost on Luca’s face or something?

Jill: Okay, your department is hedging more bets.

Due to low sales activity, they're now \*all\* guessing you two are an item and not actually working.

There are three people in the betting pool who believe this "trip" was so you two could run away and elope.

Natalie: I miss that department. My current department is kind of leaving a lot to be desired.

Jill: Horrible boss or a lazy employee situation?

Natalie: Hard to say. Little of both. Come visit!

You too, Kate, come!

If you can find your way back from Luca's face.

Me: Good afternoon, you two.

No kissing.

Meetings today went well. Tell the department to chill out. They're all going to lose their weird bet. Been hard at work—we have more sales in the works.

Oh but, Jill, you don't work on that floor anymore, do you? How are you keeping such close tabs to know of these alleged bets?

Jill: The interns I left behind are very loyal

SHE INSERTS the purple devil emoji.

Natalie: I'm patiently (read: not patiently) waiting for some details.

Jill: Yes! We've lost Natalie to love and I am regrettably as single as they come. Give us something.

Me: Sorry, nothing to share. I'm on a sales trip with Luca. LUCA BANKS.

I'm also as single as they come.

Natalie: I don't buy this, do you, Jill?

Jill: No. But you know Kate, she plays her own feelings close.

Natalie: It's maddening really.

Me: Hey, I am right here!

Jill, we did some meetings over Zoom this morning and they seemed to go so much better than our in-person ones. Any idea why we couldn't have stayed in Portland and jumped online for all of them?

Jill: I have theories but I'm late for a meeting on the top floor. Gotta run.

Natalie: KISS HIM or I'm revoking your tropical invite.



Or don't kiss him. See if I care.

Did that reverse psychology work?

Me: I miss you.

# **CHAPTER NINETEEN: KATE**

## FRIDAY

**T**he car ride lasts all of four minutes before Luca pulls onto the side of the 101 and declares, “We’re here!” He slaps the well-worn, green Lake Oswego Community Rowing hat on his head and shoulders his backpack.

I hop out, slip into my backpack, and look around. An occasional car or RV speeds past us. On both sides of the road, there is nothing but dense woods; a multi-layered canopy of tall, thick evergreens draped in moss, Sitka spruce and pine trees, lazily dropping golden leaves to the ground. The forest floor is covered in an abundance of bushes and Oxalis.

He locks the doors and walks a few yards down the road before pointing to a narrow trailhead. “Here, watch your step. There are a lot of roots, and I’m sure it’ll be a muddy boggy mess in places.”

I have him lead the way as we wind around, sticking to the path. It is quiet, but the forest echoes: a buzzing bee, the rush of the unseen ocean as it breaks on shore, two birds talking. The dirt gives way to sand and shells, and within a few minutes, we step through the trees and onto a long beach. The south end meets a large coastal cliff, the north end goes as far as I can see. We aren’t alone; people playing bocce and spike ball, couples walking with their dogs, the solo hiker decked out with walking sticks. It is beautiful.

But it’s not the lighthouse.

“I feel like you packed a lot of food for a short hike,” I say.

“This is Hobbit Beach. On the other side of that cliff,” he points to the south, “is the lighthouse. We are going to hike up and over that. Easy two miles there and two miles back.”

I take in the daunting Everest and regret finishing off the cheesecake. “Neat. What’s the elevation gain?”

“About a thousand feet.”

“You know, I did Google this place and there is a much nicer, easy half-mile hike from the parking lot *at the lighthouse.*”

“Where’s the fun in that? I know it’ll be steep, but the payoff is worth it. I promise.” Seeing my continued disbelief, he adds, “And for dinner, I’ll take you to the best taco truck.”

Luca knows how to dangle a carrot. Food is one of my love languages and so far he’s delivered on meal after meal. I sigh and tug the straps on my backpack. “Let’s do this.”

Starting on the same path, we ease back half a mile toward the car before the trail splits to take hikers back to the highway or continue to Heceta Head. My early doubts are thrown away once we continue past where I’ve been. The path narrows further, the root situation is trickier, the birds sing more softly. Shadows dance as the sun shifts. Wind twirls around the canopy, offering a welcome respite. And always, the ocean’s crash can be heard.

“Do you think Thatcher will care we took the afternoon off?” I ask, carefully placing one foot in front of the other. I do not need to twist an ankle in here, not when I am finally on my way to seeing the lighthouse up close.

“Naw. Not today. I mean, if he is, I’ll deal with him.” He wrestles with his answer before changing his tone to one of mockery. “I am the President of Contract and Charitable Giving, am I not?”

“That you are. On that note, I feel like I owe you an apology.”

“What for?”

“I haven’t even congratulated you, because I had to go through the five stages of grief first, but I’m happy to announce I have hit acceptance. . . . So congratulations, Luca. And how does it feel to be president?”

He turns around and gives a self-deprecating laugh as he plucks the leaves off a branch that has fallen. “Like everybody is waiting for me to fail.”

“That’s not true.”

“You know it is. You’re probably leading the charge.” He gives me a carless grin. “And here I wrote you a nameplate for your office.”

My mind goes back to Friday when I went into my new office for the first time. That was his handwriting? He’d been that thoughtful to mark my space as mine from the get-go?

“I feel like Thatcher gave me this job because my grandma told him to,” Luca continues. “And much like Obi-Wan Kenobi, I am his only hope. Well, his only hope if he wants to keep this business in the family. But I know he’s just waiting for me to self-implode.”

“That’s dark, especially coming from you,” I tell him, going around a bend to face our first switchback up the side of the cliff.

“This is me letting you in,” he simply says.

“You really think your grandma made him give you the job?”

He sighs. “Probably. And because she’s one of my favorite people in the world, I can’t even be mad at her for it. But I don’t want to talk about work. You and your constant work talk!” He turns back to smile at me at that last part and my heart skips a beat—not just because of the incline.

All around, it smells like Christmas and I breathe in deeply the scent of fir and spruce. The scent opens the floodgate of feelings and memories from last night.

“You like me.” I let the words out and hope they land. It isn’t an accusation, there is nothing sassy in the way it is

delivered. It is hopeful.

He stops to turn, but between the steep slope and the mud, he slides, catching himself. Confident in his footing again, he looks me squarely in the eye. “More than you know.”

If seeing a whale made me question whether or not life could get any better, Luca’s simple admission in the middle of the woods, dressed like the cover model for the summer line of an outdoor clothing company, means I’d have to tell the whale I am sorry. This was *so* much better.

“Promise?”

“Pinky promise.” He doesn’t break eye contact. One brow rises, like he is waiting for more. Needs me to say anything. Acknowledge his honesty with my own.

“I—” My sandal sinks in the bog and I lift it, only to slip, propelling me forward. He reaches out to catch me, offering me a lifeline. Losing his own footing again, we both slip and slide and I yell once. Twice. Arms and legs flail, trying to find traction while simultaneously not knocking one another over the side of the trail and down the hill.

It is a miracle we don’t fall. Relatively unscathed, I point up the path. “Hiking only, no more stopping.”

He listens and leads the way again. We carefully make our way through two more switchbacks blanketed in mud, our legs and lungs burning, before we level out. This high up, the trees look gnarled and twisted, trunks and branches like tentacles of an octopus. The sun breaks through the canopy and gives the woods a Middle-earth feel. The path widens, and Luca brings me to the edge of the cliff, presenting to me Hobbit Beach below.

I unzip my pack and pull out a water, finding a container of green grapes tucked alongside other snacks. After a long drink, I hold up the fruit.

Luca nods once. “You always have those in the afternoon at work, so I made sure you had some today.”

“Want one?”

He pops the tab on a can of Red Bull and tears open a Snickers bar with his teeth. “Thanks, but this is proper hiking food right here.”

In an attempt to continue catching my breath from the climb, I pull out my phone and position Luca for photos: beside tree after tree, on the cliff with the beach below, framing him on the trail, off in the bushes, every spot that looked like it might produce the best photo for Bliss’ social media feed. He willingly complies, trying everything from normal smiles to sassy *GQ* poses. A couple, who is hiking from the lighthouse to the beach, passes by and offers to take a picture of the two of us.

Luca hands them his phone, and the man directs us, putting us on the trail surrounded by the fairy-tale trees. “Those are great but let’s get one more. Move a bit closer. You two look like you don’t even want to be around one another.”

I look over at Luca right as he grabs me, pulls me in front of him and wraps his arms around my shoulders. I hold onto his forearms, and he rests his chin on my head. “Better?”

“Much!” the man calls out, taking a few and handing the phone back with best wishes on the rest of our hike as they take off toward the mud.

Luca swipes through the photos and stops at one, turning the phone toward me. “I like this one.”

I have to admit we look good together. The thought sends my nerves into overdrive and momentarily I find myself unsure how to act around him. It’s ridiculous behavior at best—we are adults, not high schoolers. But I take in the photo, and the idea of us being an *us* feels like winning the lottery. Too good to be true.

We pick up our backpacks and head for the steep decline. The path is wider, the ground more even, the mud all but gone. Luca happily sips on his drink and eats his candy bar, while I enjoy my grapes.

Not huffing and puffing up a hill or having to worry about my footing, I walk alongside him. “When you were made

president, I ... wasn't thrilled."

"You don't say?"

"Hear me out. It wasn't totally because it was *you*. I figured with Natalie gone, it would make the most sense for the position to go to me. And it didn't help that I overheard you, that night of the fundraiser, telling your grandfather as much."

"You heard that?" He sounds surprised, an overtone of embarrassment laces his answer.

"Jill and I did. Not on purpose, we walked into it and stayed hidden behind a food truck," I admit. "Anyway, I got it in my head that you were going to keep going to bat for me and help me get the spot. Then it felt like the rug was pulled out from under me when he named you instead." I stop for a second to snap a photo. Luca is watching me, hurt in his eyes.

"But that's on me, Luca." I reassure him. "As we say on the farm, you shouldn't count your chickens before they hatch. And really, it makes sense. You're going to take over the whole company someday, so of course, it should have gone to you."

"Porter—"

"This stems from an insecurity of mine—"

"But—"

"This is me sharing," I sing out the last word. He quiets and lets me continue as we make our way down a long switchback. "Growing up, my best friend was Bailey. She lived on the next farm over and we spent all our free time together. She and I were also super competitive with one another, and she always made sure I came in second place, whatever 'second place' looked like. My chickens laid six eggs a day, she'd find some way for hers to lay seven. I signed up for the school play and suddenly she had always dreamed of being an actress. She got the lead, which I was going after, and I got some random side part. I wanted to take honors history and wouldn't you know it? She wanted to take honors



history, edging me out by one point on our final grades. She beat me as class valedictorian by four-tenths of a point.”

“Why’d you stay friends with somebody so toxic?”

“It was a very small town,” I say, like that made the situation okay. “There was no getting away from her if I tried.”

“Is she the reason you moved to Portland?” he asks and gives me his hand to help me jump down a deep step as we turn another switchback.

“We went to rival colleges. Fitting, right? I was at Truman and she went to Northwest Missouri State. It was a breath of fresh air to make new friends and do my own thing where nobody knew my town, nobody knew her.”

I hesitate before continuing. “Anyway, my freshman year, I started dating Brett Abbott. We dated all four years, and everybody knew we were going to get married once we graduated. I had all but picked out a house for us near his family’s cattle farm. He had big plans to take it over one day.”

“Uh-oh. I don’t think this is going to end well,” Luca says, pointing to his nose like he has all the answers.

“Stop.” I reach out and playfully swat at the back of his backpack. “Do you want to hear this or not?”

“I’m sorry, yes. Please continue.”

“The night of graduation, our families were all together for this big party my parents threw at a restaurant that was similar to an Olive Garden—a kind of knock-off called Zesty Italy—” I can see his body tense up, holding back a laugh as he pictures a formal event held at a chain restaurant. “Hey! Before you laugh, Kirksville is small, okay? It was the best we had, Mister I-Have-Cut-the-Line-Access-to-Every-New-Place-in-Portland.”

“Fair, proceed.”

“Long story short. We all thought he was going to propose to me that night, and instead, Bailey showed up. I assumed she was supporting me and celebrating graduation, but turns out, not so much. He broke up with me during dinner, and they

officially started dating. He'd met her at my house over Christmas break and boom. Second place again. My whole family watched it all go down. And, to-date, it was the most embarrassing moment of my life. Well, until last night at karaoke."

"So, me getting the job you wanted is the same as you not marrying the jerk that went after your best friend?"

"When you say it like that, it sounds ridiculous."

"No, I'm just trying to understand. Let me ask you this: how are you friends with Reddington and Marshall? Don't you worry in that friendship triangle you'll come in second? They'll be closer to one another than to you?"

I smile to myself. "Not really. I know they have known each other longer and I am grateful they have included me. You call it controlling the narrative? I call it self-preservation. I don't share *everything*. They get me to try, but I've built that wall, and it's pretty solid."

"But it feels like the wall isn't as tall around me." He slows his pace and steps aside so we are walking side by side again as the path evens out for a spell.

"I can stop." I knock his hip with mine.

He hesitantly takes my hand and links our fingers. "I would hate that."

His hand is slightly rough on the palm from his time in rowing. He gently rubs his thumb around mine. I swear he can hear my heart thumping against my ribcage. Sharing a smile, we head down the cliffside, swinging our arms like it is a normal Friday. The kind of Friday we share every week.

Coming up on the next switchback, Luca stops and tells me to turn around and face the direction we have just come from. "I want this to be perfect. Hang on ... just like that, and okay." He steps in front of me. "Close your eyes. I'm going to lead you down the last switchback. It'll be fine, nothing to trip on, but I want you to see the lighthouse the way it's meant to be seen—in all its glory at once."

“I get the feeling if I don’t do this, I don’t get tacos.” I shake my head.

“The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind, but yes, let’s go with that.” He takes both my hands and rotates me back downhill.

We go the last few hundred yards, stopping once for him to put an earbud in my ear and once for him to remind me that peeking is strictly not allowed. The music starts up, Coldplay’s “Something Just Like This.” There are four steps I have to navigate with his help, but he guides me carefully, telling me when to step and how to set my foot on the uneven path. How he times it I’ll never figure out, but right as Chris Martin sings the first line of the chorus, Luca tells me, “Open your eyes.”

I take a final step down and look ahead. There she is, Heceta Head Lighthouse. Towering on the bluff, her white body is a stark contrast to the bright blue sky and dark rock surrounding her.

“Still impressive, even up close?” he asked.

“Oh yeah. Nailed it.”

He laces his fingers through mine again, and we make our way over to the base. We wander all the way around and then look over the fenced cliffside to the ocean below. Sea lions lazily relax on the rocks, some diving in the water before hopping back out to sunbathe. People mill about the overlook, binoculars in hand, ready to spot a whale.

We walk the gravel pathway along the fence line, watching the sea life, feeling the ocean spray mist our way from large rogue waves. Cove Beach below is largely exposed, thanks to the low tide, and visitors poke around the tidepools. The iconic Cape Creek Bridge towers in the background, beyond the parking lot. A stream running under it winds a curvy path toward the ocean. “This place is—” and I gesture a chef’s kiss.

“Hey!” he cries. “The shrimp last night got that honor.”

“I’m sorry, but they don’t even compare.” I squeeze his hand. “Now, are you going to take me down to the beach or what?”

We stop in the gift shop along the half-mile walk to the parking lot and beach area. I find a ceramic Christmas tree ornament of the lighthouse and grab a matching one for Luca. He playfully rolls his eyes and tells me he already has one, but decides if one is good, two is better. Next to the gift shop is the bed-and-breakfast Luca had told me about the night before.

“Why aren’t they on our list?” I ask him. “Surely they do the luxury thing?”

“Enough with the work talk!” he teases, then seeing my slight pout adds, “I promise I’ll look into it.”

I take off my Chacos and let my toes sink into the cool sand. We amble toward the tide pools and poke around, finding orange and purple starfish alongside dark purple sea anemones. Mussels dress the large rocks. It’s all better than I could have imagined. I submit Luca to a new round of social media photos, only after I agree to star in some as well.

“You like it here?” he smiles, lowering his phone and deeming the photo worthy.

I don’t even know how to articulate what I’m feeling. “How could anybody not love it here? Mountains meet the beach! There’s a creek feeding into the ocean. There are sea lions, a lighthouse, hiking, a ghost! I don’t know how I’ve made it this far in life without seeing this.”

He comes up behind me and wraps me in his arms. His chin rests on the top of my head and he takes a deep breath. Releasing it, he says, “I’m glad I got to be the one to introduce you to it.”

BACK AT THE LIGHTHOUSE, we sit on its base and dig into our packs. Luca has piecemealed cheeses, crackers, salami, and fruit. He’s also managed to squeeze in Cheetos and more Snickers bars.

“What? I always come prepared,” he says in response to my smirk.

We feast while taking in the view. In between bites of jalapeno cheddar cheese with wheat crackers, Luca looks around, then says, “I would like to state for the record that I did a great job with this date.”

I nearly choke on a Cheeto. “You are awfully confident about something that isn’t over yet.”

“What?” he eyes me seriously. “I’ll have you know, I never do second dates. Ever.”

Taking a minute to process what he says, I grab a few blueberries and toss them in my mouth. “I refuse to call last night a date. *This* is our first date. After seeing how you usually treat *the ladies*, I’m guessing that’s why you don’t get many takers for another outing.” He fakes surprise as I continue. “I’m placing my money on you taking the poor, unsuspecting soul to Tidal, sitting in the same booth, ordering the same platter you did when we went last week, and always singing the same songs.”

His hand fists and he bounces it off my knee as he says, “Yes to the platter. It’s a solid choice, though, remember? You know you liked it. Last night was good too, but nowhere in Portland mixes hibachi and karaoke.”

The wheels turn behind his wide eyes. “I should open some place like it—it would be epic. Then again, I feel like that’s a uniquely Sumo Dumplings thing.”

I nod. “And the music?”

“That changes depending on my mood.”

“At our *work meeting* last week, you sang ‘Bad Romance.’ Why?”

His lips tug at the memory. “Because I kill it with the choreography. I thought I’d get a laugh from you but you were out of there before my final bow.”

“I liked last night’s choice better.”

Leaning over, he pops a raspberry into my mouth. “Good. It was just for you.”

I study his face: the way his dark brown eyes look at me from behind his blue-rimmed glasses. I notice the way his hair bounces ever-so-slightly in the breeze at the base of his neck under his hat. His slightly crooked smile producing his dimples. “Why are you still single? You could have any woman in Portland, any woman anywhere for that matter.”

My question is earnest. What is he doing here with me? What does he want me for? When we go back to real life, how can I trust he won't cut me loose and go back to his regularly scheduled program?

He throws back the rest of a water bottle and considers my inquiry. “As you kindly pointed out just now, I am terrible at planning dates, so that's probably my problem.”

My eyes roll before I can stop them.

“Okay, you're right,” he continues. “I *could* probably have anybody in Portland. But you know what? They only see the dollar signs associated with my name. That's all they want from me.

“I dated a woman in college for a few years, and like you and Brett, I pictured forever with her. Then Miles died, and she was gone before the funeral was over. She didn't want to help me navigate the worst experience of my life—she only wanted me for the dinners and trips and trust fund. She loved what the doors the name Banks opened. It kind of blindsided me. I've watched my grandparents be so devoted to one another and thought, ‘Wow! I've found that same kind of love!’ and then she left. I was young and stupid.

“I vowed I'd never do the long-term thing again. I go out with women all the time because it's fun, but they're always asking about my connections to people and places, they see my house and start redecorating it in their mind, they ask how long Thatcher is going to keep working ... they aren't choosing me, they're choosing what comes with me. So it's a one-time thing and I move on.”

“I hope you know I don't want any of that. I want ...” I stand and gesture wildly around us, between us, “something just like this.”

He jumps up, eyes wide at my description. “Porter, did you just quote Coldplay to me?” The pure joy that shoots out of him includes a fist pump, ninja-kick, two punch twist.

“Come here before I change my mind,” I say, stopping his celebration short by fisting his hoodie and pulling him close, kissing him before I can think twice.

# CHAPTER TWENTY: LUCA



FRIDAY

**K**ate Porter's kiss is the unpredicted surprise of the century. I wanted to kiss that woman last night on the back patio by the fire before we went down the rabbit hole that is my life. I spent all day pushing the thought from my mind. *I can wait. I can wait as long as she needs me to,* I've been telling myself. She is worried this is just a trip romance, but she needs to shift her worry to how she is *never* going to get rid of me. I am intoxicated by her, and when she lunged at me, grabbing my hoodie, before I realized what was happening, and proceeded to kiss me? I couldn't remember where we were or what my name was.

Her soft pink lips crush against me, opening slightly as they shape themselves to mine. She slides one hand into my hair and the other comes up along my jaw. It is over sooner than I would've liked. Before I've had a chance to react, to hold her the way she deserves.

She takes a step back and blinks rapidly, as if she's shocked herself. "I'm so sor—"

"Kate, don't say that," I spit out. A shot of fear courses through me. "Unless you are."

Relief floods her eyes; I breathe easier knowing we are on the same page. "No, I wanted to do that." She bites her lip. The same one that was just on mine. "I think I want to again."

"I *know* I do." This time it is my turn to step forward, place my hands on either side of her face, feel her breath hitch as I slowly move toward her, rubbing her nose with mine. When I

look into her blue eyes, I see the sparkle she gets whenever something excites her. This time I'm the one causing that and I like it. I glance at her lips and can't wait a second more.

She tastes like the raspberry I've fed her just minutes ago. She smells like my favorite combination of beach and happiness. Her hands land on either side of my hoodie's front pocket, and I feel her lightly tug, like she is grounding herself. We meld into one another and continue to explore our feelings. She deepens the kiss, bringing her arms around my shoulders. It's slow, respectful, passionate. Everything it should be.

Easing up, I kiss her in a short one, two, three, burst, before I drop my lips to her nose, kiss her temple, and hold her tight. Both arms wind around her as if we will blow off the cliff otherwise.

"Can I say something?" Her muffled voice comes from my chest.

I pull back and look at her. Swollen lips from me, her hair a mess from the day, and yet the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. "Anything."

"You called me Kate. Demotion over?"

"Absolutely."

"Can I say something else?"

"Please."

"You nailed the best first date ever."

I press her against me once more and give her a kiss on the forehead. "Keep that sentiment in mind as we hike back to the car. The ascent from this side is a beast."

WE TAKE off for the trail shortly after the best moment of my life. Having packed up our uneaten snacks carefully around the ornaments, we ask a nice family to take our photo in front of the lighthouse. Kate grabs my hand and leads me to the fence along the cliff for one last selfie together with the bridge and beach in the background. I hold the phone out and count down from three when she sneaks a kiss on my cheek as I

press the button. The smile on my face reminds me of the smiles I used to freely offer the world before Miles' death.

As promised, the hike up the hill is demanding, and Kate asks if we can swap talk for music. We split the earbuds, and she taps on Coldplay's *Viva La Vida* album. She doesn't know the significance of this album, the way it catches my breath and makes me feel like I'll never fill my lungs again. I can't bear to ask her to select another album, what with her singing along to "Cemeteries of London" quietly enough she thinks I can't hear her behind me. The innocent quality of her off-key styling makes me indescribably happy. I'm straddling this weird line of happy and sad and don't want her to see any of it.

We climb and switch east, switch west, catch our breath, push on, knowing the top will come soon enough. We get through "Lost," "Viva La Vida," and "Violet Hill," before I can no longer hold back the stinging of my eyes, freely wiping the tears along with the sweat. Our feet level out, and we are among the mystical trees where we can see Hobbit Beach below.

Kate catches up, standing alongside me. She rubs my back slowly. "I picked the wrong album."

I run my hand along my eyes one last time and blow out a deep breath. "No, you absolutely picked the right one. This humiliation is me feeling all the things. Miles and I loved this album when it first came out. We listened to it so much Grandma told us we either needed to go follow them on tour or find another album to love because she was sick of listening to it." The memory makes me chuckle.

"Said the woman who later became obsessed with Adele."

"Right?" I reply, grateful she has validated me.

"What'd you guys move on to?"

I look at her out of the corner of my eye, lips quirk up. "Miles graduated from college that spring, and we jumped on legs ten through fourteen of their world tour. Well, he did the North American stretch with me through the summer and part

of the European tour in the fall before he joined the Air Force.”

She does the math and asks, “You skipped your sophomore year of college?”

“Yeah, and I don’t regret it at all. We followed them from city to city, hitting up the show night after night. We made friends all over, stayed in everything from hostels to five-star hotels, ate like kings. Josephine paid the credit card bill every month when it showed up, never batting an eye. She wanted us to follow our spirit guides and find our true selves. Every once in a while, her unconventional parenting methods worked to our advantage.

“By the time Miles went to boot camp, I had enough connections that I kept making my way through Europe and never found myself alone. It was a wild year. I finished up in South America, and then I sat in on an uncomfortable video chat with my dad and Thatcher, who essentially told me I had to come home and grow up.”

“So you went back to school that fall?” We start walking slowly, and Kate takes my hand in hers. It’s soft and fits in mine perfectly.

“I did, I made it to my senior year, that’s when Miles’ accident happened. So much was going on ...” I scratch the back of my neck, feeling sheepish.

“You never finished college,” she says it as a statement.

“When I dropped out, it was meant to be a year at most. Get my parents through their grief, help my grandparents with whatever they needed, take care of Miles’ personal property. Then a year turned into two, turned into three ... I got busy doing other stuff.”

“Like being a socialite.”

“When you say it like that, you make me sound ... ridiculous. Can we picture me as a pirate or something cooler instead?”

“Call it what you want, you groupie,” she teases.

The trail narrows and Kate lets go of my hand as I take us down the muddy switchbacks.

While going up had been slick, going down proves to be a new challenge. Every step requires thought and precision to stay upright. With each footstep, Kate's sandals ease into the thick sludge and ooze out the sides of the straps.

"You traversing this okay?" I call over my shoulder.

"I was born ready for—" Famous last words. She doesn't even get to finish her sentence because down she goes, straight into the bog.

I flip around carelessly to see her fall and lose my footing, sliding backward while laughing at her misfortune. She sits there caked in fresh mud, a cross between frustrated and surrendering to nature, ready to lie down and give up.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She pushes herself up and instantly her foot slips out from its hold, landing her right back where she'd started. "I'm super, but I need your help."

I don't hesitate, setting down my bag and making my way toward the edge of the trail at the drop off, where there was some grass and weeds to walk along. Reaching her and stabilizing a leg on either side of the trail, I offer my hands to help her up, while assessing her. "Oh, you are a mess, aren't you?"

"Watch it," she warns, lifting her eyes to mine with a sneer.

I pull her up, get her steadied. Brushing a loose hair out of her face, I tuck it gently behind her ear. "I like you," I tell her with a grin, bopping her on the nose with a mud covered finger.

She brushes the residue off and gives me an eye roll. "My hero."

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: KATE**

## FRIDAY

**L**uca leans in my doorway. “Toss your dirty clothes into the hall when you’re ready, and I’ll have Henrietta throw them into the washer.” We get back to the house and immediately I’ve headed down the hall toward my room for a shower. He’d promised me tacos from a place in Florence, but I am no longer in the mood now that I am coated with mud drying up and down my backside. It’s all over my feet and legs, and, amazingly, even in my hair.

“I am not having that poor woman do my laundry.” His instructions make me sour further. I turn and give him a look of disgust. “I’ll do it myself when I’m done.”

“She doesn’t mind, I promise.” He calls down toward the kitchen where his concierges have come to drop off a few more fresh groceries and chop wood, accompanied by their goldendoodle, Fritz. “Henrietta, would you be willing to start a load of Kate’s laundry?”

“Of course. Just have her leave it in the hall,” Henrietta hollers back, unloading the dishwasher.

I narrow my eyes. “You know, your elitism is showing and it’s not a good look on you.”

He bends down to scratch behind Fritz’s ears, waving me off with a flick of his wrist and a ‘meh’ face, like I’ve just told him I’ve seen the Gray Lady.

Cleaned up and donning joggers and a Kansas City Chiefs sweatshirt, I finger-comb my hair out, gather my dirty clothes, and wander through the house to find the laundry room.

I find it near Luca's room. His door is wide open and I see steam rise out from under his bathroom door. Starting the load, I add his pile of clothes found outside his door and head back toward the kitchen. Walking down the long hallway, I take my time looking at the large photographs lining both walls. They are all black and white shots from the coast: different angles of the property here at the estate, a stunning snap of the lighthouse, Haystack from the spot Luca had taken me for the sunset the first night. Each photograph is professionally framed, capturing the subject brilliantly. I am studying a tidepool landscape full of sea life when Henrietta comes up behind me, carrying a load of fresh, fluffy towels.

"He has an incredible eye, doesn't he?" she pauses to look at another photo of the night sky through the trees in the backyard.

"Who's the photographer?"

"Luca, dear."

Suddenly, his insistence on how we took in the sunset at Haystack from that particular spot made so much sense.

"I always told him he should've been a photo journalist with how much he loves the outdoors and how well he can find beauty in everything." She pats me on the shoulder and drops the towels in his room before heading back toward the kitchen.

"Can I help you with anything?" I call out before she gets very far.

She turns and smiles warmly. "He's never brought anybody here, you know. But the minute I saw you, I knew you meant something. That he thought you were a good one. You are the first person in a long time at this home to ask me that question. But no, I'm about done with the sides he requested and then we'll get out of your hair."

"You are more than welcome to join us," I offer.

"Oh no, dear. I think we'd just be in the way." She closes the argument and leaves me to keep studying the photographs.



Luca waltzes out of his bedroom, shaking his hair with his hand, looking perfect in his sweats and a long-sleeved thermal. The simplicity of the garments still screams pricier than my monthly car payment. I shake my head at the thought.

Throwing on his glasses and squinting exaggeratedly, he inspects the frame I stand in front of—a close-up of a whale’s tail flapping above the water—and knocks the glass with his knuckle. “That isn’t half bad. That fella seems like a real talented photographer.”

I look at him and motion to his collection adorning the walls. “How are you so good at so many things? It’s absolutely maddening.”

“Well, according to some, I’m extremely talented at all the wrong things.” His brows bounce. The sound of crunching gravel in the driveway makes his ears perk. “Oooh, right on time. Are you ready for dinner?”

I follow him outside to the front porch where a truck hauling a food cart comes to a stop. Two men jump out, waving to Luca before they open the door to the food truck, rolling up the serving window and firing up the grill.

“I promised you tacos,” he says, holding his arms out at the latest arrival, “and you earned them. Game Thyme has the best steak tacos *ever*. I’d recommend those, but their Korean BBQ pork tacos are good too. Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

“You brought the taco truck to us?” My tone isn’t the kindest, and I see his excitement waver. I stand there, caught between absolutely loving the grand gesture and annoyed this is normal life for people like Luca Banks. That this is how he has always run his life and those women he has dated *expected* experiences like this. Too muddy and tired to go get tacos, let’s just call the business and have them haul their shop to us. That isn’t me, and I never want to get to the point where it becomes who I am.

Before I say the wrong thing and ruin his efforts to deliver on his word, I take a deep breath, count to four, exhale, and give him a hug. “You brought the taco truck to me.”

WE LOAD up on more food than anybody should be able to eat in one sitting, carrying our platter through the house and to the back patio. Gus, who has started the fire, pushes off the ground and brushes his hands. His movements are a bit strained, mimicking those of a man who's done hard labor all his life; crabbing has probably bested him more than a few times. Despite that, he's cleaned up some of the lingering debris from the rain, pulled out the rest of the patio furniture and cushions, made sure the fire is roaring for us—hailed out extra wood, and turned on all the string lights. The backyard looks enchanting in the dimming sunlight. Henrietta comes out, carrying homemade guacamole, salsa, and chips.

They call for Fritz, who runs our way from the tree line, his tongue flopping. “Anything else, Mr. Banks?” Gus asks, fishing a dog treat from his pocket for his trusty companion.

“I think we are good, Gus. But please, help yourselves to tacos on your way out. I asked them to wait for your order before they leave,” Luca says.

“Very good, thank you. Let me know if you need anything,” Gus replies, shaking Luca's hand. “Nice to see you again, Kate.” He tips his cap at me.

“So good to meet you, dear,” Henrietta gives me a quick hug. “Make him fold all the laundry. He needs the practice.” She winks at me before they step inside the house. A minute later, we can hear the front door latch.

I take in the spread before us and grab a Dr. Pepper chilling in a bucket of ice. Henrietta has even frosted glasses for us and cut up lime wedges. This Banks normal is unreal.

Drink poured, I grab a chip and swipe the guac. “You suck, you know.”

“Why?” Luca whips his head toward me, steak taco halfway to his mouth. “You need to eat. Your blood sugar is low and you're saying crazy things.”

A smile creeps across my face. “No, you have the best housekeeper, and I want to steal her. Think she wants to live in

a small one-bedroom in South Portland?”

He takes a chip and dunks it in the salsa, pulling his face as if he were really considering my question. “Doubtful. I’m sure she would miss living here and taking care of my family too much.”

“That’s too bad. I’d be willing to take the couch and give her my bed. And I’d do my own laundry.” I take a bite of steak taco. The meat has been rubbed in some spice mixture that gives the taco a kick, only to be cooled by the guac and an unknown sauce. Worth every single minute of that hike and all the bruises I know I’ll find on my body tomorrow. “Hey, did you hear from your mom at all today?”

“No ...” He twists his face. “But that’s not necessarily a good thing. I meant to check in with her, but then this sassy blonde kissed me and all thoughts of my mother just disappeared.”

“You liked it.” I make a face at him.

“I guess so,” he shoots back.

I put my finger on my lip like I am thinking. “Hm, then I guess there won’t be any more of that.”

“Hey!” he cries out. “Of all the mean things you’ve ever said to me, that is by far the zinger that takes the cake.”

AFTER PUTTING AWAY THE LEFTOVERS, Luca comes out carrying a pint of Tillamook Oregon dark cherry ice cream and two spoons. He shakes the container at me and nods toward the hammocks at the edge of the patio.

“Fancy a swing?”

“If I leave the perimeter of the fire, I’ll get cold,” I tease him.

His lips buoy and his eyes light against the darkened sky. One thing that has drawn me to Luca from the moment we met in the conference room nearly a year ago, was how expressive his face is. Energy, spunk, sass, and unapologetically leaning into the happiness he is feeling. He is the sunshine to my

naturally grumpy self. The man literally buzzes like a hive all the time.

“How in the world could we remedy this?” His eyes go wide, and he overdramatically steps closer to me. “Maybe, just maybe, we will have to *share* a hammock and bring a quilt. Just spit balling here.”

It takes us a few tries to get comfortable and make the quilt fall just right so that it covered all the way down to our toes, but we cocoon ourselves, gently swinging as the hammock settles. I look up through the tree canopy and see a familiar view. The night is cloudless so far, allowing stars to litter the sky like a spilled tub of glitter. The smells of spruce, ocean, and Luca linger in my nose. He’s used the huckleberry and lemon bodywash and shampoo that was also in my bathroom; one of Bliss’ more popular scents from last summer season.

“You took one of the photos in the hall from right here, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” He spoons some of the dark pink ice cream into his mouth. “I love this spot.”

I turn my head and my nose brushes against the five o’clock shadow creeping up his jawline. “I was thinking, and hear me out before you say no, but what if we used those photos you’ve taken at each meeting we’ve had and—”

“Gah!” he covers my mouth with his hand. “No work! No work. Tomorrow, work is good. Tonight, work is bad. Here, try this.”

He tips the carton my direction. The extra spoon is sitting in the ice cream, waiting for me to grab it, and he raises his eyebrows. I shake my head. “Pause on the work moratorium. I’ve seen you take photos at each place we’ve gone for a meeting.”

“I’m a visual learner and those shots help me remember the meetings and what we talked about better,” he explains.

“It’s brilliant.” His face illuminates at my praise. “I think if we could somehow get the promotional department to let you use photographs of the establishments we are working with

and somehow tie them into the community piece, it will make it that much more meaningful for everyone involved. I don't have it all worked out yet in my head, but there is something there."

"Since you've paused my no work talk rule, I have something to say."

I watch him earnestly.

"You know you're the heart of our division, right?" His eyes lock on mine. "You're always thinking about work, figuring out the next step. You care more than anybody else. You cheerlead us all along. You find the things each of us are good at and you use that to strengthen the company as a whole."

What he said strikes a little piece of my soul. I've always felt like my efforts went largely unnoticed and that is okay. I don't need my quiet championing to get recognized, but it is nice he's seen it. There were times in the past when he'd made comments that people treated him like he didn't exist and so he heard things, saw things. This proves his claim. He saw me. And if what Luca needs right now is somebody to support him in his new role, I can do that. In fact, I find I want to do that.

"Unpause." I run my hand through his now dried hair. Down the side of his face. His body tightens. His breathing speeds up. My fingers run down his chest, fisting his shirt to pull him as close as possible, bridging the nearly non-existent gap between us.

Our earlier kisses have been fun, flirty, new. This one is like two people needing to say all the things they didn't know how to verbalize. Feelings usually saved for the chorus of love ballads bubble to the surface. While still holding the ice cream in one hand, he wiggles free the arm trapped inside the hammock, rubbing his thumb across my cheekbone.

The fire pops loudly, startling us apart before we really get going. Luca chuckles and rests his forehead against mine, breathing in deeply. My heartbeat slowly returns to normal and I grin. He returns the gesture, dimples on full display, and bops a smidge of ice cream on my nose before kissing it off.

We readjusted, and I take my spoon, helping myself to a big scoop. “Did you ever sleep out here and watch the sky change all night?”

“A few times. Every once in a while during the summer it was so hot we’d all camp out here on loungers and in hammocks. Then my grandma demanded Thatcher have air conditioning installed a few years ago, and we haven’t had to since.”

“What a rotten childhood you lived.” I finish my bite and go for a second. “No air conditioning at your coastal estate.”

“I don’t know how we ever managed without it, but I’m still standing,” he pokes the side of my rib with his finger. “Tell me more about your family. Dad’s retired. Mom does books. Sister bought farm. These are very little clues into your life, and I feel like you’ve walked straight into my crazy just on Josephine’s phone call alone. It’s not fair.”

“There’s not much to tell. Dad is looking forward to fishing—”

“Do you think he’d let me tag along? Has he ever fished in the ocean?” I can see his wheels turning.

I chuckle. “He’d love a fishing partner. He’s pretty serious about it, though. If you haven’t done much since camp ...”

“That’s okay.” He blows it off as quickly as he’d asked. “Keep going, what else?”

“I think Mom will work until she dies at her desk. She thrives on being busy, so it wouldn’t surprise me if she was going to do the books for Beth and Mitch.”

“What was it like growing up on the farm? Did you run around barefoot in overalls, catching snakes and riding on tire swings while Green Day’s ‘Good Riddance’ played through the wind?” He’s painted quite the picture and it makes me chortle against the spoon placed halfway into my mouth.

“Actually, kind of. I learned a lot about working hard and working as a team. I played ultimate frisbee with my friends all summer long once chores were done.”

He jerks, causing the hammock to rock sharply. “I play ultimate frisbee on a rec team in Portland!”

“Finally, something in common. I was getting worried.”

“You’re a sass.”

“But you like me.”

He nods earnestly. “What was your family dynamic like?”

“Um, Beth and I were sisters—we were either mortal enemies or best friends depending on the day. My parents were busy all day long, but we always did dinner together. There were maybe a handful of times we weren’t all at the table, which is impressive with farming life. Dinner may have been at nine o’clock at night, but we sat around that table and fell asleep in our seat while eating.”

“Are you a talk-about-your-feelings-family or a sweep-it-under-the-rug-and-move-on family?”

“We are big time talkers. We overshare and make sure all our feelings are out in the open. What about your family?”

“Major sweepers. We avoid feelings and talking at all costs. And your parents liked each other?”

“Yeah. They went on dates at least once a month. I remember those were a big deal to Beth and me because we’d get to order pizza and stay up late watching a movie until they got home. Where is this coming from?”

“I’ve been thinking about those siblings from last night and how much they missed their dad and how they seemed really close. It’s made me think, that’s all.

“I’ll never get to sit at a restaurant with Miles and mourn our parents. Quite honestly, I don’t know if I will be as upset as I should be by their passing. I hope so, but if anything were to happen today, I can’t promise that would be the case. Except for my grandma. I’ll be a mess—drunker than those sisters combined. But I’d still get up there and sing, delivering a great performance for her.”

He gives a brief half smile, and I kiss him softly, letting it linger. His lips are smooth, his body warm against mine. We

are the only two people left in the world, and I am the happiest I've been in a long time.

“You are not who I thought you were,” I whisper. “I mean, I was mostly right on the mark, but there's this other part of you that I would have never guessed was there.”

A small trace of delight dances across his eyes. “You could've known sooner. I would've shown you.”

“Is that so?”

“I'm not a secret keeper. What you see is what you get. While we were busting our butts and Reddington was off finding the love of her life, I thought you and I had formed an alliance. Then she came back—briefly—and you tossed me aside again.”

He has me there. His tone isn't cutting, but the message goes deep. I did exactly that; stuck intensely beside him for two weeks and then set him out to pasture when I didn't need him anymore.

“I'm sorry.” I absolutely mean it. More so than any apology I've ever given.

“And since I'm on a high horse, you have been my most expensive date in a while,” he affirms, trying to sound authoritative as he wiggles to scoop the last of the ice cream. He feeds me the bite and tosses the carton and our spoons to the grass.

I can't hide my grin. “I didn't ask for you to cater a whole taco truck for me.”

“Oh, that was nothing,” he says, as if he's simply taken out the garbage or loaded the dishwasher. “I'm talking about the five thousand dollars you cost me at the fundraiser.”

“You have nobody to blame for that but yourself. For the record, though, I think I've been pretty good company.”

He kisses my forehead, my nose, my eagerly awaiting mouth. Running his hands through my hair, he holds the back of my head and deepens the kiss, only pausing long enough to get out, “The best.”



“COME ON, LET’S GO INSIDE.” I lightly nudge Luca. His soft snores have filtered into my ears and woken me from my own slumber moments before.

His voice sounds distorted, exhausted. “I’m not asleep. I’m not ready to go in yet.”

“You were asleep and I was asleep.” I lift the quilt off of myself, ready to ease out of the hammock.

“Can’t we just sleep outside like I used to?” His eyes are still closed and he looks comfortable. “The walk to the house is miles away.”

“Trust me, you’ll feel a lot better in the morning if you sleep in a bed.” My feet find ground and crunch leaves, the cool night slamming my body now that I am missing half the warmth I’ve enjoyed.

“You are zero fun,” he tells me. I lean down to kiss his temple, and he grabs my sweatshirt, trying to pull me back next to him.

A low chuckle escapes my lips. I am just about ready to climb back into the hammock when his eyes pop open, twinkling with glee.

“Maybe tonight will be the night the Gray Lady leaves her hill and visits this way.”

I jump back from the hammock as if it is on fire. Quilt wrapped around me and dragging along the ground, I head toward the house, leaving Luca in a full belly laugh.

“Not funny!” I cry, reaching the door. “And just for that, you’re sharing your bed again!”

He comes up behind me and scoops his arms around my waist, nuzzling against my neck. “Perfect! Then my plan worked.”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: KATE**

## SATURDAY

A crash from the kitchen wakes me. Luca is rummaging around a cabinet, banging pots and pans together, opening and closing the fridge. He is talking to somebody. A muffled voice reverberates down the hallway during his pauses. Hopefully, he is getting the car situation figured out. Josephine's Subaru has been hauled off to the car graveyard, and while I am grateful we have been able to use Thatcher's restored Range Rover, we need something to get us down the rest of the coast and then home. I roll out of the bed, my toes sink into the thick wool rug, and I look out the window. Beyond the yard, I study the water in the distance. The morning wake greets us with calm, lapping waves. Dew clings to the branches of the large spruce trees enveloping the edge of the property, each drop glistening off the sun's rays. Lifting my arms above my head, I stretch a good minute, waking all my muscles. Reminiscing about the night before.

*Luca.*

Just the thought of his name brings an excited flurry of warmth that expands over every inch of me. Thirty-six hours earlier, I was so quick to write him off. I've only ever seen him as the grandson who literally waltzed into the office and stole the job I dreamed of getting after working hard, putting in my time. Then yesterday happened. Without a second thought, I'd kissed him and when we kissed again last night—every time was better than the last. Now it's a new day, and I don't know where we stand. Was it a case of being swept up in the

moment: A good hike, endorphins, beautiful setting, joking around, a thoughtful dinner, and a fire?

I slide into a plush robe I find lying on the large accent chair and skip down the hall toward the kitchen. His tense voice stops me short of bursting through the arched doorway to greet my housemate.

“Mom—” His frustration bubbles over.

I stand against the wall, out of sight. His back is to me, head tucked, holding his phone between his shoulder and ear, and his long arms brace the counter on both sides of the sink. He is still wearing the gray sweats and thermal from last night.

“No, Mom. Please listen,” his voice changes from upset to exhausted. His shoulders sag and he tilts his head toward the ceiling. “No, you can’t get high in my comic book room. We have talked about this ...”

He sets the phone on the counter, putting it on speaker. Josephine’s voice fills the room.

“Luca, you know there are times I need to ... realign my energies and escape a bit.”

“Do you not hear me? I don’t want that smell in the house. Go out on the balcony.”

“But the view from that room is my very favorite. Come on, sweetheart—I’m riddled with anxiety, I need this.”

“So make some brownies and eat them in there.” There is an attempt at compromise in his voice.

“I can’t find anything in your kitchen, you know that. Everything’s in glass containers that aren’t labeled. It looks like *Architectural Digest* threw up in your pantry.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s on a Portland—Singapore—Tokyo leg this weekend.”

A long sigh. “I’m going to call Grandma.”

Her voice turns from saccharine to snappish. “Is that a threat?”

“No, but I’m not there to keep an eye on you and somebody should be there when you ... treat yourself.” He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t want to hang out with my mother this weekend. Alone. Where are you?”

“At the house.” He grabs a box of waffle mix and measures some into a bowl.

“You’re here? Are you hiding from me again?”

Adding an egg and milk, he whisks out his frustration. “Mom, that was *one* time. In fact, I think it was in correlation to the last time you got high, in. my. comic. book. room. We are at the beach house for the weekend.”

There is a long pause, followed by a very upbeat, “I’m coming.”

Whisking stops. His head snaps up, and I cover my mouth to smother a laugh.

“This will be perfect. I’ll call Gus and have him pick up some eggplants and mushrooms at the farmer’s market and we’ll grill those with ...”

“Mom, no. I’m begging you—stay in Portland.”

His pleas are lost on her. “Got to run, kiddo. I need to tell your grandmother we are going on a little road trip. See you tonight!”

He stares at his phone a moment before calling over his shoulder, “Good morning, Kate.”

My body stiffens. I shuffle into the kitchen. “I wasn’t spying.”

“It looked that way through the reflection in the window,” his voice is sing-songy.

I feel heat creep into my face. “How’d you sleep?”

“Like a rock, until that phone call woke me up and invaded my day.” He pulls a waffle maker from the cupboard and plugs it in. “So you heard the great news. Josephine is coming with my grandma. Here. All four of us together. Should be *fun*.”

“This sounds like a family thing,” I sidle up next to him, wanting to throw my arms around his waist and hold him close. But the fear of yesterday’s dreaminess and today’s reality holds me back. “Why don’t I rent a car in Florence and stay down there tonight?”

“Oh no, you’re not getting out of this. I’m not facing whatever state she is in by myself.” He dips his finger in the batter and bops me on the nose.

“Your grandma is coming, you’ll be fine,” I remind him, wiping the goo off my skin.

“Ha,” he says. “That’s where you are mistaken. After a three hour ride together, Grandma is going to pass her off to me.”

“I honestly don’t believe it’s as bad as you say.” I shake my head. The waffle maker indicates it is ready, and I pour a heaping scoop of batter on it before closing the lid.

“Wait until you’ve been in the same room for a few hours. You’d be ready to climb in a ring and go a few rounds. I’d put my money on you.”

The corner of my lip lifts. “You don’t mean any of that.”

His expression softens. “I don’t. I’m just frustrated.”

“Something to do with a comic book room?”

He nods.

“Please expand on what exactly this space is. I’m picturing a bedroom with twin bunkbeds and wood paneling. I’m seeing bins set on every surface, hoarder-style, overflowing with comics? Maybe your most prized issue framed on the wall with special lighting to highlight it.”

He shyly glances around the room. “Not quite. I told you my grandma and I used to build Legos. For a long time, it was kind of our thing. Then she started to worry about my reading. I was kind of behind and my grades weren’t so great, so she introduced me to comic books. One turned into two which turned into” —he scratches the side of his face as he thinks

—“nah, I’m too embarrassed to even tell you. But they’re all in a room at my house, sorted by series and year.”

“And it helped you become a better reader?” I ask.

He grins. “Yeah, I started to enjoy reading and everything school-wise snowballed from there. Grandma saw how much joy they brought me and it became treasure hunt for us.

“We’d go searching for them together at shops around Portland and later on, on the internet. My most prized one, a Captain America from 1941, is in fact framed and lit. That one took us years to track down and buy.”

He pauses and smiles wistfully at a memory. “Miles and I came to the beach with Grandma one time during summer break and there was an estate sale in Florence that we just happened to drive by. Grandma would never normally stop at one but there was a sign that said baseball cards and comic books. We hit the motherload with a big box of old Batman and Spiderman and Star Wars.

“It rained that afternoon and Grandma put on Chicago’s *Greatest Hits* while she made banana bread. Miles and I sat on this floor and went through the box, divvying them up, reading most of them that day.”

I look around the large kitchen and try to imagine a young Luca sprawled out one of the cozy, woven rugs around the room, excitedly lost in a superhero’s world. The thought makes me happy. “Do you have a favorite issue?”

“That’s like asking if I have a favorite song. Impossible. But, I really loved Batman #50 that launched in 2018. It was an extra-sized anniversary issue. Batman got married. Anyway, I got up early to stand in line at Excalibur over in East Portland—”

“I’m going to stop you there.” I hold up a hand—I have to interject here. “Most of this is gibberish to me, but one thing stood out. *You* stood in line, an actual line, and waited until the store opened and the queue moved and it was your turn to purchase the comic? No errand boy? No housekeeper did this for you?”

He puffs out his chest proudly. “I did it all by myself. It was excruciating, and like, my feet hurt by the time it was over, but it built character.”

“Oh, you’re kind of a geek.” My fingers hesitantly climb up his chest and I give him a kiss. A brief brush of the lips like it is something we do all day long as we come and go throughout the house.

“I’m okay with that,” he says, grabbing me and pulling me close. “And maybe it’s stupid that a grown man has a comic book room. In fact, saying it aloud to you, I’m hearing how unusual it sounds, *but* that room contains all the happiest memories of my childhood. Then Josephine decides to go get high in there, like it’s no big deal, because her chi is on the fritz.”

“She seems ... spirited,” I muse.

His lips quirk. “That’s the nice way of saying ridiculous.”

We move around one another in the kitchen like a synchronized dance. Luca walks across the room to a floating shelf, collecting plates and cups. I rinse huckleberries. He pulls milk out of the fridge. I set the table.

A ring from my phone alerts me to an incoming video chat from Natalie and Jill. I look apologetically at Luca. “It’s Saturday morning. We used to go to brunch a few times a month, but since Natalie left, we have been doing this instead.”

“Why are you apologizing? Answer!” He turns his attention to the beeping waffle iron. “I’m taking this waffle, though.”

I accept the call, sitting at the table, and a split screen brings up Natalie and Jill. Natalie beams, her hair braided and her skin glowing. “You kissed! I smell kissing!”

“You can smell through your phone?” I tease her.

“That’s not a denial,” Jill provokes.

“Kate, what are you wearing? What is wrong with your hair?” Natalie squints her eyes, taking me in.



I feel my hair. The humidity has given it waves and rogue curls. Looking down at my cinched robe, I ask, “What are you talking about?”

Natalie touches her nose. “By my calculations, it’s ten in Oregon—”

“Yeah, and it’s seven in Hawaii.” I deflect. “Where are you going so early? Joel’s behind you holding a snorkel. Hi, Joel!” I wave to Natalie’s boyfriend. He joins in and smiles at Jill and me.

“These fake friends again, Red? Really, you two—how much does she pay you? She’s rich, you know. She could pay a long time for a ruse.” He kisses the side of her head.

“Joel’s started this really fun new thing for us where we get up super early to swim laps at Waimea Bay. *Laps*. Multiple. Across the bay. Like I’m athletic or something,” she says, rolling her eyes and ignoring his jest. “But the real interesting thing is, Kate is not ready for the day, and Kate’s an early riser who does not bum around in pajamas past eight.”

“So?” I smile.

“I smell kissing!”

Luca sits down next to me, plate piled high with fruit on top of his waffle. He squeezes himself into the camera. “Reddington, did I hear somebody is telling *you* what to do? I never thought I’d live to see the day.” He grins big and his dimples peek through his scruff. I can’t stop staring at him. I know my friends notice where my attention is.

Taking a bite, he doesn’t miss a beat. “Hi, Joel, I’m Luca.” He elongates his name, as if he’s expects Natalie to have mentioned him before.

“Hey, I’ve heard all about you,” Joel laughs. “Nice to meet you, man. Can you do me a favor?”

“Name it.” Luca squares his shoulders, ready to go to battle.

Joel leans in, cutting Natalie out of the frame, waving Luca closer. Luca mirrors him. Joel whispers to Luca like they were

the only two on the call. “Red will never let us go swim until she gets her answer. You and I both know it’s none of her business, but she is who she is and she has to know. And we need to go get our laps in before she has to do the crepe thing and I have to do my kayak thing.”

Luca leans back and puts an arm around me. I can feel the heat rush up my neck and flood my face. This turn of events between us is new and we are on the road, making it feel almost surreal. I have never been one for flaunting a relationship around others; the lighthouse kiss—out in the open among strangers—was definitely new territory for me.

He moves in, leaving an exaggerated wet kiss on my cheek and turns back to Natalie and Jill. “Take that as you will, ladies.”

“Visual confirmation has been made, I’m satisfied,” Natalie replies.

Jill gave a half smile and a shoulder lift. “If this becomes a thing,” she says, wagging a finger between Luca and me, “I’m here for it.”

“*If* this becomes a thing, the first person we are going to tell is Gayle,” Luca says, like it makes all the sense in the world to everybody present. I burst out laughing, the sound echoing around the kitchen.

“Oh look at that, Shark Guy, they have an inside joke,” Natalie teases. “How cute are you two?”

Jill and I mouth “Shark Guy?” to one another.

Joel rolls his eyes and smiles. “Don’t mind Red and *her* inside jokes. Luca, is Kate this feisty? Is our dating life going to become a competition? I need to know so I can run while I’ve still got a chance.”

“We live on an island, babe, you’re not running anywhere.” She wraps her arms around him and squeezes his shoulders.

“Hey, the fifth wheel over here is feeling forgotten,” Jill sasses.

“We need to find you somebody, Jill,” Natalie jumps in. “Joel doesn’t have any single friends, and Luca knows all the wrong people.”

“Thank you,” Luca says, standing up. “That’s my cue to go. If you were nicer, Reddington, I’d send you some fresh huckleberries from the *estate* but you don’t deserve them. Marshall, I’ll bring you a jar. Chat with you both next Saturday.” With a wink for my friends, he takes his plate to the waffle iron.

Next Saturday. He’s eased himself into my life, and it is thrilling. I like that we’ve bounced around one another, like boxers sizing up before the match, before jumping right into things without hesitation.

Luca opens the sliding glass wall of windows, creating a breezy indoor/outdoor space, and I step outside to continue the call on the patio. Joel excuses himself, leaving the three of us to finish up.

“So?” Natalie asks.

“Yes,” I admit.

Jill says, “It’s about time. You two have been dancing around each other all summer.”

“No,” I scoff.

“There’s been something there,” she says, tapping her nose all-knowingly.

“Is he a good kisser? He seems like he would be or would think he is,” Natalie mulls.

I turn to see if Luca is nearby and catch him back at the table, scowling at his phone. “Definitely that kind of kiss you see in the movies where the camera pans away and the song plays and there is a voice over.”

“Oooh, an epic kiss,” Jill lulls.

I bite my bottom lip, thinking about all the kisses Luca and I have shared. Epic is a pretty good word for them. “I have to go in a minute. There’s some Banks family drama happening.”

“Interesting. They seem so put together,” Natalie says.

“Oh, you know a family with *that* kind of money and reach has skeletons,” Jill says, throwing on a pair of sunglasses. I wonder if she has ever caught wind of Miles’ passing. She pulls her light brown hair back into a tight ponytail, and we can see her head into her condo’s hallway. “I’m about to go, too. Pilates is calling.”

“Okay, but before you guys go, I have to share this endearing little nugget: he has a room at his house devoted to comic books.”

They let that sink in for a second.

“Sounds on brand for him,” Jill nods, accepting this as a normal thing.

“What’s happened to us? This used to be something we would have laughed about, probably for days,” I point out. “Now we just accept it as the norm?”

“Well, now you’re ... dating, kissing, whatever, and that changes things. We can’t make fun of him anymore,” Jill explains. “If you like him, we like him. Quirks and all.”

“Plus, we all have a thing,” Natalie quips. “I have a food truck, Jill has a library. Joel has the outdoors. Luca has comics.”

“What’s my thing?” I ask her. When she puts it that way, I feel left out.

Jill thinks about it a second. “What do you want it to be?”

“I don’t know yet.” Admitting as much makes me feel a little pathetic. How have I made it so far in life without a defining thing? Something people associated with me?

“Maybe you’ll figure it out on the trip,” Jill says kindly, then adds. “As you sell *lots* of contracts. No pressure.”

I END the call and go inside to a fresh waffle waiting for me at the table. I sit down beside Luca, prepare my breakfast, and take a bite. He seems edgy and zoned out, like the comfort

food I am enjoying isn't providing that same relief for him. I wave my fork at him, snapping him out of his reverie. "You know, I have no idea where you live. Do you live by your grandparents? Do you have a penthouse apartment on the waterfront?"

"I've got a few places." He takes a bite and realizing I'm unimpressed, continues. "My house is in the Healy Heights neighborhood—are you familiar with where that is?"

I stop chewing. My impassive face makes him raise an eyebrow. "I'll take that as a yes." He takes another bite and covers his mouth with the back of his hand. "You're judging me a bit, aren't you?"

"Let me put this in perspective for you: My car is a 2012 Honda Pilot. The toiletries I use are often '*gifted*' to me from my place of employment. I shop at the Loft Outlet for work clothes. The one little luxury I own is this bracelet"—I hold up my wrist, my black onyx Tiffany's toggle bracelet dangling—"and it was a birthday present from Brett our senior year of college. Even though we broke up five years ago, I can't stop wearing it because it makes me feel a little bit fancy, a little bit like I fit in with all of you. So yes, I know where Healy Heights is, and I don't think I'd be allowed near your gated community."

Luca puts down his fork and pushes his plate aside. "I wasn't trying to make you feel bad." His gaze averts to the table while he collects his thoughts. He clears his throat and looks at me. "I am so sorry. I really wasn't. That, just now, was the old Luca. The one who was always trying to impress and throw around buzz words to look cool. And I'm really trying to get rid of that part of me, but every once in a while, he is going to rear his ugly face again and mess things up."

"I should probably apologize too. That was pretty defensive just now." I blow out a breath. "You live in Healy Heights. Please continue."

Luca pushes the fruit around his plate with his fork. "I had a penthouse apartment downtown and loved it, but I sold it and bought this place a few years ago ..."

“To throw raging karaoke parties.” I tease, bumping his shoulder.

He smirks. “There were two pretty cool parties I threw when I first moved in. If you appreciated name-dropping, I’d blow your mind right now with the VIP list. But no, I actually picked the place because the architect designed it to be a multi-generational dwelling. So it had enough space for me to take in my mom, and when Dad is in town, he can stay there too. My grandparents will have their own floor when they can’t live on their own anymore. It backs up to the nature preserve and there are lots of greenbelts around for running—but the hospital is close by and it’s in the heart of everything Portland.”

“That’s pretty noble of you.” I scoot closer and interlock our arms. “How has this worked out with *the ladies* once they realize your castle will become a family affair?”

“My one-date policy has made that a non-issue.” He bounces his brows.

“It’s all about controlling the narrative,” I repeat to him and offer his arm a light squeeze. “What was the matter when I was outside?” Pivoting the conversation, I point to his phone.

“Oh, my grandma is on her way to get Josephine and then they’ll descend upon us before you know it. This is really happening.” He looks around ominously.

“What’s on the docket today?” I ask him, scraping the last of my syrup with my waffle and stabbing the final few huckleberries on my plate.

Luca takes our dishes to the sink and rinses them before placing them in the dishwasher. “I’ve got some laundry to fold and I think we should try a couple more cold calls to some of the businesses we missed—don’t you feel like that’s going better than stopping by in person?” He pauses to look for my confirmation before continuing. “So weird they prefer it that route, but it’s easier and faster for us. Then what would you like to do?”

My eyes roam the large open-concept kitchen, living room, dining room, and land on the wall behind the piano. To a mounted shadowbox containing handtied flies. I look at Luca and ask, “How do you feel about teaching me to fly fish?”

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:  
LUCA**



## SATURDAY

“Cast a little farther out, like this,” I call out and demonstrate for Kate, pitching my arm out, allowing the line to travel as far upstream as the leader would go. My Spey fly finds a quick breeze and lands flawlessly on the top of the Siuslaw River.

When she'd proposed this outing, I had to pick my jaw up off the floor. Kate is nowhere near as high-maintenance as Reddington, but I would never have pegged her as wanting to strap on waders and stand with a freezing river rushing between her legs, casting repeatedly, reeling in a fish and unhooking the fly from its mouth. Whether or not she knows that is all part of the activity remains to be seen, but she asked me to teach her, and I would be a fool to tell her no.

Our first stop was to one of Florence's fishing outfitters to get her setup with waders, a vest, a flyfishing kit, and a hat. She's thrown her long blonde hair into a sloppy braid as she proudly selects and puts on a burnt orange baseball cap with a patch embroidered "Florence" to round out her look.

She stands downriver from me, the main bridge that runs through Florence towering behind her, thigh deep in the rushing river. Carefully watching my moves, she copies them perfectly. Her leader flies toward me, landing in the middle of the river and she reels slowly as it passes by her, heading downstream. Her lips turn up at her accomplishment, and I snap a photo just as she throws her head over her shoulder and winks at me.

My heart lurches at her simple expression. She casts again, and I can't stop watching her. Graceful, flawless. She'd slept soundly all night, not moving once from the moment her head hit the pillow. Me, on the other hand, I'd watched the stars shift across the sky and saw the morning shadows dance across the yard. Needing to relive every moment of yesterday once, twice, three times, suddenly became more important than slumber.

Kate has always been an enigma to me. From the first time we met, she gave me just enough to think we were becoming friends before pulling back again. It's been almost a year since Grandpa walked me into the office on the fourth floor and introduced me to Marshall and Reddington, leaving me in their care. They'd seemed less than enthusiastic at my arrival, but naturally wouldn't dream of saying no to their boss. After showing me around the office, they'd dumped me at my cubicle in the main area and that's when Kate had walked in. Drenched, she had shaken her broken umbrella a few times before chucking it in the garbage can by the elevators and making her way across the room toward me. Tossing her tote on the floor, she wiggled out of her coat and threw her wet hair into a bun on top of her head. I'll never forget her blue eyes raking over me with a look of disgust.

"I'm guessing you know who I am," I'd said to her with an uncomfortable chuckle.

"Don't touch anything, don't answer any phones, just wait until I get back from the meeting I'm late for and then I'll start you on a project," had been her reply. With that, she'd run off for an hour while I'd happily followed directions, scrolling social media and quickly solidifying my reputation of doing the least amount of work possible.

I thought I'd earned some points when we saved the fundraiser in July. Kate had been so stressed out while Reddington was in Hawaii, so I'd called in favors, missed karaoke finals at Tidal, and worked my first sixty-hour week ever to help her out. Even though she had dismissed my date offer at the end of the event, things had seemed better between

us. All I wanted was a colleague who was in my corner, and I thought we were there.

Getting the president's gig didn't help me out at all, but this trip feels like it has been a turning point. We've hit a few bumps, but I am doing everything I can to get her to relax, smile, have some fun, and not completely give up on me. We've had some laughs. She agreed to surrender her loathing of singing in public. I opened up, telling her things nobody knew. And then I took her on my favorite hike and she rewarded me with the best day I've had in years. Maybe even ever.

Usually, I take a woman out and that was that. I am fine if I never see her again. More often than not, I crave the attention of a large group, needing their energy to keep mine up and help me feel like I am making the most of my life. But these relationships are nothing more than surface friendships, socially knowing as little as possible about each other while still having a good time.

Kate has changed everything in a matter of days. She radiates goodness, and I find myself drawn to her like the moon's gravitational pull on the ocean tides. I know right now I'll never be able to escape this grip. It is more than attraction, it is a force of nature.

Never have I ever thought one person would be all I needed to be my best self, but here we are. I want her to know everything about me, and in turn, I want her to leave no detail of her life unshared. And after she kissed me, I knew I was a goner. All night I replayed her grabbing me and going in for the kill.

"Oh no! Luca!" Her cry shakes me from my thoughts. "I think I caught one—eek! What do I do!?"

I throw my head back and laugh. "Why 'oh no'? That's great if you caught one."

"Get over here and help me!" She furiously reels while simultaneously squirming.

“Take this.” I close the gap between us and hand her my flyrod, while grabbing hold of hers. There is definitely something on the other end of her line, and I slow down, reeling it in. A Chinook salmon flops wildly, fighting against the current and my pull.

“What are you going to do with that?” she shrieks. The confident and sexy fisherman has been replaced by a very unsure Kate. Seeing her in this new light is amusing.

I lift the fish and inspect how deep the hook is embedded in its mouth. “I’m going to be grateful you caught us dinner so we don’t have to choke down whatever delightful meal my mother has planned.”

“No.” Her eyes go wide.

“You’re telling me you want eggplant? Have you had it? It’s not fish tacos.” I shake my head at her. “But this guy could be.”

“That’s cruel,” she tells me.

“Where do you think fish tacos come from? You grew up on a farm,” I remind her. “Your dad fishes. This is not your first kill.”

I can see her weigh her options.

“What’s it going to be, Porter?” I hold up the salmon again. “I’ll grill this into something delicious or you and Josephine can enjoy an eggplant and mushroom medley, followed by a stomachache.”

She preps my rod to cast and turns away. “Do what you must, but I’m not watching.”



“WHEN WE GOT in the water today, I was hoping you’d catch one. I never imagined you’d end up with six.” I look at Kate as we head north out of Florence. Her braid is draped over her shoulder, loosely tumbling as she wraps the ends around her fingers.

“I’m sorry your whole time was spent dealing with my catches.” She grimaces.

I reach over and grab her hand, interlacing our fingers and bringing them to my lips. We haven’t been very affectionate all day, and aside from my over-the-top kiss on her cheek during our video chat, there has been nothing since. I am not sure what to make of that and usually I’d have no problem bringing it up, joke about it to get an answer. But what if she’s changed her mind and yesterday was a fluke? I can’t deal with the fallout of that *and* Josephine’s imminent arrival. She tightens her grip on mine, and I take it as a good sign. “You were a good luck charm. Buckle up because you’re always going to have to go with me now.”

“My dad used to say the same thing. Anytime I fished with him, we’d catch a lot. Of course, I’d never deal with those either. Today was more technical than reel fishing, but I liked the challenge.” She settles back into the seat.

Noting her lack of response to my flirty threat, I am ready to have the awkward conversation about us when I notice the missing bling on her wrist. “Hey, your bracelet’s missing—do you think it fell off?” I pull off on the shoulder, watching for a chance to turn around. Hopefully she didn’t lose it in the river.

“I took it off before we left,” she says.

My eyebrows lift. “But I’ve never seen you without it.” I pull back onto the highway, wondering if this meant more or if I am reading into it now that I am invested—probably to my own detriment.

She lets a long three seconds pass. “It was just time.”

“Well, now how am I supposed to know when you’re nervous?” I tease her.

“Maybe I’ll start straightening or adjusting my clothes like you.” Do I really do that? All I’m hearing is she’s had eyes on me. I’ll take it.

“You’ve watched me,” I say with amusement.

“Only when forced to,” she replies. “Same could be said about you, though.”

“I can’t stop watching you,” I tell her honestly, then realize what I’ve said. “And *that* made me sound like a creeper.”

Her laugh fills the cab of the Range Rover, squeezing my heart. In return, I squeeze her hand a few times.

“I haven’t heard this song in forever!” she says, sidetracked by the playlist. Bonnie Tyler’s hit “Total Eclipse of the Heart” begins its long, slow-building first verse to the explosive chorus. “Let me guess, you brought down the house, I don’t know ... at a Superbowl afterparty, belting this out to your adoring fans.”

Her oddly specific guess makes me quick to grin. “A London pub, actually. But nice try.”

“Oh, apologies,” she sasses. “Was this during your stint as a groupie?”

I think about it a moment. “No, this trip was during spring break my senior year of high school. A bunch of us went and my whole goal was to find Emma Watson, but it never happened.”

This makes Kate roll her eyes. “Are you singing with me or what?”

“You want to take the lead or sing backup?” I steal a glance at her as we head up the cliffside. Her eyes are going to freeze permanently in an upward position if she keeps rolling them.

“Stop complicating everything and just sing,” she commands. Two beats later, we jump in, and I can’t help but harmonize with her. It takes her a few lines before she lets loose, but by the time we’ve reached the chorus, she playfully belts out the words, slightly off-key and drumming the dash at the crescendo of the chorus. It takes everything in me to keep my eyes on the road. Kate is singing along to memorized lyrics, but it feels like the performance was for me.

We pass over the Cape Creek Bridge by the lighthouse and mid-note she looks over at the scene of yesterday’s adventures and heat creeps up her cheeks. That has to be a good sign she is thinking about us as much as I am.



THE SONG ENDS as we turn into the long driveway. My heartbeat picks up, thrumming against my ribcage. Consciously slowing my breathing, I brace myself for signs of my grandma's Lexus LX. The garage door closest to the house is open and there it sits.

"Ba-dum," I sing the two most famous notes of *Jaws*.

Kate chuckles. "Stop."

"Ba-dum," I repeat.

"Coworkers," she says, stopping me mid-third round of singing.

Slowing the car to a crawl before we reach the main yard, I look at her. "Coworkers?"

"Yes." She lets go of my hand and sits up straight. "I've never met your mom and your grandma is well, my boss' wife, and they're under the impression we are coworkers keeping Thatcher's empire alive."

"Gus and Henrietta aren't stupid, they know something is going on. What if they say something and it spills?" I don't understand what her hesitation is. If anything, I am sure the turn of events will be welcomed.

She considers this, biting her lip. "I honestly have never had a reason to know if there is something in Thatcher's policy about workplace relationships. Do you know?"

A smile crosses my face. "When would that have ever stopped me?"

Kate furrows her brows. "There's more at stake for me here than for you. Your grandfather would 'redistribute' me rather than let you go. Please, promise me you won't say or do anything to raise any questions. Let's not throw another layer into the mix."

What she says makes absolute sense and is the right route to go, but it plants a flicker of doubt into my mind. She is

doing that give and take thing again—going so far as to admit this is something—and I can't risk going back to the beginning. Can't let her easily dismiss whatever has begun.

Before I can argue, Josephine bounds out the front door and flies down the walkway.

“Luca! There you are, my sweetheart.” Her arms open graciously wide to greet us. I take a quick assessment, killing the engine.

Her shoulder length dark hair is loosely curled. She wears her signature matching linen top and pant ensemble. She goes barefoot, her toes painted bright purple. At least she seems sober. We can work with this.

I hop out of the car and swoop her into the big hug she is looking for. Despite our absence of only five days, she loves to make a big deal after any time we are apart. It is her most maternal behavior, and I've secretly always loved it.

“Hi, Mom.”

She smells like peonies, and I brave the question, “You spared my comic book room?”

She pushes off of me with a tsk and pats the side of my face. “You and your precious magazines. With the change in plans, I thought I'd save that fun for tonight.”

Kate comes up the walkway, carrying the cooler. She sets it down and extends her hand politely. “Hi, Mrs. Banks, I'm Kate Porter.”

My mom sizes her up for a brief moment and dismisses her outstretched hand, pulling her instead into an awkwardly long hug, complete with a kiss on each cheek. “Pleasure is all mine, Kate. You're much prettier than those women Luca usually hangs out with. Very natural, glowing skin.” Mom runs her hand down Kate's braid and stares into Kate's eyes intensely, leaving no room for boundaries. “Mm, and your aura is bright purple with some fringes of red and yellow. This is interesting, very interesting. Unusual, actually. I'll have to go consult my book.” Stepping back, she flicks her wrist, bracelets clinking



like a chime. “Anyway, call me Josephine, please. Mrs. Banks is my mother—speaking of, where is she?”

As quickly as she has popped onto the front steps, she turns and tucks back into the house. Kate appears somewhat shell-shocked but overall handles the initial meeting better than I could have hoped for.

“Imagine if she had shown up high,” was all I could say. I toe the earth at the edge of the lawn for a second before clearing my throat. “I’ve got the cooler if you want to grab the gear and put it in the garage. Or I can grab your suitcase and take you back to Florence.”

Without hesitating a second, she gives me a playful smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t miss whatever this is for the world.”

**CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR:  
LUCA**

SATURDAY

**G**randma is out back on the patio with Gus and Henrietta. I drop the cooler on the teak outdoor dining table.

“Gus, I’ve got six Chinook in there.” I nod to the cooler and Gus goes over to look. “Henrietta, do you have anything for fish tacos? I apologize, we should’ve stopped or texted you but—”

“No worries, dear,” she gives me a knowing look. “I’ve got everything you’ll need.”

Stepping up to my grandmother, I wrap an arm around her and give her a quick hug as she stares annoyed at the grill. Vegetables of all shapes and sizes sit on a Blackstone griddle. “Hey, how was the drive?”

Eleanor Banks stands taller than her five-foot-five frame. Her short silver hair is styled the same way it has been my whole life and looks recently set. Removing her sunglasses, her hazel eyes study mine. “Thank heavens you brought food-food, my favorite grandchild. Your mother insisted we do some kind of plant-based cleanse, and I have been hungry since Portland.”

A laugh of appreciation rises out of me. Grandma never is one to flower over her feelings or keep her opinions to herself. Kate appears tentatively in the doorway of the opened window wall. Henrietta passes by on her way into the kitchen and says something to Kate, who smiles and blushes. She whispers something to Henrietta and Henrietta nods, a look of understanding passing between them.

I wave her over and from the corner of my eye see Grandma follow my eyeline. “Grandma, you remember Kate, right?”

“Lovely to see you again, Kate.” Grandma pats her on the back. “How have things been going this week with him?” She looks at Kate conspiratorially and throws her head my way, like I’m not standing right there.

“Somehow we have managed,” Kate replies, giving her work smile. It is tight-lipped and polite, warm enough, but corporate.

“I’ve enjoyed the photos you’ve posted every day. It looks like you’re making some good connections,” Grandma continues. Her eyes bounce between the two of us, the context of her comment deeper than its words.

Kate blows out a long breath. “Hopefully, they pay off in the long run. Maybe I should go see if Henrietta needs any help with dinner.”

The subtle context to their layered comments ping pong and I almost break. Keeping secrets from Grandma was up there with staying off a stage. I just can’t do it.

“Mom,” Josephine opens her bedroom door onto the patio, saving me. “Peter Cetera is trying to choke himself on my crystals again.”

“Peter Cetera?” Kate mouths my way, confusion written all over her face.

Grandma goes toward Josephine’s room, and I take the opportunity to close the gap between Kate and me. She smells like Neoprene and salt air and overwhelm. “Grandma’s Scottish Terrier.”

“Of course, naturally. And she named him that because ...”

“He was the lead singer of Chicago,” I finish.

A chuckle escapes her lips as she turns on her heel for the kitchen. “Clever.”

Under any other circumstances, I would have followed her, wanting to be next to her to help in any way I could. Find

reasons to steal a kiss while we chop and dice, make an excuse to place my hand around her waist and pull her against me. Annoyance brews that instead we go back to being coworkers, and I turn my attention to running interference.



“AS ALWAYS, Gus and Henrietta, you’ve outdone yourselves,” Grandma praises, taking her place at the head of the table. She’s changed into a fashionable tailored jogging suit with a cashmere throw draped around her shoulders.

Gus and I cleaned, gutted, and grilled the salmon before Gus chopped wood and started a large fire. He’s made sure all the string lights are turned on, the patio area made impeccable. Henrietta dressed the long teakwood table in a deep teal runner, setting artisan hurricane candles down its length, along with groupings of gourds and pumpkins. She’s pulled out Grandma’s favorite Acacia dinnerware and the locally blown glassware.

Kate carries out a bowl of mango salsa, setting it on the table, taking in the production value. She has showered and let her long hair dry in waves, bangs swept across her forehead. She wears her linen pants and a thin navy sweater that hugs her curves. I can’t hide my grin, discovering she’s wearing the same dangly, wooden hoop earrings from hibachi night. Mind in overdrive, I imagine she’s done it as a subtle nod to me.

“Come sit by me, Kate,” Grandma points to the seat on her left. “And Luca, why don’t you take this one?” Her mouth ticks up as she nods to the seat on her right.

We follow her directions, my lips purse ever so slightly at being pulled away from Kate again. With Grandma at the head of the table and Kate and I on either side of her, Josephine sits next to me, while Henrietta and Gus sit next to Kate. Peter Cetera chases Fritz around the base of the trees, intermittently wandering over to the table, hoping something has fallen or somebody will share.

We pass dishes around, loading our plates with what we need to assemble fish tacos and respectfully take a small scoop of Josephine's vegetables. She's brought her vegan wine and pours herself a generous glass. I take that as my cue to be on high alert.

"Kate, Luca tells me these are all your doing. You got yourself a good harvest today," Gus says. "They blackened up nicely, and I think the mango salsa will mix well with the flavoring."

"Her first time flyfishing and she showed me up." I shift my gaze across the table. She lifts her eyes from her plate, settling them on mine. I get a small smile and delight dances across her eyes.

Gus looks up with excitement. "You don't say? Well, young lady, you're welcome to go anytime with me—I rarely get that lucky!"

"Oh hush, you got lucky in love and that's all that matters," Henrietta pats his hand with hers.

Stabbing a mushroom, Gus agrees and takes a bite. "I really did, Etta. You're right as always."

The table breaks out in chuckles, and Grandma turns her attention to me.

"How are things going? Your grandfather hasn't said much to me, but I know he's following closely."

I slowly chew a bite of taco to buy myself a minute. Jill has been forthcoming in telling me she's been tracking our progress, but I should've known Grandpa couldn't sit back and let me run this trip. He is probably making follow-up calls with places we've stopped by and checking notes we've left in the database. Swallowing, I answer, "It's been a good learning experience. I think we've made some decent headway. We sold to one motel, and we have a couple who we need to touch base with again next week."

"Very good, dear," she smiles at me like I'd just told her I dunked a basketball or tied my shoes without looking. That is the thing about Grandma; I could set this house on fire and

she'd still support me. I've never been able to determine if she is scared to call me out on my laziness for fear I'll spiral like my mom, or if she truly thinks I hold so much potential I could walk on water if I focused hard enough.

"Darling, I only see one slice of eggplant on your plate." Josephine pushes my tacos aside to make room for a few more, along with a medley of mushrooms, butternut squash, and Brussel sprouts. "You need those antioxidants. You're not getting any younger. Superfoods are your friend."

"Mom, I'm not eating any of that," I tell her, then add more loudly, "but you should try the mango salsa"—I point my fork at Henrietta—"because it is amazing. Thank you, Henrietta."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. You and Gus did a fine job grilling," Henrietta grins across the table.

"Those fish did nothing to deserve the ending you gave them," Josephine huffs, pouring a second glass of wine.

I look at her with exasperation. "They didn't—What? I didn't say you had to have any fish."

"But what is the point of trying the salsa by itself? I have nothing else to put it over," she retorts, arguing like a toddler.

"Okay, you enjoy your plants, and I'll enjoy my tacos." I take a considerable bite to end her argument.

"Do you think he's doing a good job?" Grandma turns to Kate, continuing on like the conversation hadn't been hijacked by my mother.

Kate looks at me as if sizing me up will help her answer the question. Then she turns and gives Grandma her full attention. "It was rough to start, but he's found his groove and I'm impressed. It's a lot to be thrown into—not just the job itself but going on the road a few days after starting the position, and he's handled himself well."

I watch Kate for signs of stretching the truth, but she seems to believe her assessment of me. Grandma appears equally delighted by the news.

“Very good. I think you two make a marvelous team.” She wrinkles her nose as she answers and leans in toward Kate like she is praising Peter Cetera.

“You said you two fished the Siuslaw?” Gus asks while he inspects a piece of fish.

“Yes, just east of the bridge,” I answer.

Gus builds a taco, adding purple cabbage and squirting lime over it. “North side of the river?”

“No, south, just out from the Best Western.”

“I’ve always gone further inland, closer to Cushman, but these are incredible. I’ll have to try your spot sometime.” He quietly goes back to eating and there is a lull in the conversation. I have to fill it before Josephine finds a reason to make things awkward.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Grandma, we don’t want to get in your way. We were planning on leaving tomorrow—we’ll just need a ride down to Florence to get a car.”

Grandma shakes her head. “I wouldn’t hear of it, tomorrow is Sunday. You won’t find any owners to talk to tomorrow, just their weekend management. Spend the day with us and leave first thing Monday morning. Gus, you can drive them down on Monday, can’t you?”

Gus runs a chip through his guacamole. “Yes, ma’am. I can do that no problem.”

“Kate, has Luca been showing you around the area?” Grandma looks at her expectantly. “Has he taken you to the lighthouse and everything?”

“Yes,” she keeps her eyes on Grandma. “We went hiking yesterday and obviously fishing today. This area is so beautiful. Your estate is probably my favorite place I’ve ever been.”

With that, she sneaks the quickest look at me again, her neck flushing. I hope she was thinking about the kiss at the lighthouse, sitting out by the fire, sharing the bed. I bite my lip and kick my foot out of slip-on OluKais, finding her



Birkenstocked foot under the table, tapping it. She flinches in surprise and then nudges my foot back.

Grandma looks delighted by the compliment. “Oh, me too, Kate, me too! I used to spend all summer here with the boys. I’m sure Luca’s told you all about it. And Christmases—oh, can you just picture this place completely decked out? Henrietta, it took us, what? Three full days to prep this place for the holidays, lights and trees and decorations?”

Henrietta does some mental math before responding. “It always felt like it took a month, but I’m sure it was only a few long days. It was worth it, though. This place is very special. Luca used to worry Santa wouldn’t find them if they weren’t at home, but what’d your cousin Theo always tell you?”

“Santa would always find me because I believed in him so much that my Christmas spirit led him to wherever I was.” I smile at the memory.

Kate puts her hand over her heart. “Oh, that’s the sweetest thing I’ve heard.”

Scratching the back of my neck, I chuckle. “Yeah, well, he grew up on a Christmas tree farm, so he basically had all kinds of North Pole nonsense drilled into him from the minute he was born. I’m pretty sure he thought he’d be an elf one day.”

We all laugh, and Grandma mutters, “I wish he’d find somebody lovely to settle down with. What is wrong with all my grandsons?”

“Last I heard, Bryce was dating somebody, and Theo’s getting ready to take over the farm, so it’ll be a while before he’s not throwing all his energy into that, Grandma,” I remind her.

“And what about you? Although I fully intend to live forever, I’d like to be a great-grandma sooner rather than later.” She glances at me meaningfully.

The table goes still, waiting for my response. Kate taps the top of my foot as I shrug. “I just got this promotion, Grandma, and it’s going to be a while before I feel like I understand what

I'm doing. Plus, you know me, I'm always dating, never looking for anything long term."

I can't bear to look at Kate and gauge her reaction. My old go-to attitude slips out without a second thought. Immediately, I want to take it back and tell Grandma that actually, there have been some developments as of late and surprise! The woman I am finding myself wanting to spend every waking moment with happens to be sitting to her left.

Josephine sits back in her chair, swirling her glass in a slow circle, eyes on Kate.

"I think I misread you earlier, Kate." Her brows pinch.

Kate's glance shifts my way. She sits up straighter. I do too. "I'm sorry?"

"Your aura is not purple. No, it's a pink, which leans to being happy and in harmony with someone around you ..."  
She lets that linger.

Kate's eyes widen a bit and she looks at me for help. Luckily, Gus speaks up. "This eggplant is surprisingly good. I think we grilled it just right there, kiddo."

I jump in, taking my first bite enthusiastically. "Agreed. Sooo good. Mom, do you like it?"

Josephine glances at her food, like she had no idea what we are talking about, and sniffs it once. "Yes, the olive oil wasn't kosher, though. I can taste the difference." She sets her plate on the ground and two happy dogs come running to check out the offering.

"So sorry, it's what we had. But good to know for next time." I look at Kate and shake my head, holding in a laugh.

Josephine sits back in her chair again, casually crossing her legs and looking between Kate and me. "Luca, your aura is always bright yellow; you were born like the sun. Except, naturally, when Miles died, you went through a transitional time but you came back strong. It's odd, though. Right now it's a lemony color."

“And what does that mean, Mom?” I swivel my body toward her, shoving another bite of that awful vegetable into my mouth.

She brushes her hair out of her face, bangles rolling down her arm. “It means you’re fearful of loss.”

“And what am I afraid I’m losing?” I know better than to engage her and should brush off her analysis, change the subject. But she always knows how to poke the bear and get me to play her game. While she pauses for dramatic effect, I put a plate of grilled salmon scraps on the ground for Peter Cetera.

“A job? A relationship? Could be anything, honey.” Josephine’s Professor Trelawney impression is always my favorite. She gets all sullen and trance-like, as if she really can read us and predict the future.

“Luca, you have no reason to worry about losing your job.” Grandma pats my hand, dismissing Josephine’s interpretation as nonsense. “Your grandfather would never take that away from you. And Jo, he sat right here a minute ago and told us he’s not in a relationship right now. You’re a little sloshed and need to be put to bed.”

“Oh!” Mom hasn’t heard a word her mother says, but snaps to attention as if she’s solved a great mystery. Pointing between Kate and I, she exclaims, “The pink and the yellow!”

“And who’s ready for blackberry cobbler?” Henrietta jumps up.

“I’ll help you!” Kate offers, pushing her chair back so forcefully it nearly tips over. “There’s ice cream in the freezer we need to soften, right?”

Gus rises, grabbing plates to take to the kitchen, and I busy myself stoking the fire, then call the dogs in from the yard. Grandma watches the hustle around her, pulling her throw tighter as Peter Cetera jumps up in her lap after finding my treat. Meanwhile, Josephine sits there, continuing to swirl her glass, eyes on me and a smirk lacing her lips.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: KATE**

## SATURDAY

I sink into the hammock, letting it sway idly side to side. The air is crisper, my breath visibly puffs with each exhale. I probably won't last long out here, but I need to clear my head.

Dinner was a lively trip; dessert followed in much the same pattern. Luca has been on edge all evening, wondering what his mom might say next and keeps changing topics, engaging Gus and Henrietta in a walk down memory lane. After Josephine finished her dessert, she bowed to the group in namaste, and turned in. Gus and Henrietta leave shortly after loading the dishwasher and putting away the leftovers, waking Fritz who'd fallen asleep by the fire. Eleanor asks me to sit and tell her about Missouri. That somehow rolls into needing to know all my thoughts on working at Bliss by Banks before growing tired and asking Luca to help her to her room.

Enjoying a moment to myself, I grabbed the quilt from the other night and headed into the yard. Nestled into my little happy place, I listen to the waves as they bash against the cliff below in a steady rhythm. Hear the fire pop and crackle. An owl hoots in the distance. Patches of clouds slowly move inland, hiding the moon.

A low "ooooh" like a ghost comes from the way of the house. "I'm the Gray Lady, and I am looking for the one who is called Porter."

I lazily wave my hand out of the hammock, and leaves crunch under Luca's steps.

“Boo!” He stops right over my head. “Did I scare you?”

“Hi.” I scoot over, and he climbs in. He’s changed into a flannel button up and sweatpants; wool socks visible out of his slip-ons.

“Hello,” he croons. I catch a whiff of the river and grilling and spruce trees. And something else.

“What is that smell?” I scrunch my nose and try to put my finger on it. “I’ve smelled it before.”

“When?” he asks coyly.

I thought about it a minute. “It’s the same scent from your coat I borrowed. I know I’ve noticed it at work ...”

“Describe the scent, please.”

“A ridiculously overpriced version of yourself.”

He laughs. “Ah, yes. You’re right about that.”

“What is it?”

“Tom Ford’s Oud Wood cologne.”

I take an extended sniff. “You put on cologne to come lay by me?”

“Not all of us got a chance to shower earlier. Some of us had to make dinner, you know. I had to play hostess with the mostest while you got to pamper yourself.” He gently bumps our noses. His cheek, surprisingly soft for day-two of not shaving, brushes mine.

“I’ve said it before, but I mean it: I’ve missed your beard,” I tell him as I rub my hand along the side of his face. It suits him, fits his personality.

He sweeps my bangs out of my eyes and lets his hand linger down the side of my face. “These are growing on me.”

“Don’t get too attached to them. This poor decision is being grown out.” I stand firm in my decree.

“You survived tonight.” He changes the subject. His dark eyes study mine, his hand absentmindedly reaches for a lock of my hair, wrapping it around his finger. Undoubtedly this

evening has been a lot, but Luca suddenly makes so much more sense to me. So many of his mannerisms and ticks are present in his mom and grandma.

All night long I kept thinking if he'd been at a dinner like that with my family, they would've asked him to help with farm chores, taught him to drive a tractor, and taken him shooting. Then we would've gathered around the table as they talked over one another at the loudest possible decibels. I'd have to hide from him afterward while nursing a migraine for days. He would have been overwhelmed in a totally different way.

Instead of indulging him with my thoughts, I rip off the Band-Aid. The topic we are avoiding—we've danced around not talking about it long enough, and I've given him all the opportunity in the world to bring it up.

“What are we doing, Luca?”

He lets the silence linger long enough I almost regret asking, though his eyes never waver from mine. “Jumping head first into something that's going to be really, really great.”

“How are you positive it's going to be so good?”

“Because when I'm with you, I can finally relax.”

My breath hitches.

I know what he means because I feel exactly the same way. My neurotic need to prove myself and be in charge has fallen by the wayside the more time we have spent together.

“Same,” I admit.

A grin spreads across his face. “You mean it?”

I nod.

“Are you scared?” I have to know. If he were to ask me, I would confess to being terrified. This is Luca. Luca Banks, larger than life, could have anybody, doesn't want to be tied down, blows wherever the wind carries him. Quite possibly I am making the biggest mistake of my adult life by even flirting with the idea of dating him.

“Totally,” he answers immediately.

“Why?” My curiosity is piqued. Not the answer I was expecting with how self-assured he was a moment ago. I brace for the worst, such as an answer along the lines of regret in giving up his freedom or some newfound HR policy regarding workplace romances.

He pauses, swallows hard. When he speaks his voice sounds small. “Because I think you’re the first real friend I’ve had since Miles.”

My stomach drops. This hadn’t even been in the realm of what I expected him to say. There is no joke lingering on his lips, only raw vulnerability. The guy who easily commands a stage, holds a mic at every opportunity, and without regret makes a complete fool of himself regularly, has been replaced by a man who put all his cards on the table in a desperate need to be accepted for who he is, messy bits and all.

“You don’t mean that,” I whisper.

He adjusts onto his back, I do likewise, and we look up at the tree canopy. “I absolutely do. People want to be my friend because I have something to offer them—connections, a job, a fun time, access to anything and everything. An amazing body to look at.” He turned his head my way and he waggles his eyebrows while giving a self-deprecating laugh. “You couldn’t care less about any of that. You call me out on my crap, which is a new thing for me—and not always the easiest to accept. I’m sure by now you’ve noticed how people applaud my mediocrity and wouldn’t dare call me anything less than a brilliant mind if I told them the Earth was flat.”

I let out a quiet chuckle, having been witness to that more than once.

“I’m exhausted, Kate.” He sighs and runs his hands down his face. “I’ve spent the last decade running at full speed to live life for both me and Miles. I’m constantly *on*: bring the energy, be the life of the party, join the team, get everybody excited about *whatever* because it’s so much easier to get lost in a constant barrage of activity than be alone with my thoughts. But the truth never leaves me: I miss my brother. He



chose me all the time, he liked me for me. The only other person who's ever truly chosen me is my grandma. Which sounds sweet on the surface, but I think there is some rule about how grandmas have to take their hard-to-love grandsons and make them a project or something, right? And speaking of my family ... I love them, but they're a chaotic circus. You got a front row show to that tonight. And that scares me too."

"Why?" The floodgates have opened and as long as he wants to talk, I'm here to listen.

"Because. What if I've built this thing up in my head where you and I become a thing, but you don't feel the same? Or we give it a go and you realize my life is a lot, a lot more than you want to deal with."

"Lu—"

"Maybe yesterday was just a fluke and now I'm rambling like an idiot. It seems like we've finally got a solid friendship figured out, but I had to ruin it by wanting to kiss you and now I'm here, oversharing, and I'm sure I'm definitely making you reconsider anything more than barely tolerating me."

He braves a glance at me, my cue he is finally done speaking.

"I need you to say something," he begs when the silence has stretched longer than he likes.

A slow smile creeps up my lips. My heart flutters, joy coursing through my veins. I wiggle my arm free and find his hand. It is newly calloused from tossing the fly rod all afternoon, but it is warm and feels like home.

Not sure where to start, I simply say, "I'm sorry you're exhausted."

"It's weird, I haven't been all week. Turns out you are a breath of fresh air in my life. Being around you has done this thing for me where I let it all go. The pretenses and the stress—even when you're rolling your eyes and giving me that look that you save just for me, I feel like I'm going to be okay."

"Same," I reassure him.

“I am comfortable with you. You ground me, Kate. I love that I can be myself around you.”

“Same.”

“You keep saying that.” He playfully pokes me in the side. “You’re letting me do all the sharing of feelings and you’re piggybacking off of it, Porter.”

I turn my neck to face him, seeing the profile I’ve looked at all week in the car, the one I’ve looked at so many times over the last year. Without trying, I’ve memorized it. The slight curl of his hair when he tucks it behind his ears. The dimple nearly hidden by his scruff. His superpower ability to see me out the farthest corner of his eye. “Want to know a secret?”

His eyes light up. “Sounds juicy.”

“When we worked together those few weeks in July, I had fun.”

He waits for more, but when he realizes that is it, he gives me a half smile and a single laugh. His eyelashes bounce with every blink of the eye as he keeps his gaze skyward. “You *had* fun, huh? And then?”

“I don’t know. Nat was supposed to get Jill’s job, and I’d take hers and we were going to be the dream team of the fourth floor. But everything went sideways when she moved.” He already knows all of this. I stop.

“You stopped being my friend after the fundraiser, you know.”

“I know.”

Luca squeezes my hand twice and teases, “You were just like everybody else—use me and lose me.”

“And look where it got me: I still ended up in second place by becoming *your* VP.” I can’t help it—it slips out before I can stop it.

His face whips toward mine. “You’ve been holding that one, waiting for the right time to let it out, haven’t you?”

“A little bit, yeah.”

He kisses my nose with a boop. “So that was your big secret? You had fun with me once upon a time.”

I sorta love when he circles back and fishes for more, when he lets his confidence slip just a little and needs validation like any normal person. However, his coolness I’ve learned tonight, has been a mask for his exhaustion and sadness. Luca is such a better man than I have ever given him credit for.

“I’ve had fun with you intermittently.” I throw it out and watch his brows pull together. Another beat passes before I add, “This week, though, can’t be beat. Yesterday was one for the books.”

His shoulders raise and lower in contentment. “If we didn’t have the photos on our phones as proof, I don’t think I’d even believe these last few days happened.”

“I’ve pegged you as somebody with a good memory.”

Luca finds a strand of my hair again and winds it around his index finger. “I’ll never forget a minute of it, but we’re going to get back to Portland next week and you’re going to do that thing with building the wall and boxing me out. I hate the idea of going from this to that.”

He tests the waters, voices his fear as an absolute truth to gauge my commitment.

I shift myself to face him, run my hand through his hair, following the strands to the curl at the end. “No, I’m not. If anything, you’re going to realize I’m incredibly boring and you’ll get tired of me wanting to stay in with Chinese food while binging a show. Your wild spirit will need more. I don’t want to be the one to hold you back from what you want.”

“What if what I want is you?” He frames my face with his hands. His eyes trail from my mouth to my eyes.

“Then I guess we’re dating.” I lean in until our lips are so close I feel the vibration of his with each exhale. “Because, Luca Banks, I’m going to choose you. Every time.”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: KATE**

SATURDAY

Luca's lips crush against mine.  
He chooses me.

I choose him.

There is something in the simplicity of that idea that sets my soul on fire. He looks past his lavish life and picks me, needs me, wants me. I beg myself to be all in, not have one foot at the door ready to run as I wait for the other shoe to drop. Luca isn't a liar, he isn't a sweet-talker. Never once have I seen him not be true to his word in the way he conducts himself.

If he says he wants me, he does. I'm his number one choice.

The surf roars as the weather shifts. Wind ticks up and the temperature dips again. A few raindrops dance on my face.

His lips pull from mine and in between a kiss to my neck, my cheek, my nose, and my temple, he asks, "What are you thinking?"

I ignore his question. "Should we go inside? I felt rain."

"You're not bothered by the weather." His thumb traces down the side of my face, trails my jaw, and he kisses me again, like he is drinking me in. "Do the sharing thing, Kate."

"I'm just having a hard time believing this is real."

"Believe it." His nose rubs my nose, and rests a kiss on the end of it. "You choose me." He tests out the phrase carefully.

“It’s in spite of your better judgment, isn’t it?”

“Definitely,” I tease him assuredly. “Luca, you are wildly unconventional compared to me. You are confident and vulnerable all at the same time. The person I am when I’m with you, I like her. The guy you are when I’m with you, I like him. I worry I’m maybe not up to your family’s standard, but I want this. Are we going to push each other’s buttons and say the wrong thing at times? Probably, but at the end of the day, it turns out, you electrify my life. So, yes, I choose you.”

“The only opinion you should care about is mine. And I’m not going anywhere,” his dark eyes meet mine.

I swallow my fear. In choosing him, I have to choose to trust him. And he’s never given me a reason not to. Pulling the quilt over our heads, we get lost in our own cocoon. His lips find mine again. They taste of blackberries he most likely picked from a bush on the way to find me in the hammock. With each kiss, I feel my life electrified.

“Luuuca!”

We both still at the sound of his name as it is held out for four long beats. “Are you still out there?”

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. Head peering out from the blanket, answers her. “Yes.”

“Sweetheart, where are you?” Josephine sounds close.

Luca bounds from the hammock, and I can’t decide if I should appear as well or hide until she is gone. She was already onto us at dinner.

“Right here. What do you need?” His voice dims as he walks toward the house. The rain kicks up from a sprinkling to a steady fall. Even though I can see the house if I turn my head, the darkness in front of me suddenly feels heavy ... and spooky. Stupid legend.

I roll out of the hammock and gather the quilt.

“Oh, hello, Kate.” Josephine looks between Luca and me. Her brow quirks. “Hmm, still pink.”

“Mom—”

“What are you two doing out here?” she asks. “It’s late.”

“We were going over our plan for Bandon—yes, it’s late. Why are you up?” He stumbles over his words as he eyes her.

She shifts her hips and bemoans, “It’s raining.”

“Welcome to Oregon; it rains a lot here.” He puts his arm around her to lead her inside.

She stays rooted to the spot. “I know that. I was planning to do yoga in the morning outside.”

“Okay, Grandpa brilliantly had the retractable patio roof installed, and we can move the table and cover the area for you.”

My mouth nearly hits the ground, and before I can ask follow-ups, Luca eyes the area above the table we used at dinner. Sure enough, tucked along the roofline was a second roof of sorts and a fancy mechanism I don’t understand. He walks over to the wall and pushes a button, making the system come to life. In less than a minute, the whole area is covered. Rich people have no idea how amazing their lives are.

“Thank you, honey, but I like to do yoga on the cliff.”

“Maybe it won’t be raining in the morning.”

“Even if it isn’t, it will be all muddy,” she points out.

“Don’t worry, you won’t melt.” Luca shakes his head at her.

Her lips purse; obviously she expects him to control the weather.

“What if you and I do yoga on the cliffs in the morning?” I offer. “I don’t mind getting wet.”

Josephine keeps a passive face. “Which is your practice preference?”

The kind with Natalie and Jill that ends early and leads to brunch afterward. “The class I’ve been to the most focused on Ashtanga.”

She claps her hands together, impressed. “Oh, this will be wonderful! Luca, won’t this be wonderful?”

He grimaces.

“Do you have your own mat?” Josephine asks. “I brought an extra mat that I only use for evening meditation, but I’m more than happy to share.”

“That would be great, thank you,” I tell her. “What time did you want to do this?”

“If we are set up and begin our sun salutations at six-thirty, we will be fully immersed in our breathing and movement to greet the new dawn when the sun comes over the mountains.”

I turn my head so only Luca can hear and whisper, “Is she high?”

He shakes his head.

“Can’t wait.” I smile at her. “I’ll meet you at the back door at six-fifteen.”

“If you’re not there, I know where you’re sleeping,” she wags a finger at me. “You know, I walked by your room earlier tonight and you are the most impeccable houseguest we’ve ever had. You make your bed so well it doesn’t even look like it’s been slept in.”

My eyes go wide. Luca hides a laugh behind a cough.

“This is really just the most lovely home, I couldn’t imagine leaving a messy bed like Luca.”

“He’s not so bad once you get to know him,” she reaches up and grabs her son by the jaw, moving his head back and forth. “You’re just a wittle messy, awn’t you?”

He shakes out of her grasp and puts his hands on her shoulders. “Mom, baby talk means it is time for you to go back to bed.”

“Okay, okay, I know when I’m not wanted.” She gives us both a squeeze on our biceps and looks at Luca. “Your color is back to bright yellow. I’m glad you’re not worried anymore, son.” At the doorway, she turns around. “There’s also some



wavelengths of red ... passion. Mmm. That's new. Well, Goodnight."

UNDER THE PROTECTION of the patio cover, I wrap us both in the quilt. The rain bounces off the furniture and has long since put out our fire.

"I think ..."

"... I should stay in my own room tonight," I finish for him.

He tightens the hold around us. "I don't like this idea."

"I thought we were caught—she has us all figured it out," I laughs. "Was she waiting for me to admit I haven't actually slept in my room?"

"No, she's like me—what she says is what you get. She doesn't assign ulterior meaning to her words," he assures me.

"Will I wake Peter Cetera going down my hall?"

"Naw. Grandma keeps a sound machine going and he should be out until morning with all the running around he did tonight."

"Darn. I guess I don't have any more excuses not to go, then," I pout.

Luca kisses the top of my head. "I'll see you bright and early?"

"Sleep in! There is no reason for you to get up early, unless you're joining us."

"I refuse to miss watching you push my mom off the cliff."

He holds me close, and his hand travels up my back and into my hair. Everywhere he touches leaves a trace of tingles. I tilt my head up and give him a long kiss.

"Until tomorrow," I sigh.

"Until tomorrow."

THE BEDROOM IS UNFAMILIAR. Other than housing my bags and taking showers, I've hardly spent any time in it. The bed is comfortable, just like Luca's, but cold and too big for just myself. I find the book I haven't read for days on my Kindle and settle in. The bruises from yesterday's hike are ripe and my hips hurt, having taken the brunt of the fall.

Two pages later, my phone lights up.

Luca: It's weird over here. My bed is too big.

Me: I know. It's weird in here too.

What are you listening to?

Luca: Mylo Xyloto

Me: Coldplay for the win.

Luca: What are you reading?

Me: You wouldn't know it.

It's one of those romance novels that everybody in the office has been reading.

Jill's book club choice.

Luca: Any good?

Me: Yes.

Luca: Was the guy modeled after me: tall, dark, and handsome?

Me: While you are what women usually write, this guy is blond.

Luca: That's too bad. But then I guess not everybody can be me or Roman Kitt.

HIS COMMENT MAKES ME STOP. Last month, book club read had been *Divine Rivals*, of which Roman was a main male character. For a week solid, women on all floors of the office building had debated the greatness of the book, quoted their favorite parts, and praised Roman as the perfect book boyfriend. Only makes sense Luca heard about it at some point. He has to be messing with me.

Luca: I read it. It was fine. Not my favorite type of book by a long shot.

Me: You read the book club book?

What do you usually read?

Luca: I prefer historical fiction or nonfiction.

But everybody was talking about that book and wouldn't shut up.

I had to see what this perfect guy was like.

Me: If you read it, why didn't you come to the meeting?

Luca: I actually was going to, but had a therapy appointment and then rowing.

Me: Are you reading this month's?

Luca: No. That was my first and definitely last time.

Me: Why is that?

Luca: Your club picks books are just ... meh.

Who chose it?

Me: Me.

I CAN'T HELP but giggle he actually read one of our choices, and it doesn't bother me in the least he didn't care for it. Our book club is made up exclusively of women, and we tend to read romance books without apology. I love knowing he probably feels he had to tread carefully with his next response; it brings me immense delight.

Luca: Oof.

You know, it's getting late and I'm disoriented without you next to me ...

Me: Goodnight, Luca.

I like you.

Luca: Night Kate.

I'm locking away that under that sassy exterior  
you're just a romantic sap.

You're the best.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN:  
LUCA**

## SUNDAY

**W**hen I wake up at six, the house is already a buzz of activity. I shuffle into the kitchen at quarter-after in hopes of seeing Kate. Instead, Grandma is busy cracking eggs, measuring sugar, and shaking her hips to whatever she is listening to under her headphones.

Peter Cetera announces my arrival with a hearty bark and a wagging tail.

Grandma twists around, her apron covered in flour, and lifts one headphone cushion. “There you are! Glad you’re finally up so I can listen to this the way it was meant to be heard.” She removes the headphones and connects her phone to the Bluetooth system in the kitchen. Seconds later, “Daydreaming” fills the room.

“You met that nice young man once, didn’t you? What was his name?” she turns back to her baking and shaking. “Harry Styles, right? He’s brilliant. Grab me the secret ingredient, please, my tall grandchild.”

I walk to the fridge and pull out what Grandma requests. Handing it over to her, she asks me, “Do you know this song?”

“Yes, Grandma. I saw him in Vegas the first night of his tour. And one night in New York. I love that you just discovered him.” I kiss the top of her head and give her a side hug. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” she says, leaning into me before wiping her hands on the front of her apron. “I have to stay current,

you know. It keeps me young. Peel and mash some bananas, will you?"

Obediently, I take the bunch and grab a fork and bowl to complete the task. Taking my place at the counter, I absentmindedly peel a blackened banana and look out the window where I see Josephine and Kate already at the edge of the yard. The rain didn't let up last night and continues to saturate the ground. Gusts of wind turn the steady rainfall horizontal but there they are, doing sun salutations in yoga pants and tank tops. "What happened to *meeting* at six-fifteen? And why isn't Kate in a coat? She'll freeze."

"You're living in a daydream, aren't you? Luca, is Kate what you dream about?" Grandma snickers at her joke, in that funny little way she does when she finds herself hilarious.

I ignore her nod to the song and mash my frustrations at what I'm watching.

Grandma's lips turn up. "What happened was your mother." She stops adding ingredients to the bowl and puts her hands on the counter. "Poor Kate has no idea what she agreed to, does she? She came out here a few minutes before six, wearing the correct attire for the elements, and two minutes later, in strolled your mom. Jo took one look at Kate and sent her back to dress—and I quote her—'in a manner that paid proper respect for the art' and off they went right before you finally waltzed in."

I debate going out there and insisting both of them come in. It would be fruitless; deep down I know those are two women nobody can boss around, even in matters of common sense. Kate is stubborn enough she will follow through with the whole session and ask for a second, just to prove she can do it no matter how awful it is. Josephine is wired in her head to start every morning with yoga—at the estate that means at the cliff's edge; this is happening.

They finish their salutations and move into a Warrior 1. Although Kate is far down the yard, she faces the house, and I wave without thinking. Grandma catches this and chuckles.



“You *like* her, don’t you?” She doesn’t ask to pry or accuse. That has never been her way. Her voice holds warmth and acceptance as she keeps her eyes down on her recipe, adding vanilla and waiting for me to dump in the mashed banana.

“What would Grandpa say if I did?”

“Do you ask because you work together or because you suddenly care about his opinion on who you date?” she teases.

I measure out Grandma’s secret ingredient—a cup of sour cream—and add it to the bowl. Folding it all together, I ask, “Are we that obvious?”

She laughs fully and grabs a spatula to help her set the mixture in the prepared bread loaf pans. “Oh, Luca, you know why I love you so much? It’s because you’ve always thought you were holding all your cards close and letting people see you the way you wanted them to. But I see you, the real you, and the way you look at Kate ... honey, I hate to be the one to break the news, but you’ve folded. Chips are gone and it’s game over.”

My hand automatically reaches to adjust the shoulder of my pajama top. I freeze and shove my hands deep into my pajama pant pockets instead.

“Was it like ‘Baby, What a Big Surprise’? Is she a ‘Hard Habit to Break’?” Grandma can’t help herself and breaks into a fit of giggles.

I playfully roll my eyes and give her a slow clap. “Bravo for seamlessly weaving Chicago into the conversation.”

With a cheeky smile, she pulls my face down to hers. “The only thing I worry about is our world being too much for her. Being a Banks takes a lot of gumption, it’s not for the faint of heart.”

I study her before I grab the pans and place them in the oven. “She’s a lot tougher than she looks.”

“You’re happy?” She turns her back to me and pulls bacon out of the fridge.

“Stupidly so,” I admit, leaning against the island, eyes focused outside, arms crossed. “You never answered my question: what about Grandpa?”

“All he wants is for you to be happy,” she replies, placing bacon on a cast iron skillet. I feel her eyes on me. “He put you two together for a reason, you know.”

My gaze flicks over to her. Recognition dawns on her face that I’ve had no idea. “He likes Kate a lot. He thought you could learn from her and if something else happened along the way

...” she flicks her wrist, letting her sentence trail off.

A bark of laughter escapes me, and I rub the side of my face. “Is that so?”

“I’ve said too much already.” She zips her mouth, eyes trained on the skillet as she flips bacon.

I let that revelation bounce around my brain for a minute. Bacon sizzles, the comforting smells of banana bread waft through the kitchen, and again, the rain picks up. I’ve had enough. Umbrellas in hand, I throw on a raincoat and rain boots, grabbing the quilt as I go out the back.

My boots slosh in the overly water-logged grass, collecting up leaves with every step. Careful to keep the blanket dry under umbrella cover, my strides are long, and I try to look like I mean business as I approach Mom and Kate. To say they are soaked is an understatement. They look like the ocean has swallowed them whole and spit them back out. Kate’s long hair, once in a bun, is glued to her face, her arms, her back as she keeps a perfect Warrior 3. Mom’s bangles clink together as she shivers in the same pose.

“Okay, you two, this looks like it’s been a great session, but I’m calling time of death.”

Mom ignores me and moves into an Eagle Pose, straightening her back and twisting her legs as she squats, like a toddler who has to use the bathroom.

Kate takes one look at the pose and wipes the hair out of her eyes. “Yeah, I’m out.” She bows namaste to my mom and

rolls up her mat.

Warming her drenched body with the quilt, I hold the second umbrella over her head as we slosh back to the house. The fireplace in the front room is now lit, blasting warmth through the main part of the house. Grandma's playlist has mysteriously shifted to eighties ballads with "You're the Inspiration" to kick us off.

Grandma gives us a smile and a wink before she informs us breakfast is almost ready and follows Peter Cetera onto the back patio. With her tea mug in hand, I know she won't be back for at least a few minutes.

"Subtle," Kate says, teeth chattering wildly.

"We've got a fan," I smile and kiss her gently. Except, I don't want to be soft and subtle. I want to make up for the lost hours and separate beds, but I am acutely aware we have an audience, even if they are outside. While I'm grateful Grandma gave us her seal of approval, it's her house, and I'm suddenly feeling sixteen and shy. Well played, Grandma.

Kate feels my timidness and gives me a playful pat on the bum. "She set this up for you to seduce me and you've lost your edge. I didn't think that could happen."

I run my hand through my hair and adjust my glasses. "I know—this is so unlike me."

Her smiles reaches all the way to her eyes. "That's good. Means I'm really somebody important to you."

"You have no idea," I tell her, kissing her temple. "No idea at all."



KATE EXCUSES HERSELF TO SHOWER, and I sit down on the living room sofa with my laptop open to our upcoming appointments. There are a few stops we need to make in Coos Bay, Bandon, and Brookings before we head back to Portland. Deep in thought, I finish mapping out a strategy as Kate sits

next to me, wearing navy joggers and an oversized misty gray hoodie that matches the clouds outside.

“That’s Monday and Tuesday?” she asks, leaning over me and reading the schedule.

I can’t help but massage her head with one hand. She grabs the laptop and checks a few things from a spreadsheet against the plan of attack. Despite my hesitancy when we first came inside, a brief pep talk worked wonders and I’m back.

“Mmm, if you keep doing that, I won’t be able to focus,” she warns, but her head leans in against my hand. “What if we switched our ten and eleven? Based on these numbers, our better bet at a sale is the eleven o’clock and we can run that time slot longer if need-be.”

I agree as the back door closes and Peter Cetera jumps between us on the couch. He spins around a few times before finding his perfect spot and closes his eyes. Kate passes me my laptop and digs a crystal out of her pocket, handing it over as well.

“Oh, she gave you the full treatment out there, huh?” I ask her and toss the stone in the air. “What’s this one mean?”

“Before I answer, I have to say, in my defense it was really cold,” she begins.

“I can’t figure out why you even went out there.” I want to wrap her in my arms and pull her against my chest, but an already snoring dog makes this impossible. Instead I settle for shifting my body to face her and run my hand down her arm.

“Because she seemed so ...”

“Pathetic?”

Her fist playfully hits me square in the chest. “No, she seemed sad yoga was going to be washed out and I figured why not do something spontaneous?”

“I don’t think it counts as spontaneous when you made the plans the night before,” I tease her.

“Anyway, not only was I freezing out there—and I am pretty sure I’ll never regain feeling in my feet again”—she

holds her legs out straight and flexes her toes in front of the fire as if to prove her point—“but your mother thought I was distracted. So she put that piece of fluorite on my mat to help me focus.”

I sit up straighter. “And pray tell, who has you distracted?”

“You know, if I don’t regain feeling, I should sue her. Word on the street is she’s got some money.”

“Now you’re just playing dirty,” I say. Grandma pulls out her chair at the kitchen table, which is our cue to join her for breakfast. Whispering, I lean in and tell her, “Come on, I want to hear it. Who has got you distracted?”

One of my favorite things about Kate is how she dodges a question, and after being pushed to answer it, gives me her *look*. But then she can’t help herself in adding a smirk at the end. As if on cue, her eyes narrow and she pauses before her lips battle their way out of being pressed and form into a half smile. She sighs deeply, defeated by my will. “You, Luca Banks. You distract me in all the best ways.”

I raise my fist in victory, then push off the couch carefully to make sure Peter Cetera isn’t bothered. “On that high, let’s go get breakfast.” I extend my hand to Kate, who grabs it happily, then I add, “Remember, Grandma knows about us. Brace yourself.”

**CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT:  
LUCA**

## SUNDAY

**T**he deluge continues all day. By late afternoon, Josephine stands outside under the covered patio in some bizarre stare down with the rain. Grandma works on a big puzzle of Portofino, Italy, at the kitchen table. Kate hasn't left the couch since after breakfast, happily reading. I've spent some time preparing social media posts for the upcoming week, but also scrolling repeatedly through the photos of Kate and me on my phone, reliving each moment. We looked good together—the way I've seen some couples and automatically thought, “They make complete sense.” I never thought that could apply to me.

It is interesting to note the way our body language shifts as the week wears on. The first few days, even in the pictures we took of one another, there was a tenseness in our stance, our faces. Our smiles aren't quite authentic. But by the time we are at Depoe Bay watching the whale, we look like longtime friends with the best yet to come.

I go to grab a Coke from the fridge and take a peek at Grandma's progress. Colorful pieces lay scattered all around a slowly-forming still shot of the coastline and boats.

Without breaking her concentration, she says to me, “If I could do it all over again, I'd have your grandfather take me here for our honeymoon.”

“I agree. He did a horrible job by taking you to Oahu.” I spy an edge piece and snap it into place.

She pats my hand and looks up with a gleam in her eye. “Just don’t make the same mistake. Italy is very romantic.”

I respond with a tight-lipped smile, and pop the tab on the can, taking a sip before stealing a handful of her peanut butter M&Ms. Moving back to the living room, I find Kate with Kindle still in hand, her attention firmly fixed on her novel.

“How’s the blond?” I place my drink on a coaster before I sit at the piano. “Has he done the thing everybody at work goes weak in the knees over, the thing where he says, ‘Touch her and die?’”

She releases a distracted laugh. Making her laugh is quickly becoming one of my new favorite things in the world. It is right up there with music, traveling, rowing, and my grandma. In fact, it has slid right into the number one slot.

“No. He’s brooding and basic. But our department especially seems to think he walks on water,” she replies, glancing over the E-reader.

My fingers scale up the keys and back down before I speak. “A week ago, you would have agreed with their assessment.” I look between the lifted lid of the piano to see her fighting a grin and wink.

“And you would’ve been jealous,” she answers, going back to her book.

Jealous of a fictional character? Never. But if this blond were real and tried to catch Kate’s attention? Then I would gladly become that silly trope and embarrass myself by yelling that line.

After scales, I fall into playing my three Christmas songs. Kate puts down her Kindle and closes her eyes, a peaceful look upon her face. During the second song, her phone rings and she jumps up, exiting the room in a hurry. I watch her go, curious if it’s Marshall and Reddington who have pulled her away, when Mom breezes into the room and sits down on the bench right next to me.

“Hello.” I keep playing. Because I only know three songs, I can perform them forwards and backwards, with my eyes



closed, while talking to somebody, or in the middle of a tornado.

“I always wished you’d kept at it. You’re so good,” she muses. “Maybe you’d even know a fourth and fifth holiday piece.”

I shrug. “I’ve been thinking about getting a piano for the house and maybe taking lessons.”

She seems pleased with that. “Kate’s lovely.”

My automatic response when Josephine says such things is to jump in and keep the conversation going in the direction I want it to, but this time I wait. To let her finish her train of thought, however long that takes. I raise an eyebrow so she knows I’ve heard and for her to continue.

“She was not very chatty during yoga.”

“Really? I can’t imagine why not.” The second song ends, and I slow down the pacing for the finale.

She shifts on the bench and swishes the pendant on her necklace back and forth. Mom is not one to hesitate sharing her feelings and my body braces itself as I give her a minute to say her piece. She surprises me as the silence lingers. Too long.

“What’s the matter, Mom?” I finally ask. The last thing I need is for Kate to walk in and hear whatever is on Josephine’s mind before I have a chance to.

She turns and straddles the bench, looking at me squarely. I hope the third song is long enough to get through whatever she is about to say. “Well, honey, she’s from Missouri.”

The confusion sits thick on my face. What does her being from Missouri have to do with anything? Quickly continuing, she adds, “Chances are, she’s going to want to go back to her family at some point and live there. If you two get serious, you’ll follow her and I can’t even tell you what that would do to this family.”

My hands fall hard on the keys and I meet her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve been given this opportunity by your grandfather, and he’s setting you up nicely to take everything over one day. Leaving would be ... well what would that say to him?”

“Mom—”

“I don’t know if you know this, Luca, he didn’t want to give you the promotion. But I talked some sense into him.”

A ton of bricks fall on me. Thatcher hadn’t wanted to give me the promotion. My suspicions were confirmed and it wasn’t even Grandma who made sure it happened. He did it because Josephine had told him to.

Before I can enter a verbal showdown with Mom, Kate skips in, stopping abruptly at the sight of my mother. Frozen to my spot on the bench, I watch as Josephine gets up and saunters over to the fireplace, pretending to study a glass float Grandma and I found two summers ago in Lincoln City as part of their Finder’s Keepers program. I don’t want Kate to register the temperature in the room, but before I can say anything, Kate opens her mouth.

“Eleanor, would you mind coming in here for a minute?” she asks, clutching her phone to her chest with both hands. Her eyes shine. “I have a grand announcement to make.”

My heart leaps—the phone call. Grandma comes into the room, and I know immediately she can feel the tension between Mom and me, but she doesn’t show it. Instead, she calls Peter Cetera to sit with her on a large leather lounge chair and gives Kate her full attention.

“That call was from Patrick.”

My mind flicks back through the rolodex of business owners we have met with.

Kate turns to Mom and Grandma and explains. “He was a very nice owner of a motel in Oceanside. It’s actually the ideal place to have your products. I pitched to him on Wednesday before—”

“Before Luca ruined my car,” Josephine cuts in and points at me. “Don’t even think for a second I forgot you owe me a car. I’m thinking I want a Volvo.”

I ignore her and gesture for Kate to continue. She looks like she is trying to suppress her excitement, but when she sees my building anticipation, she blurts out, “He’s in!”

Grandma claps her hands together. “This calls for a celebration!” Josephine forgets her wicked revelation shared a moment ago and offers her congratulations for a job well done.

The merriment is short-lived as Kate waves her arms and stands on her tiptoes, like she is speaking over a large and unruly crowd. “But that’s not all.”

“Don’t you be getting my hopes up, Porter.” I push back from the piano and slowly rise.

“Well, do you remember the Johnsons in Cannon Beach? His father had golfed with Mr. Banks, but they were facing a renovation and claimed we were too expensive?”

“Yes.”

“Turns out they magically found some extra money. Right after Patrick called, they called, and they’ve got some rival thing with the Surfer Inn Motel.” She tosses her phone on the couch, drawing out the moment. “I love good, small town drama. They heard through Rose, the lady with the cookies from our first night in Cannon Beach, that Patrick’s in, so now they’re in.” She turns out her arms at the end of her explanation like ta-da! “And you thought your lucky cufflinks had let you down.”

I cross the room before she’s even finished her last sentence, scooping her up, dipping her, and kissing her in front of my grandmother and Josephine. Her initial reaction is shock, grabbing hold of my shirt for dear life. Like I’d ever let her fall. It only takes a second for her to move past the surprise, and she links her arms behind my neck, deepening the kiss.

Grandma’s triumphant whistle brings us back to the present, and I set Kate upright. She adjusts her sweatshirt and pushes back her hair, color tinting the tops of her cheeks.

“You,” I whisper so only she can hear, “are luckier than any cufflinks.”

“Who wants pizza?” I cry out. “Grandma, you said you want to celebrate, and it’s been way too long since we’ve had that for dinner.”

“Oh, I think you just celebrated enough for all of us, dear,” Grandma teases, “but I suppose we can also have pizza. Kate, is that okay with you? It’s not very fancy.” Her apologetic-meets-appalled face makes me crack a smile. My whole life she has lived to host and impress; being married to my grandpa put her in that position and now with Kate, she is worried such a simple dinner is beneath her.

Kate beams. “That’s my favorite food, actually. I can’t imagine a better way to end today.”

“Then it’s settled! Nobody touch my puzzle, I’m going to go start making crusts,” she announces and heads into the kitchen.

“Mom, I’ve got a great recipe for portobello pizzas, and I’m sure we could use the rest of the eggplant as a base too,” Josephine says, as she follows Grandma.

Kate looks at me, a hint of worry dancing across her face. My hand runs down the side of her face. I breathe her in. “Don’t worry, you’re getting a flour crust. And pepperoni.”

She blows out a sigh of relief. “I know you’d told me your grandma taught you to bake, but she cooks way more than I thought she would. Not at all what I expected for being a *Banks*.”

I wrap my arms around her and hold her against me. I love this; the way she’s tall but still tucks right under my chin when I hold her close, the way she hugs me tight like I’m what tethers her to earth.

What my mom said earlier about Kate and Missouri and then about my new job not really being mine at first nags like a little voice that tells me I am about to unravel. That even this woman breathing in sync with me is too good to be true. Forcing myself to focus on the present, I answer her. “Grandma has access to cooks and caterers and trust me, she

does use them. But whenever we are here, she likes to get her hands dirty and create. It's her thing."

Kate hums in response and then after a minute, rubs my back. "Hey, you seem distracted."

"Nope. Just enjoying this." I squeeze her in confirmation.

"Also, congratulations. That's three sales."

Leaving a kiss on her temple, I toast, "To probable disappointment."

I feel her chuckle. Her hand snakes up my back and into my hair. She pulls my face closer to hers and stops short of kissing me. Her warm breath lingers on my lips and her eyes are filled with what could only be described as happiness.

"How could I ever feel disappointed when I get to have you? When I get to do this?"

She moves in the rest of the way, her kiss soft and soulful. Short and sweet. Perfect and also leaving me wanting more. I am starting to feel like I can't imagine a world where she'll be anything other than the only one I want everything with.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: KATE**

## SUNDAY

The sky darkens, the wind howls, and Eleanor has me chopping veggies with her on the kitchen island while the dough rises. Luca studies her puzzle and every once in a while, Eleanor calls out, “I’ll disinherit you!” if he tries to place a piece. Josephine has completed her evening yoga in her room and joins us with a glass of her vegan wine in hand, sniffing around the counter at our preparation.

“I’m on my cleanse still, so I’ll just have asparagus and acorn squash,” she announces to nobody in particular.

Luca looks at his mother while disobediently sliding a puzzle piece closer to its mark. “I thought you were going to make a pizza base with eggplant.”

She harrumphs, taking a long swallow. “I said no such thing. Who in their right mind would eat leftovers?”

I see Luca blatantly give her side eye before stepping up behind me, his breath falling on the back of my neck. His proximity makes me nervous-excited. I want to turn and throw my arms around him, finish that kiss we started in the living room.

Luca’s hand finds the small of my back and he presses into me, looking over my shoulder. “Need any help?”

“Luca, I need you to get the fireplace blazing again and set the coffee table for us to eat in there,” Eleanor directs him.

He kisses the crook of my neck and whispers into my ear, “I’m sorry we have to spend the evening with them. I do know

where Josephine's sleeping pills are ...”

I turn into him and give him a quick kiss on the lips. “No.”

While the timing of mom and grandma's arrival hasn't been optimal, I am enjoying their company overall. Josephine is definitely playing some one-sided power struggle with me that I won't miss once we leave in the morning. During our yoga session, she interviewed me much more thoroughly than any job I'd ever applied for, and I know my short answers drove her crazy. But I also know she is protective of Luca and doesn't need to be. I'm not going anywhere, and I have no plans to hurt him.

Natalie had told me when she met Joel, they quickly became one another's foxhole person. It was all well and good, but the concept had meant nothing to me in the moment because there hadn't been a person on the planet I would want to share my life with. The ups, the downs, their ugly, my awful, embarrassments and celebrations, the monotony that is life once the initial fireworks fizzle.

But the glimpse I have gotten the past few days here with Luca, I understand what she meant. The estate is magical, and being here with him—even if we have Josephine traipsing through the house interrupting us for the rest of our lives—would be a life well spent. We would have fun. We would keep one another on our toes. We would continue to push each other to become the best versions of ourselves.

“Here, Kate, I think everything's ready. Why don't you spread out this dough ball and make your pizza?” Eleanor says, handing me a ball she's formed from the batch. She goes outside under the patio cover and checks the pizza oven she prepped earlier. “Yes, yes, hurry! It's perfect!”



“GRANDMA, the only thing missing from this night is a karaoke machine,” Luca says, contentedly sinking into a leather armchair in the living room and balancing his plate of



food while drinking a Red Bull. “I always begged you to get one for here.”

We gather around the pedestal coffee table next to the fireplace, listening to a playlist of Eleanor’s favorite songs from the eighties over the pounding rain. Josephine picks at her vegetables, while I devour my pizza without apology.

Eleanor blots her mouth with a napkin and places it on the table before responding diplomatically. “This home is a quiet space, a refuge, my performance-loving grandchild.”

“Lies!” he nearly knocks his plate off his knee. “You blast your music throughout the house all the time. Including now.” The grin on his face tells me he knows he’s cornered her.

“Fine, you caught me!” she raises her hands in defeat. “I don’t want one here. You sing too much.”

Luca wads up his napkin and playfully throws it at her. “No such thing.”

A song ends and Tina Turner comes on next. The same song Luca sang only nights before at the hibachi grill. We both looked at each other, and I bite my lip, recalling what he’d told the audience. *Tonight is the first time this song has meant anything to me.*

He takes a drink and I wonder if he is also thinking that was the moment that changed everything. Did he know when he’d said it that I would react in his favor? I’d given him no reason to even hope it would go well for him to admit his feelings. He was bold, brave, a man who played by his own rules.

“So, so pink,” Josephine says, giving me her full attention. Her tone is dark, like it is an accusation.

“Sorry?” My hollow apology is the only thing I could think to offer.

“And you,” she twists her body to look at her son, “bright yellow again.”

“I think you need bread, Mom,” Luca tells her, taking a bite of his pizza. “You’d be a lot happier if you were full of

carbs and had some water to go with your wine.”

Instead of responding to her son, Josephine turns to her mother and takes a long sip. “Did you know Dad didn’t want to give Luca the job?”

My brow furrows; what is she talking about? I’d assumed Thatcher hadn’t even considered anybody other than Luca for the position. Eleanor sits up. A warning to her daughter flashes across her face briefly.

“Thatcher loves Luca,” Eleanor keeps an upbeat tone to her voice as she smooths out the napkin on her lap. “Of course, he wanted him to be president. Eventually he will be CEO too.”

“Mom, stop being so naive. Dad wanted to give the job to Kate.” She swoops her glass my direction; wine sloshes over the side and onto the wool rug.

I look at Luca to see if he knows what his mother is talking about, but his face is impassive, his eyes bouncing between the two women.

Eleanor turns the music down to a low background rumble. “Jo—”

“Trudy McGee and I go to the same spa and I was there in August getting a massage when I ran into her,” Josephine starts. “She said the board had gotten the proposal from Dad for Kate to become the president of the division and it was all but a done deal.”

“Josephine,” Eleanor attempts to speak over her daughter.

“But I told him loyalty should be rewarded and family should come first,” she smirks to herself and takes another sip. “No offense, Kate, sweetheart. Now that I know you better, I rather like you. You are exactly the kind of woman Luca needs in his life. But I couldn’t have my father overlooking his grandson. What message would that give the company?”

The room stills. Luca’s slice of pizza hangs frozen halfway to his mouth. Eleanor has a look of shock, giving the impression this is news to her. Josephine sits there, her piece said. If any of that is meant to bait me, I’m not biting. All I

wish is I could melt into the floor and disappear. Whatever this moment is, it is a family matter, and I don't belong, even as a fly on the wall.

The fire pops and brings the room back to life. Luca calmly sets his drink and plate on the table. "I had been campaigning for Kate to get the job, Mom. Ever since Reddington left, and you knew that. She was and is the most qualified. Why did you go behind my back and do this? If Grandpa didn't want to hand the position to me, there was a reason. And we all know it was I was ready for it."

Josephine sets down her drink and leans her arms on her knees. "He thought you'd fail, Luca. I mean, you've proven him right, haven't you? Three sales, one dead car, and you've been busy playing house here all weekend. That's not building an empire. That's not taking care of your family when they've given you everything."

Luca's face falls, hurt washes across his eyes, and he swallows hard. Keeping his composure, his voice carries no strain. "Grandma, *you've* given me everything. And I appreciate it more than you'll ever know. If Grandpa wants to replace me with Kate, I'm okay with that. What I thought was undue nepotism turned out to be string pulling, and that's definitely not how I want to earn anything anymore." His gaze passes by me and lands on Josephine. "Mom, please quit drinking and schedule a session with your therapist soon. If you'll all excuse me."

He leaves the room and a few seconds later, his bedroom door shuts.

Josephine brings her wine glass to her mouth. "Well, somebody is testy."

I reach over and take the glass, replacing it with a slice of pizza. With a bit of censure, I instruct, "Soak it up."

Her chin lifts. She holds herself with an abashed air. "He needs you, Kate. You're good for him."

Staring down at her, I shrug. "What he needs is a mom who can be there for him, instead of a mom who relies on him

to take care of her.”

What I said oversteps my bounds, but in the spirit of an evening saying inappropriate things, it was my turn, and I take it. With an apologetic nod to Eleanor, I gather the plates and napkins and head into the kitchen. Once I place all the leftover ingredients in the fridge, my next stop is Luca’s bedroom.

I bring my knuckles to the door, pausing. Words leave me. I can’t decide as the newly minted girlfriend if it is better for me to go in there guns blazing, ready to exact revenge or enter reservedly and offer support while letting him vent or stew quietly. What does he need? How do I not know?

Because we are only a few days into a new version of us. The one we haven’t shown the world and have barely shown one another. Add in the sticky layer that we aren’t dealing with a simple issue like a (non-familial) boss who had caused a bad day or a buddy who’d said something rude, and I am at a loss. Luca mentioned they were sweepers—they didn’t like to talk about things. Were these kinds of incidents normal in the Banks family and Luca just needs to be left alone?

Steeling myself to be the doting girlfriend who will drive to Portland tomorrow to change his house’s locks, I knock. Then wait. And knock again. Try the door handle and find it locked.

Eleanor’s hand on my back startles me. “It’s safe to say we won’t see him until the morning, dear.”

“Should we be worried?” I ask dolefully.

“Come work on the puzzle with me, will you?” She leads the way down the hall. Before the kitchen, she stops at the door that was closed the first day we got to the house, the one Luca said nobody used, and briefly places a splayed hand on it. A deep breath later, she takes off and we settle at the table next to one another.

We silently sort through colors, Peter Cetera lying at our feet, fire crackling, and rain calming down. I focus on finding the yellows for a house she started to assemble earlier. She

seems lost in thought, poking through the reds for a boat. After a while, she pops the tab of Coke and hands me one.

“Things have been tense since Miles passed,” she finally says.

“I can’t even imagine what it would be like to lose your grandson,” I tell her quietly, opening my Coke. “That door you stopped at, that was his bedroom here, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” She pats my hand the same way I’ve seen her lovingly pat Luca’s and continues to sort. “I lost a grandson and a daughter. Jo’s always been the free-spirited type, like her brother, but it’s been a long decade of taking it to a whole new level.”

“You have a son, right? He runs a Christmas tree farm?”

“Yes, Everette. He and Amy gave me my other two grandsons, Theo and Bryce. The four cousins were always thick as thieves growing up. Even if Everette needed his space from Thatcher and me, he’d make time to come *here* and we’d all pretend for a summertime week or a long holiday that life was perfect.

“Then Miles passed and we all handled it differently. Jo went on a spiritual pilgrimage, as she calls it. I don’t understand it but deep down I know I can’t judge her—she lost her son. Her husband, Tim, is a pilot and his job has always taken him everywhere but home and it only got worse after Miles died. Thatcher, likewise, chose to throw himself into work even more than before. My son’s family all but disappeared. I went to therapy and took up painting. And Luca

...” With her pause, I look over and see a smile spread all the way to her eyes. “Well, he found his solace in wild adventures, dating the wrong women, pretending he wasn’t hurting by running a million miles an hour.”

“He adores you,” I tell her, sliding a piece into place.

“I think I’m finally losing my long reign to somebody else.” She gives me a cheeky glance. “And I couldn’t be happier it’s you. My grandson has a light in his eyes again that

has been missing for too long and my guess is you've played a part in that."

Her approval makes my cheeks heat. "But what is going to happen at work? I'm sure there is some rule against this."

"Thatcher knows much more of what's going on within his company than everybody thinks. He observes people and you've been one of them."

That statement makes me chuckle; maybe she is mistaken and he has been watching me because he can't figure out why a Midwesterner believed she had a chance at rising through the ranks. Or he was worried I'd fall for Luca's charming ways. Spoiler alert, Mr. Banks, I have.

As if she can read my mind, she says, with a twinkle in her eye, "He told me you're going places. The two of you on the road isn't an accident. Thatcher plays the tough love card on Luca a lot and sees his potential, but I've watched you two this weekend and you already know who he is and what he is capable of. It's a lot more than any of us give him credit for, I'm afraid."

"I've been guilty of underestimating him too," I admit and take a sip of the soda. "But he kept obnoxiously trying to be my friend and managed to weasel his way in, helping me see a whole new side of him. I was so wrong about who I'd pegged him as."

Eleanor laughs, delighted by my confession. "He's never had a lot of true friends. Sure, lots of people flock to him because he's got a vibe, but I've never seen him have anybody he could really rely on or connect with other than Miles. Until you."

"No pressure there." I bounce my brows and she gives me a grin. We work quietly again for a few minutes before I push back my chair and wish her a goodnight.

She looks up. "Don't give up on us yet, Kate. We have our good moments. And Luca is worth it. He's always been my favorite, you know. He radiates goodness."

That he does.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY: KATE**

MONDAY

“**G**ood morning, all!” Luca claps once and rubs his hands together. “Hello, Peter Cetera. You need a bath, you stinky dog.”

My eyes rake over him as he enters the kitchen. He is back in his suit, the navy one with the red tie I love so much. While his hair is styled in his corporate coif and his face clean-shaven, behind his glasses hide swollen eyes from lack of sleep. I look down at my ensemble. I’d texted Natalie the night before, filling her in ever-so-briefly before asking for outfit advice based on the clean pieces I had left. Helping me create some courage to face the day, she’d voted for a warmer black long-sleeved dress with gold belt and leather boots. Exhausted this morning, I’d pulled my hair into a sleek ponytail and added my favorite wooden earrings. My face feels permanently downturned.

After texting with Nat, I’d gotten ready for bed and texted Luca. He didn’t respond, and I didn’t expect him to. I tried reading. I even looked through the spreadsheets for work, hoping to be lulled into a bored sleep. Finally, in the middle of the night, I stood out on the patio, smelling the fresh scent of a long rain mixed with the briny ocean. The trees cast deep shadows across the yard, and my eyes fell on the hammock. *The Hammock*. Ours. I ached to go back to the other night when we were wrapped up in one another, not a care in the world beyond our little cozy cocoon.

But this morning, the first words out of Luca’s mouth since dinner are nothing but a bouncy greeting. Not an apology for



ignoring my attempts to talk to him. Not pulling me aside to assure me he's fine, I'm fine, we're fine. Not even a measly personalized hello or so much as a high-five. Not a glance at me, but instead his eye went around the room at large. All like nothing happened yesterday. Or a few days earlier, for that matter.

Eleanor knows we want an early start, and she got up before the sun to whip up a batch of fresh blueberry muffins. When I go into the kitchen to help her, she put me on puzzle duty, insisting I finish the yellow house I started last night.

Gus comes in the front door and removes his cap before greeting us. "Hello. Are you two ready to go?"

I welcome him and go to my room to grab my bags. When I come back out, Luca is reminding Gus to grab some salmon to take home and please ice the rest for Eleanor to take back to Portland. He continues animatedly in giving instructions, no hint of the hurt he briefly showed last night before he disappeared.

Finished with Gus, he goes down toward his room. I follow him, leaning heavily in the doorway as he grabs his toiletry bag and zips up his suitcase.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I cross my arms.

"Talk about what?" Luca's smile doesn't meet his eyes. "We need to get on the road, we have a big day ahead of us."

He nudges his way past me, luggage in hand.

Eleanor meets us at the front door, warm muffins in Tupperware and cold drinks in a little cooler. She hugs me long and hard and whispers in my ear, "Safe travels. Don't kill him even if you want to right now. Trust me, I understand. But take the lead and talk to him. I'll see you back in Portland." When she lets me go, she gives me a knowing nod and bounces her finger off her nose.

Gus meets me and we load everything in the Range Rover while Eleanor holds an extended conversation with Luca. She cups his chin with one hand and is doing all the talking while he bobs his head like a scolded child.

“Do you two want to sit together in the back and let me properly chauffeur you?” Gus asks with a smirk.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll take the front seat,” I tell him and climb in.

Josephine has stayed notably absent from the goodbyes, though once the car pulls out of the driveway, I see her from the side mirror, standing against the front door, watching the car travel down the driveway.

“You two are awfully quiet this morning,” Gus says after pulling onto the highway. He looks in the rearview mirror at Luca and then over at me. When neither one of us answers, he asks, “You kids want any music?”

We both shake our heads and he lets the thick quiet fall for the short ride down to Florence.

We pull into All Budgets car rental, arriving alongside a bleary-eyed employee. My suspicions are confirmed by the operating hours on the door—the shop doesn’t usually open for another hour and a half. Bankses have called in favors yet again.

Gus unloads our baggage and the boxes of samples. “Take care, Luca. I hope to see you soon.” After a handshake, he turns to me. “And you’d better be with him.” He pulls me in for a quick hug. “It’s been a pleasure, Kate. Etta and I see a lot of us in you two. Whatever this quiet is, it will pass.”

LUCA SLIDES behind the wheel of the Toyota Sienna. The minivan is the only vehicle All Budgets had available this early, and after throwing everything into the back, we take off for Coos Bay. I haven’t been in a van since my mom’s on the farm and it smells like nostalgia and domesticity. Luca looks out of place driving it and a small part of me wants to take a picture to send to Natalie and Jill. Or as a memory for us to laugh about later, together. There has to be a later.

He pulls me from my beginning of a spiral. “What do you think would happen if instead of a Volvo, I bought this for Josephine?”

“I think she would ask why you didn’t answer my knock last night.”

Luca’s knuckles grip the steering wheel and his jaw flexes momentarily. “Can we do this later?” His delivery wobbles slightly, and his shoulders hunch in anticipation of a fight from me. Because that’s what Josephine would do. Knock him while he’s down.

“Sure.” No, I don’t want to wait until later to figure out what is going through his mind. To understand how he is handling what Josephine had said. What he is thinking about me. Why hasn’t he wanted me to be his sounding board or the one to console him? I want him to need me the same way I’ve stupidly allowed myself to need him. The way I unexpectedly found myself craving his eyes as they watch me from across the room, the way his lips turn up when I have a quick retort, the way he pulls me into him like that’s where I belong. I need him to kiss me again, like he is deprived of oxygen without my lips against his. Most of all, I don’t want to discover we are going to end before we truly had a chance to start. Resigned, I reach for his phone. “Music?”

His body visibly relaxes as we settle into our normal pattern. “That sounds perfect. Oh! I think ‘Best of Karaoke 3’ would be good.”

I locate his request and that song from *Dirty Dancing*, “Hungry Eyes,” comes on. “Want to go over any strategies? We have an hour to kill.”

“Naw, I’m feeling really good about these meetings today.” The sing-songy uptick in his voice is back, and he absentmindedly picks up with the chorus. He raises his brows at me, flirtiness in his eyes as he sings the lyrics.

Mustering the best smile I can offer, my attention turns out the window to the large sand dunes that sit between the 101 and the beach. The landscape has changed from luscious forests to beach grasses, tall sandbanks, and Douglas firs. Where we once hugged the coastline the first few days of the trip, we are now blocked from ocean views by the dunes, with the road curving slightly inland. Mist rises from the ground

with the warmer temperatures when the sun comes over the mountains. The lighting casts an amber hue all over, it's fall at its best.

One song turns into two, into three, and Luca keeps his vocal cords warmed, harmonizing with each.

My phone sits in my lap and its buzz brings me from my zoned out state.

Jill: Happy Monday! Just saw you guys got two sales over the weekend!

Hopefully you ahem ... celebrated.

Me: What do you know about the Red Roof Bed-and-Breakfast in Coos Bay?

THERE IS a pause in her response, and I picture her at her desk, furiously looking it up.

Jill: I know what you know—same supplier for six years.

Me: We categorized who we have left to visit and they seem like our best bet for another sale.

Jill: It's Monday morning and you're talking about sales.

You spent a weekend holed up alone at the estate all weekend with Luca.

Spill.

Me: There's nothing to spill.

His mom and grandma showed up.

Jill: Yikes. Was it awkward?

I THINK about her question for a minute. Inconvenient would be my word of choice over awkward. Even with how unconventional Josephine's approach is to everything, the weekend was fine until her theatrics. And Luca's response to them.

Me: Let's just say, we need to go to brunch on Saturday.

Jill: You've got me on the edge of my seat.

Good luck today.

"IS THIS CHICAGO?" I ask, slicing through the single-sided tension in the car.

"Contrary to popular belief, no." Luca adjusts in his seat, excited to give this lesson. "Well, this *is* Peter Cetera's very popular 'Glory of Love,' and is actually Grandma's favorite song—which is how her dog got his name. But this is after Peter went solo and it's the theme song from *The Karate Kid Part II*."

"There was more than one movie?" I am halfheartedly invested in the conversation.

He lets out an exaggerated gasp. "Shocked and awed, Porter! Are you kidding me? You've never seen the second

one?”

“I’ve never even seen the first,” I say with a defensive bite.

“Movie date night is definitely on the calendar as soon as possible,” he decides for us. “I’m thinking we should go with a whole theme. Get some Bagel Bites and Cool Ranch Doritos. I have a Rubik’s Cube or a Magic 8 Ball in a box somewhere. Oh! We could play the original Mario Brothers on Nintendo.”

I hold back what’s sitting on the tip of my tongue. First, he’d calls me Porter; did he friendzone me? And secondly, the walking contradiction that is Luca Banks has planned a movie date night but refuses to communicate like an adult. I desperately want to go old school Kate on him. Instead, I tuck away his continued offenses for later and answer him with an enthusiastic, “Sounds like a plan.”

Between anger-eating three of Eleanor’s amazing muffins and taking in all of the new views the drive has to offer, time flies by and we arrive in Coos Bay right on schedule. He pulls into the parking lot of our first motel and kills the engine.

“Did you want to run this pitch?”

“You can if you’d like.” I push the sliding side door button to grab my tote with the iPad.

He shuts his door, walking around and assessing me. “You’re mad.”

“You’re astute.”

His face pinches. “I’m not one hundred percent sure what that word means, but it feels like I’m in trouble.” He clucks his tongue. “Yes, I am definitely on your bad list. I promise you can tell me why later, but I’m going into this meeting right now. Are you coming?”

“That’s why I’m here.” I throw the strap over my shoulder and lead the way in.



LUCA HOLDS the door to my room open, letting me in first before he follows with my suitcase and bag. We survived the day and once we settled into our first meeting, I was able to dig deep and find that charisma needed for us to play off one another well. It wasn't even hard to let myself get lost in our banter and friendship. By our second meeting, we were in a good rhythm and convinced our clients on the spot to give Bliss a chance once their current contract finished in December. We ended with a few more soft meetings before we landed in Bandon for the night.

The beautiful little town is famed for its cranberry crop and gorgeous coastline. And thanks to the end of the summer season, it appeared pretty vacant as we drove through the heart of the business district.

I open the sliding door of our inn and look out at Face Rock. The tide is out and the famous rock formations jut out of the ocean.

"They gave us connecting rooms," Luca informs me, opening the door on our shared wall. "I'm going to change and then do you want to grab a bite to eat? We need to celebrate lucky number four."

"Sure." Still focusing on the beach below, I wave him off.

I change in my room and walk straight into his without warning. There stands Luca Banks, wearing nothing but his boxers. The sight stops me in my tracks. My brain quickly registers I have never seen him so undressed before, and I don't bother to hide my slow, appreciative intake. While I've felt his strong build as we laid in the hammock, to actually see the curvature of his tight muscles is completely different.

He is built like a rower: his whole body is taut.

After an inappropriately long time, he clears his throat and smirks. "Kate, you're more than welcome to take a picture if you want to." My eyes snap to his, and he beckons with his hand. "Okay, let me have it. You've been patient to wait this long."

I catch the double meaning in his words. “Could you put on some clothes, please? I can’t focus when you look like that.”

He lets out a laugh, my favorite one that floats through the air like a happy melody. “Definitely not. I’m never getting dressed again if it keeps us from fighting. Keeps you from fighting me? I don’t know what’s about to happen but you’re making me nervous.”

His unzipped suitcase sits on the coffee table, and I rummage through it, finding a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. Tossing them at him, I step back and watch him slowly pull them over his body, his lips turn up, his eyes playful.

“Luca, what are we doing?”

His smile dims. He anxiously adjusts the collar on his shirt.

“What do you mean?”

“Two days ago, I asked you that question and you told me ‘Jumping head first into something that’s going to be really, really great.’”

“Have you changed your mind?”

I arch a brow. “Have you?”

He shakes his head. “Not even a little.”

“Then what was last night?” Undeniably, it comes out harsher than I mean it to.

He looks down. “That was Josephine getting drunk and spouting off.”

“I’m not talking about her right this second.” I calm my tone and reach for him. My hand settles on his bicep, giving it a light squeeze. “Luca, you boxed me out. I stopped by your room, and you didn’t answer. I texted you and nothing. This morning you walked into the kitchen with a pep in your step like what happened last night was normal.”

He raises his head slightly and looks me squarely in the eyes. “I’m a sweeper, remember? Bankses get mad and move



on. I'm over it already. She was rude, and today's a new day."

"I call BS." My palm slides down his arm. I grab his hand, hesitantly wrapping my fingers through his.

"We're not dissecting it. It is what it is." He pulls me down onto the bed. We both lie back and stare up at the ceiling.

"Well, I've told you, Porters talk things to death. We clear the air and then we talk about it some more. And I'm not saying *we* have to do that but this—*us*—isn't going to make it past dinner tonight if we don't compromise and meet each other halfway. I will not become a sweeper."

He takes a long, deep breath and blows it out his barely-parted lips. "Fair."

My head rolls to the side, and he peeks at me out of the corner of his eye. I say, "This is me sharing. Okay?"

I wait for him to acknowledge me before I continue. "I can't begin to know how you felt with the way your mom attacked you, and the way she went behind everybody's back to get you the job, but I wanted to be there for you in the aftermath and you ignored me. It made me feel like you didn't need me or want me."

The last sentence makes him wince. "Not even remotely true. I felt so stupid, and I didn't want you to start seeing me the way my mom and grandpa see me."

I roll onto my side and take him in. He looks smaller. Afraid that through opening up, I'll confirm the worst of his fears. "That's never going to happen."

"Believe it or not, I've really tried to change the last couple of months. How stupid can I be to think my grandpa actually gave me the job out of noticing my efforts and thinking I was up to the task?" He lets go of my hand and shifts his body to face me, tucking his hands under his cheek. "You were supposed to get the job, Kate. My mom stole it out from under you and made you feel like you were only worth second place. That makes me so angry at her."

"But in not getting the job, I got you. And to me, that's the better end of the bargain."

He leans in and gives me a half smile before brushing his lips against mine. I put my hand on the side of his face and drink him in. Pulling off his glasses, I run my hand through his hair and deepen the kiss, closing the gap that had been between us.

His hands wrap behind my back and tuck me against him. His lips caress mine until he breaks away and breathes, “Are you done being mad at me?”

“For now.”

“If this is what fighting is, I like it.” He goes for another kiss, his lips crushing mine ever so briefly.

I playfully push his face away. “Hold the phone. You thought you were once in love enough with another woman to propose to her and you two didn’t fight?”

“No,” he says matter-of-factly. “We didn’t talk about stuff that would cause us to fight.”

I put my hand on his chest and raise an incredulous brow. “Then what did you even talk about?”

“Her.” A wide grin crosses his face. “Her clothes, where she wanted to travel next, what restaurants we couldn’t eat at because it didn’t fit into her macro plan.”

I throw my head back. “I’m surprised you two didn’t work out. You sound like the perfect couple.”

“Her leaving me was the best thing that ever happened. She was boring, and I was young and dumb.” Luca’s lips strain for me and land on my temple, then my neck. “Turns out I like blondes who hold their ground and put me in my place.”

When his lips find mine once more, I get lost in us. Excitement washes over me the way it did at the lighthouse the first time we kissed. My growling stomach pulls us apart, and Luca leans his forehead on mine.

“Come on, let’s feed you before you get low blood sugar and become mad at me again.” With a bop on the nose, Luca pulls me off the bed, and we are back in our rhythm.

# **CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: KATE**

## MONDAY

I tighten the drawstring on my hoodie, effectively giving myself that really unfortunate squished face look. We opt for take-out from a local Chinese restaurant and walk it down the stairs at Coquille Point. Sharing a large rock and with chopsticks in hand, we pass boxes back and forth filled with lo mein, egg rolls, and kung pao chicken. The warm food hits the spot, and the view can't be beat. The beach is deserted and the sheer amount of clouds is a warning not to expect a sunset we'll write home about.

"I'm calling it: summer is officially over," Luca says, zipping up his coat.

"You look adorable, Porter." He snatches away my box of egg rolls. Between his down coat and a hoodie, I look more Marshmallow man than adorable.

"Hey," I call out, hand covering my mouth full of chicken, "we are nipping this in the bud. You can't call me Porter anymore. If I'm your girlfriend, you have to call me Kate."

He bumps his shoulder against mine. "I can do that. But you're also my friend. My best friend, actually."

I consider his words, taking a long drink of Diet Pepsi. "That's a lot. We need to find you some more friends."

He gives me a half smile and offers up the last egg roll. When I shake my head, he doesn't hesitate to plop it into his mouth. Speaking around the food, he says, "I'm done with big groups of people always hanging around. What do you mean I'm a lot? A lot in a bad way?"

“Yes. No. I don’t know. We barely could stand one another two weeks ago, and now you’re giving me all kinds of titles.”

“We’ve always been friends, Kate. You just didn’t want to believe it.” He swallows the statement with some Coke.

I can see how there is some truth to that.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Always,” I tell him.

“Back at the inn, when I was winning you back over by being scantily clad”—he raises his eyebrows at the laugh that rumbles out of me—“Kate, there was staring. A lot of staring. Don’t deny it. Anyway, once I was clothed, you said you were frustrated last night because you didn’t feel wanted or needed by me when I didn’t answer my door.”

“Right.”

“And that bothered you because ...?”

“Oh Luca,” I lean into him and rest my head on his shoulder. “Welcome to an adult relationship where you don’t control the narrative.”

He kisses the side of my head and gestures with his chopsticks. “Explain, please.”

“Of course I was bothered. I wanted to be there for you as a sounding board or to sit quietly and hold your hand while you processed everything. I would’ve gladly stolen all of Josephine’s crystals for you if you’d asked me to and hidden them around the estate, Easter egg style. That’s my job—to have your back. But you have to let me do that.”

I sit up and look at him. He puckers his lips together and closes one eye while he considers what I’ve said. “I’m going to like having you on my side. You’re the best cheerleader, after all.”

“That really is my thing, isn’t it? Who would’ve ever thought *my* thing is cheering everybody along?” I muse. Ironic for somebody who tends to be somewhat grumpy.

“And one of my favorite things about you is you’re not afraid of my mom, which is really going to annoy her.”

“Yeah,” I draw out the word and clumsily twirled lo mein into my mouth, “we are going to have to talk about some boundaries with your family.”

“You don’t say?” he sounds amused. “You’re telling me you don’t want to spend every waking hour with them? There are still so many puzzles to put together and yoga sessions to do.”

“Ha. We’ll figure something out,” I promise him. Details can wait. I don’t want to expend any more energy on something I can’t control, especially a subject as touchy as family. They have lots of problems but the Bankses are close in their own way. And I do like them. Maybe now that Luca knows he has somebody outside of Eleanor on his side to navigate life with, he will distance himself naturally a little bit. Or maybe dating Luca means I am going to see them all the time, and I have to make peace with that. Things to worry about later. “Thatcher put us together and sent us on this road trip for a reason, you know.”

“I know.” When I give him a puzzled look, he sheepishly explains. “Grandma told me this morning when you were packing the car with Gus. Thatcher realized I needed to gain confidence and he knew you were the one who could help me find it.”

He rubs the back of his neck and adjusts his glasses. “He recognizes you’re a leader, Kate. He also knew if you got promoted to president, you would run with everything at full speed and not mentor me along. By the way it sounds, he was actually going to let that happen—until Josephine intervened. Grandma says he figured sending us out of the office and forcing us to spend time together would bring out your bossy side and let you lead in a different capacity, and hopefully I’d rise to the occasion.”

“Smart man,” I reflect. “He saw me as a born cheerleader before I did.”

“Yeah. When he heard we were at the estate, he had planned to send her down for recon. She wasn’t thrilled I foiled the plan with Josephine jumping on board after I talked to her. She had been looking forward to a quiet weekend away.” He chuckles and gathers our trash. “Grandma also told me to take care of you. I think she’s starting to like you more than she likes me.”

“Never. But we’ll take care of each other,” I vow, grabbing his hand and snuggling up against him.

“That’s my plan,” he assures me. “Hey! Spout!”

My eyes track off in the direction he points. Sure enough, two more blow at the same time.

Luca repositions us so my back leans into his chest, and he wraps his arms around me protectively. He offers an ear bud, which I happily take. “Warm enough?”

I nod and call out, “Spout,” after seeing a fourth spray of water. Grabbing his phone, I decide what we’re going to listen to. The energetic beat starts and I can feel Luca smile.

“I knew you’d come around to Harry Styles,” he says with pure delight.

“We’ve been doing some much ‘Late Night Talking’ it just seemed appropriate.”

“Lies!” he laughs. “You’re part of the vast fandom of Harries now.”

I sigh. “I’ve evolved. I find shameless joy in all the things now, just like you.”

“You keep getting better and better,” he whispers into my ear.

“I’m thinking I need to come back and spend a month exploring all these places we drove past.”

“I know a good tour guide,” he tells me. “He not only knows this area like the back of his hand but he has a few killer playlists and food truck hook ups.”

“Mmm, he sounds good-looking.”

Luca's laugh shakes my body. "I like you. More than you know."



SATURDAY:

"SORRY I'M LATE," I scoot into the booth and sit across from Jill at our favorite brunch spot, Mother's Bistro and Bar. Natalie is visible on Jill's propped up phone. Whatever they had been talking about is quickly forgotten as two pairs of eyes fall on me. Jill gathers her long, brown hair over her shoulder and plays with the tips.

"So Banks sends you on a trip and you come back with six sales and a boyfriend," Natalie launches right in. "I did not win either of those pools."

I can't hide the happiness I feel hearing the word boyfriend. "Yeah, Brookings ended up landing us two more. We have a few we need to touch base with next week, but I think it went okay overall."

"Okay is the understatement of the year. They've become more than just watercooler gossip," Jill fills in our friend. "The interns are calling them the dream team. Every department is talking about them."

"Who is everybody talking about? Us?" Luca slides onto the bench next to me and gives me a kiss on the temple. "They should be. We are adorable."

"You invited him?" Jill asks with an amused look.

"Marshall, I invited myself. We are a package deal now, I'm afraid," he apologizes. "I just saw Lisa in the kitchen and she's sending out her amazing apple cobbler at the end. She wasn't planning on making it today, but you know." He leaves the sentence hanging and bops me on the nose with his menu before opening it and diving in.

"You talked her into it." I make a guess.



“That’s my favorite dessert she makes!” Natalie calls out. “Joel, we have got to go to Portland and go to brunch. I miss it!”

Joel can be heard in the background. “We have brunch on Oahu, Red.”

“But brunch with my friends is the best and now that Luca’s in the picture, he is going to hook us up. He knows everybody in town and we can finally play fast and loose with the menu, get special treatment. Gah! We need to go.”

“As you wish,” he tells her and joins the group. “Luca. Looks like we will meet before too long. Do you happen to know any places to play ultimate frisbee?”

Luca bounces in the seat, his face glowing with inflated excitement. “Thompson! I’m so excited you play! I’m on a rec league and they would love to have an extra player.”

“I’ll start figuring out when I can take off. Maybe after the new year?” Joel looks at Natalie.

“As long as you don’t come in May,” Jill pleads. “Have I told you I just talked to my mom and was told to save up my time off? I have to go home for few weeks.”

“Who knows—maybe you’ll meet the love of your life before then and he can go with you?” I offer hopefully.

“I thought I’d found him once, and we all know how that ended up. I don’t think I’ll get married again,” she says without anger or wistfulness.

“Oh! You could totally be like those romance books we read in book club and get another chance at love? There could be some meet cute on the street because you drop your taco and he buys you a new one? It would be one of those big city girl goes back to her small town to find her hero. I love this for you,” Natalie decides.

The conversation carries through our meal, with Joel and Luca adding their own spin of silly tropes Jill could experience, before they jump on their own separate call to talk all things hiking. While I can’t wait until we are all at a table

together instead of like this, I am grateful to have Luca seated next to me.

Hanging up his call with Joel, Luca nudges me. “Hey, we have to get going.”

“You’re not going to hit the bookstore with me today?” Jill pouts.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I can’t. We have to go buy Josephine a car. And then Thatcher is making us salmon puffs and Eleanor wants to show me her dahlias before it frosts next week,” I explain. “But I am setting aside next Saturday just for you and me.”

After the meal, Luca and I walk out the restaurant, hand in hand, down toward where we parked on Second Avenue. “You can go with her if you want,” Luca says. “Boundaries and all that.”

“I know, but I need to help you get the Volvo. Besides, I’m saving you from being at your grandparent’s forever. You’ll have an excuse to take me home early ... somebody promised me a really elaborate eighties movie date night.”

“You’ve got my back, Kate!” he says with a gleam in his eye. “I hit the jackpot with you. And I’m never letting you go, you know that, right? Never. Because you’re simply the best.”

## **EPILOGUE: LUCA**

SEPTEMBER, TWO YEARS LATER

“How can you possibly take another picture on this trail, love?” I call to Kate as she stops for the fifteenth time to capture another angle of the moss draped across the spruce trees with the sun shining through. We couldn’t ask for a more perfect fall day. The leaves haven’t turned yet but they’re on the cusp of doing so and there is a promise in the air of the new beginning each season brings.

She looks at me and smiles, making the (new) face she saves just for me—the one I’ve gotten to see for the past two years. It’s a sassy little scrunched up thing with narrow eyes, and I can’t get enough of it.

“That’s rich, coming from you. I can’t help it. I love fall and the trail really knows how to show up this time of year.”

Zippering her phone into her vest pocket, she skips down the path toward me. “Why are you in such a hurry, anyway? I expected you to be taking more photos for your portfolio.” She catches up to me and throws her arms around my neck, giving me a long kiss. “Oh! Don’t move! The lighting is amazing,” she instructs, sing-songing the last word and pulls her phone back out. Framing us into the shot with the mythical Middle-earth trees to our backs and Hobbit Beach below, we smile and she clicks away.

Glancing at her phone, she sighs with a grin. “You really are *GQ*, Luca.”

I look at her and shake my head. How she doesn’t realize she is truly the most beautiful creature to walk the planet is

beside me. I try to tell her every day, but she always dismisses it as folklore. Her long hair is wavy from the salty humidity and she looks every part the Oregonian native in her army green ankle pants, heather gray sweater, and black vest.

“Coming up on your left,” a voice announces and we step aside as a woman using hiking poles tips her hat-covered head at us and blazes by.

Kate’s face pulls in concentration. “She looked familiar, didn’t she?”

My eyes go down the path toward the woman and I shrugged. “I don’t know, we hike this all the time. I’m sure we’ve seen some of these people before.”

We have spent most weekends and all major holidays at the estate, taking it over as our own. Kate is never more relaxed than when we are there, whether we are playing the piano or sitting out by the fire or lazily entwined in the hammock. The only change she has made is adding a few personal touches to my old bedroom to better reflect both of us living in the space. Whenever Josephine comes along with us, Kate will humor her with a yoga session or two—as long as it is not raining. Grandma and Grandpa love having her spend so much time at their second home; they always have said they bought the house to fill it with happy people. Happy we are.

“How many photos did you promise for the new campaign with Surfer Inn Motel?” she asks me, pulling me to the present.

I scratch my beard as I contemplate the question. “I think Patrick wanted four of his place, three of local Oceanside scenery and two of the Oregon Coast in general.”

“That’s easy-peasy,” she responds, grabbing my hand as we navigate down the mountain. After a beat she adds, “It’s so nice to not have you doing homework this fall.”

I chose to step down as president after six months on the job and went back to school. My grandpa was surprised by my choice at first, since school had never been my favorite or my strong suit, but he was the loudest to cheer for me—next to

Kate—when they called my name and I crossed the stage in April. These days, I work for the company in the publicity department and spearheaded a campaign that provides locally-taken prints to our coastal luxury toiletry clients. The prints match the with labels on the items they provide at their locations and it has turned into a big hit with the property owners and tourists alike. I’ve stumbled upon an Instagram page and some hashtags dedicated to the brand and it looks like the products are trending into becoming a collector’s item.

“Me too. I’m never taking another test again,” I swear. “You’re not answering emails, are you? You’re on vacation,” I chide, catching Kate looking at her phone.

“Last one. My assistant was worried about the wording on our renewal contract for the Pineapple Resort,” she replies. Kate took over my job and has thrived. She loves it, and Thatcher can’t be more pleased somebody he sees as family wants to take over the company when he is ready to step down. In his mind, Kate is the granddaughter he never had and always wanted.

She’s stayed true to her word and doesn’t care what doors the Banks name can open. Since the day she wanted to be mine, it’s always been her and I against the world. Stubborn to a fault, she is probably going to keep her little apartment forever, just to prove to me money doesn’t buy happiness. I’ve known this for two years. Kate does.

We make our way down the switchbacks, and I give her an earbud, placing the other one in my ear. Rounding the last bend before the lighthouse comes into view, I put on “Something Just Like This” and Kate’s lips turn up.

I lead her to the base of the lighthouse, and we take our traditional selfie with my phone. A quick glance around the viewing area lets me know everything is a-go. My hand shakes as I pop the bud out of her ear. Instead of simply putting everything into my pockets and wandering over to the fence to look for whales like we usually do, I dropped to one knee. I’m nervous but excited—the same feeling I get when I perform karaoke. Producing a small box with a simple emerald cut diamond on a platinum band, I look at Kate.

“Oh!” she exclaims, cupping her mouth with both hands.

“Kate, you are the love of my life. The one who makes me calm and cheers me along. You have made me feel more alive the past two years than all the experiences I had before you. You are my greatest adventure, and you are the one I want to have every adventure with for the rest of my life. Please keep loving me and fighting with me and singing off-key for me.” I pause, and she laughs while brushing a tear from the corner of her eye. “I can’t go another day without knowing if you’ll be mine forever—will you marry me?”

Her eyes light up, and she pulls me to standing with a loud, “Yes, Luca Banks, it’s about time!”

I grab her in a crushing hug and kiss her like it is the last time our lips will ever meet. Swinging her in a circle, I set her back down and our private moment is over. From all around the area, we are flanked by those who love us. Grandma and Grandpa hug both of us first before Josephine and Dad step in for their turn. I’ve flown Kate’s parents out for the occasion, and they look at us giddily. They are staying in Florence for the week, and Kate’s dad is excited for me to take him fishing. Reddington and Thompson wait patiently for their turn to congratulate us, Reddington grabbing Kate’s hand to compare diamonds.

“I can’t wait to help you plan!” she tells Kate, who laughs her happiest of laughs and replies, “Calm down, bridezilla, your wedding just barely happened. Take a breath!”

“It’s been a year, thank you,” Reddington reminds her. “And it was epic.”

“Well, I’m still recovering,” Kate teases. “But yes, it was the party of the century. I have some big shoes to fill.”

Marshall throws arms around both of us at once and squeezes us hard. “I am so happy for you two. I told you, Kate, way back at that one fundraiser, you were a good person to have in her corner, and I still stand by that today.”

“Jill! You’re here! I can’t believe it,” Kate gushes, pushing me from the group hug and stealing her old friend for herself.

“Where’s—” she stops, looking around.

“He couldn’t come this weekend and was so bummed. I’m kind of hoping we can all spend a few days together before festivities get going for us,” she smiles.

Reddington swoops in and hugs Marshall and Kate. “Yes! Joel and I are on the mainland for a few weeks. We’re driving down the coast and will be in town for a week before the wedding, so please, let’s do lots of things together, in between wedding duties.”

“Married, nearly-married, engaged,” Kate smiles. “I couldn’t be happier for the three of us.”

Her friends agree and eventually everybody gives us space, heading down toward the beach to where the taco truck is waiting for us to celebrate.

I pull Kate close. She nuzzles into me, then pulls back fast. “Wait, am I crazy or was that Gayle earlier on the trail? The owner of the Mystical Mermaid?”

“Yeah, that was her. She’s down at the beach with Patrick and the Johnsons. Everybody wanted to be a part of today. They love us. Well, mostly just you.”

“Well, I love *you*,” she tells me, lifting her chin and meeting my lips.

“Are you happy?”

“Are you kidding me? Absolutely.” She means it. She radiates joy. “You’re stuck with me forever now. You can’t change your mind.”

I take her hand and we walk toward the path that will take us down to the party on the beach. “Best news I’ve ever heard. Because you know what I think? I think you’re simply the best.”



## LUCA AND KATE'S PLAYLIST

**I**n order as seen in the book (sang, talked about, listened to, played):

1. Bad Romance – Lady Gaga
2. Trouble – Coldplay
3. With or Without You – U2
4. Sign of the Times – Harry Styles
5. All Too Well – Taylor Swift
6. Hold Me – Weezer
7. Don't Want to Miss a Thing – Aerosmith
8. What About Love – Heart
9. The Best – Tina Turner
10. Yellow – Coldplay
11. Something Just Like This – Coldplay
12. Viva La Vida (the whole album) – Coldplay
13. Good Riddance – Green Day
14. Total Eclipse of the Heart – Bonnie Tyler
15. Mylo Xyloto (the whole album) – Coldplay
16. Daydreaming – Harry Styles
17. Baby What a Big Surprise – Chicago
18. Hard Habit to Break – Chicago
19. You're the Inspiration – Chicago
20. Hungry Eyes – Eric Carmen
21. Late Night Talking — Harry Styles
22. Silent Night; The First Noel; Oh, Holy Night

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Oregon Coast holds the dearest of places in my heart and I try to visit as often as I can. When I finally find myself with a big pile of cash, I'm buying an estate just like the Banks' and you can all come visit. While I have yet to see a whale, I've seen a few spouts off in the distance. I know my day is coming. And when it does, I will make sure the whole world knows it has finally happened.

I am so grateful for my continued tribe who cheer me along.

To Sharlee: thank you for loving Luca as much as I do. Thank you for reading the ugly draft chapter by chapter and talking me off the ledge more than once. This is as much your book as mine.

To my book team: Lily (my cover designer), Rachel (my line editor), and Sarah (my proofreader), thank you for helping shape this book into what I hoped it would become.

To my reader friends and Instagram friends: a big, fat thank you for cheering me along, sharing my book, keeping me excited to write!

To my two boys: thank you for listening to my writing playlist so much it is ingrained in your souls. Not many kids your age know *all* the words to "The Best" or "Late Night Talking."

To Bear: again, I couldn't have done it without you. Thank you for letting me talk about Kate and Luca as if they are real people, letting me vent my frustrations during the process, and letting me borrow some of your little quirks to create the characters I love (or did you know I did that?). Let's go back to Oregon again soon and find a whale, visit our lighthouse, and eat copious amounts of steak tacos, okay? Also, in case I don't tell you enough: you're simply The Best.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Beachley is happiest at the beach—any beach. She also enjoys fish tacos, hiking, and witty conversations with friends.

