



THE ACCIDENTAL
Honeyymoon
CATASTROPHE
HAYDEN HALL

The Accidental Honeymoon Catastrophe

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Honeymoon
CATASTROPHE

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Edited by Sabrina Hutchinson

Cover by Cate Ashwood

ISBN: 979-8-3512-4267-5

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About The Book

**Remember not to get drunk married to your best friend.
It's not rocket science.**

Stefan

It was supposed to be a fun weekend trip with all my friends. The next thing I know, a splitting headache is waking me up on a plane to who knows where and there's a ring on my finger.

What?!

Next to me is Marco, my best friend in the world, my favorite person, and... My husband? His ring matches mine and the marriage certificate in my handbag definitely has both our names on it.

But this is ridiculous. I've seen a marriage go sideways; I've seen my parents destroy each other with hatred. And I swore

never to be like them. Never marry, never fall in love.
Especially not to the best guy ever because he doesn't deserve
to get hurt like that.

Marco and I have a perfectly functional arrangement. We do
whatever we feel like, but we never ever become boyfriends.

It's just safer to separate a relationship from having fun with
each other.

And, as we find ourselves on a romantic – and *fake* –
honeymoon, I start to ask myself: have we been dating all
along?

Marco

Stefan made me promise never to fall in love with him. And
the thing about me is that I always keep a promise. We have a
deal; we fool around, but we don't let our feelings get
involved. And it's better that way.

Stefan doesn't believe in happy endings and I don't deserve
him. Or anyone. I'd already lucked out once in my life when a
wealthy family adopted me. How much more could I ask for?

Except, having to spend a week with him in the most romantic
place on the planet is making all the lines blurry. Are we just
messing around like we always do or is there something more?

Is one week enough to convince Stefan that not all

relationships end in flames?

And is a week enough to convince myself that I should love myself before letting someone else love me, too?

The more I think, the more I see: this marriage is a total joke.

The Accidental Honeymoon Catastrophe is the fifth novel in the Frat Brats of Santa Barbara series. While it can be read on its own, it's just more fun to read them in order. Dive into a world of pining, steamy accidents, and two best friends who are perfect for each other, but refuse to see it.

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Prologue



AUGUST 9 - SOMEWHERE above the Gulf of Mexico

It felt like a regular bump on a dirt road in a car with worn-out shock absorbers, really. Never in a million years would I have guessed what it really was. It rocked me and sent a lightning bolt through my skull, pain searing my brain.

I sucked air between my teeth and frowned as if to force my head to stay still. The pain flashed like a white light, like the light of a newborn star directed straight into my pupils.

A soft whimper escaped down my nose and I tried to open my eyes when we bumped over gravel once again. This time, it was like we were hurtling down an old road at a hundred miles per hour and it shook everything around me.

“Folks, this is your captain speaking. We’re experiencing some turbulence. Please stay in your seats and fasten the seatbelts for your safety. We will resume the serving of snacks

and beverages shortly.” The voice was muffled and distant. In front of me were blurry blotches of gray, black, red, and beige. I didn’t see much else besides these colors.

Pain that sliced my brain intensified the longer I had my eyes open. So... I closed them. I shut them all the way.

Something smelled of alcohol and I had a tiny suspicion that it was me. The scent was coming from the inside.

Ah, you’re hungover, Stefan, I thought. It explained the thirst. My mouth was on fire. I would have felt better had I eaten sand on a beach, no doubt.

I peeled my eyes open again. They were grainy. Like someone had thrown a fistful of dust in my face. Every move irked me.

The shaking subsided and now felt like we were on a smooth patch of new asphalt.

Turbulence... Captain...

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on a goddamn minute.

I jerked awake violently as I felt the soft seat under my ass. As my arms flailed, I struck something, and that thing fell out of the cup-holder of my fancy seat. The object rolled around the red-carpeted floor and stopped at my bare feet.

Where the hell are my shoes, man?

I hyperventilated as I glanced at the small, oblong windows to my left. The two seats that filled the cabin were partially

facing the center. My seat was upright, but the other one was pulled out to near flatness, almost like a makeshift bed.

My gaze met the window once again and I realized that not only was I in a plane, but also up in the air.

Where the hell am I flying to, man?

Something shifted in the other seat, but my thirst was the only thing I could comprehend. The thing that had rolled to my feet was a bottle of water. I picked it up, opened it with all the strength I could muster, then downed all of it, taking only a short break to breathe.

My headache wasn't going anywhere, but at least my thirst did.

Ringings filled my ears and I wasn't sure if it was my heartbeat echoing through my fried and empty skull, or if it was something external.

"No, no, no," I murmured, my voice cracking after apparently copious amounts of alcohol had slid down my throat. But here's the thing... I didn't remember drinking any of it. The only way I knew I had, was the very fact I couldn't remember. That and the smell of booze. Had I been crazy enough to drink whiskey neat? It smelled like fucking whiskey to me.

My stomach turned. I was going to be sick.

I pressed back against the chair and stilled myself for a little while. *Don't get sick. Whatever you do, don't get sick.* I needed answers, not sickness.

Across the small cabin, mounted to the wall, was a flat screen TV. It was on, but it wasn't playing a movie. Instead, there was a plane in the center of it, and nothing but vast, blue background around it. There was also a clock displaying it was just after two in the afternoon. *But which fucking timezone?*

Fear filled my chest as I tried breathing. I was about to choke on it. *Deep breaths, Stefan*, I told myself internally.

"There you go, folks," the captain said. "Nothing more than a little turbulence. You can unfasten your belts now and order drinks as usual. We're currently cruising at thirty-five thousand feet above the Gulf of Mexico."

I didn't listen to the rest. It didn't matter what the temperature outside was and I already knew the time. The pilot's voice faded from my swirling mind.

I ran a hand through my hair and felt something oddly cool touch my brow.

I looked to my right. The other chair was occupied, too, and the person shifted. His thick, black curls covered half his face. His white shirt was wrinkled beyond repair from turning and tossing during the flight. His suspenders were loose around him and his black pants unzipped, but still around his hips.

The very best of my friends, Marco, slept soundly three feet away from me. A lock of hair must have tickled him because he murmured something, groaned, and raised his left hand to his brow, then brushed the light curls off his face.

He moaned and I jumped out of my chair and towered over Marco.

Don't be sick, I told myself again. It was all I could do.

The faintest of memories glimmered somewhere in the darkest corners of my mind: dancing, tossing the dice, downing shots — my stomach was still turning at the thought of shots — and laughing maniacally both at our big wins and our bigger losses. The Vegas trip we'd been planning for ages... Vegas...

“Marco?” I whispered. “Marco, wake up.” I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, but he sleepily waved his hand and swatted me away.

“Mm,” was all he said.

“Marco, wake up, dammit,” I said.

“No,” he murmured and turned his head away. As he did, he moaned.

My stomach rumbled and I returned to my seat before I fainted. With my vision blurring and sharpening in random pulses, the cabin spinning around me, tilting like I was on a boat in the middle of a storm, I put my head in my hands and blew out a breath of air.

Where the hell were we going? The Gulf of Mexico? *Oh shit. Is this a long-haul flight?* I looked at the screen again and waited for the weather forecast to pass. The plane against a blue backdrop appeared again and my chest squeezed tight.

The next image, zoomed out with our destination in sight, was about to show up. I'd missed it earlier.

"...could have danced with you all night, ta-da-da-dee-da-dee-daaaah..." Marco murmured in his sleep.

I looked at him. He was kind of pale. How much had we drunk last night? Had that been last night?

I stood again, crossed the short space between our chairs, and grabbed Marco's face.

"Mm... No..." His voice was weak and groggy. I didn't pay the words any mind.

Marco's lips were cracked and dry, skin a little gray, eyes shut. His arms were limp, legs spread apart. One of his arms was hanging from the chair, the other rested on his chest, rising and falling slowly with his shallow breaths.

"You're dehydrated," I said, my brain somehow still working through all the mist that enveloped it. I pushed my headache away and made myself think about what Marco needed.

I looked around the cabin. The last of my water was gone. Thirst dried my mouth, but Marco must have felt worse.

I looked beyond Marco's chair where there was a small door giving us privacy. "Stay there," I said to Marco as if he was about to wander away. As if he could even walk...

I slid the door to the left and poked my head through. The hallway was only wide enough for a flight attendant to push

their cart through, but it was empty. “Sorry,” I called. “Excuse me?”

A young man, at least six feet tall with wavy hair on top and faded sides, dimples, and a bright smile appeared on the left end of the hallway. “How may I help you, Sir?”

“I need a bottle of water,” I croaked. Fuck, I was thirsty. “Make it two, please.”

“Got it,” the flight attendant said and scurried away.

I looked left and right again. There were curtains on both sides of the hallway, so I couldn’t see anything. There was, however, another door, exactly like ours, to my right. I figured it was another private cabin.

This had to be a really big plane. Where the hell were we flying? The Gulf of Mexico? And why? The last I could remember was Marco pulling his pockets inside out and shrugging at the money he’d left at the roulette table. I couldn’t remember leaving the casino, let alone boarding a flight.

The handsome flight attendant returned with two bottles of water in his hands. “How are you enjoying the suite so far, Sir?”

“Perfect,” I said with the broadest of grins as if not to let the guy know I had no clue why the hell I was even here.

“May I interest you in some lunch?” he asked.

My stomach turned again. “Hell no. I mean... No. Thank you.”

“Very well,” the attendant said. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

I murmured my thanks and slid the door shut before I knelt by Marco’s chair. I cracked the first bottle open and took a sip of deliciously cold water to save myself from burning from the inside, then gently lifted Marco’s head.

“Come on,” I said. “Open up.”

“Huh?” Marco moved his head away, eyes still closed, a small frown touching his brow.

“Stop fussing, goddammit,” I said. “Just have some water.”

“Oh,” he said. “Mm.” Slowly, he half-opened one of his eyes and parted his lips as I lifted his head a little higher. Careful not to let him choke on the water, I allowed a slow stream into his mouth.

It felt like it lasted an hour. Marco swallowed sip after sip until he emptied the bottle, then licked his lips.

“Thanks,” he said, voice still groggy. “You’re great.”

“And you’re still drunk,” I said as it dawned on me.

I grabbed the other bottle of water, downed it without a pause for air, and stumbled toward my chair where I crashed, pulled the back down, and let the darkness take me away.

elle

Something shook.

Actually, something was shaking *me*. And that something was my best friend in the world.

I woke up with a start, half sitting up.

“Oh good,” Marco said, still bending over me. “You’re alive.”

I scratched my head and looked around the cabin. “So, it wasn’t a drunken dream, then, huh?”

“What wasn’t?” he asked.

“Never mind,” I said as I shifted in the chair and straightened my back. “What time is it?”

“Ten past four,” Marco said and returned to his chair. “How’s your head?”

“How’s yours?” I asked. “You were still drunk two hours ago.”

“I’m all good now.” He grinned.

“How are you never hungover?” I asked and rubbed my eyes. “Also... What the hell is happening?”

“Fasten your seatbelt, first,” Marco said as he did his.

“Why?” I asked.

“We’re landing,” he said. His signature casual smile combined with the light and cheerful tone he almost never abandoned never irked me. Well, never until now. He fastened his seatbelt and started turning a ring on his finger.

I lifted the back of the seat and buckled up, then dug my fingernails into the armrests. “Okay. We’re landing. Got it. I

just have one question.”

Marco looked at me expectantly. “Yeah?”

“Where the hell are we?” My voice was a little harsher than I’d meant and Marco raised an eyebrow. He was the calm, cool-headed one in our friendship. I was exactly the opposite.

“Santo Domingo,” he said plainly.

My heart skipped a beat. “We’re in the Dominican Republic? Marco, what the hell?”

He laughed out loud. “You remember nothing, huh?”

“You do?” I looked around the cabin when the voice of the flight attendant reached through the door, asking us to lift the window blinds. They were all up.

Marco shrugged. “A lot more than you do, it seems.”

“Care to share?” I asked.

Marco straightened the back of the seat and got ready for the landing. “I’m starving,” he said. “But the itinerary has us on the road as soon as we land. Do you think we’ll get to buy a bagel or something?”

I pursed my lips and said nothing. He was doing what he always did when push came to shove. The old ‘confuse and avoid’ tactic. He’d mastered it long before I’d even met him.

We sat in silence as the plane dipped and dipped. Finally, I sighed. “I’m sorry I snapped.”

“It’s cool,” he said, his voice already more cheerful. “Every marriage has its challenges.”

My brow wrinkled as I frowned. Time slowed down as I lifted my gaze to meet Marco's, then dragged along his body until it landed on the ring on Marco's finger. Marco didn't wear rings. Except, he wore one now. "Uh..." I looked up and found Marco's expression morphing from playful to horrified.

"Shit," he whispered. "You don't remember that, either."

My eyes widened in shock as I lifted my hand and looked at the silver ring on my finger.

"Oh, shit," Marco said again. "Stefan, I need you to stay calm."

I opened my mouth but said nothing. My head cocked to one side as my gaze darted between our rings. They matched. "Marco..." My voice was thin.

The things I knew for a fact were pretty slim. We'd been in Las Vegas for a long weekend before the start of the semester; we'd gambled our allowances away; we'd gotten drunk enough that I couldn't remember boarding a flight to the Dominican Republic; and...

"Marco, did we get...married?" I whispered in horror.

Marco took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

CHAPTER ONE

Off To Vegas



THREE DAYS EARLIER

Dad squeezed my shoulder and took a deep breath. “I wish we’d spent more time together, Stefan.” It was followed, as always, by a sigh.

We stood at the wraparound deck of his summer house gazing at the vast backyard bordered by a forest. He rarely spent any time there except when I was visiting.

“But that’s life,” Dad added in a somber voice.

I held my breath and said nothing. It might not have sounded like a big deal, but this also wasn’t my first time being baited into this conversation. The reason we hadn’t spent more than a week together since winter holidays was because my mother had taken me on a ten-day cruise before I flew out to see Dad.

And he wasn't happy about that at all. Not that he would say so outright. Nothing was ever as simple as that. Nothing could ever be said in a few precise words if it could be said in many vague ones.

"Next time, maybe," I said instead. "I'll probably visit you for Thanksgiving. Or Christmas."

Shit. I'd fallen into the trap despite staring right at it.

Dad grumbled under his mustache and squeezed my shoulder tighter. Yes, he loved me; and it was a mutual feeling. But he also understood that I hadn't yet decided who to visit next. Would it be Mom? Would it be him?

If it were just up to me, I would visit neither. Despite all our messy love, we liked each other best from afar. To be precise, Mom and Dad hated each other less from afar.

"Whatever you feel like, Son," Dad said. I knew it was genuine, but I always felt some sting in his words.

Oh, it wasn't just Dad. This ten-day cruise with Mom? Holy shit, that had really worn my patience thin. Dad was probably hoping I would see him first next time so that he could empty my batteries before I saw Mom. It was always the same with them.

For ten days, Mom had chipped away at my nerves by overcompensating. Had I earned it? Hell yeah. It was a wonder my hair wasn't gray after all the hell they'd unloaded on me when I was ten. Was it always obvious that she was trying to make up for it just a bit more than Dad was? Yes; yes, it was.

Not once did either one of them ask about the other. God forbid the One Who Shall Not Be Named is mentioned unless it was the only way to save my life or whatever. Even then, I felt like they would both need a moment to weigh the outcomes.

“How about a ski trip this winter?” Dad asked.

I swallowed a sigh. Me on skis was a nightmare scenario. It would result in several broken limbs and an expulsion from the resort. “We can put a pin on that one,” I said.

“I’ll have Ashley check some places just in case,” Dad said. “Reservations can be canceled.”

I turned my head to look at him and gave him a lip-sealed smile and a nod. “You do that.”

Dad stood in silence, nodding his head as he planned it. He had always been the planner, the organizer of events that might or might not come to fruition. This one in particular would probably result in me having to pack a suitcase around Christmas and learn how to ski. Or break a leg trying.

Going north wasn’t really my idea of a winter holiday. I would always rather plan something nice with Marco and the guys and head somewhere warm. Hudson had spent his winter holidays in Cyprus last January and returned a fresh man.

“The Carpathian Mountains in Romania are supposed to be beautiful,” Dad said. “We’ve never been. Why don’t we just take two weeks and fly out?”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “Romania? In Europe? On the other side of the planet?” My voice thinned with every word I said.

Dad looked at me like I was crazy. “I don’t think there’s more than one Romania, Son.”

I stared at him in terror. “You want a father-son trip to Romania?” I asked, just to clarify. “And skiing?”

Dad shrugged and took a small step back.

Fuck, I’d been harsh, but he was wearing me thin. “It’s just an idea, Stefan.”

I dropped my head down and squeezed the bridge of my nose. “Ah... Look, I appreciate the effort, but isn’t that a bit much even for you? I get that I spent over a week with Mom and only five days with you. We’ll hang out more next time, but seriously, Dad... We’re not gonna go to Europe. What the hell?”

Dad pursed his lips, his mustache drooping down. “Why wouldn’t we? Any time now, you’re going to find yourself a nice boy and want to spend more time with him. Hell, you might find one before winter. Am I crazy to want to have a good experience with my son before he truly leaves the nest?”

My phone buzzed just then and I pulled it out of my pocket. “My ride’s here,” I said. “Can we... Can we talk about this another time?”

Dad said nothing for a long while. We stood in awkward silence as my taxi waited by the main gates of Dad’s estate. It

was quite a walk from here and it was burning under my feet. I was meeting my friends in Vegas this very evening, celebrating the fact most of us somehow got through two years of school already.

“I know what you think, Stefan, but this isn’t a competition.” Dad tucked his hands in his pockets and slouched.

He said it wasn’t, but it always fucking was. He was only half my problem, though, because Mom was exactly the same. Sometimes I thought that their similarities were the bigger problem during their marriage than their differences. Sometimes, it was how they both behaved identically that resulted in fights.

“If I say I’ll think about it — and I mean seriously give it some thought — would that be alright?” I asked, feeling more than a little guilty about leaving on this note. Somehow, I always left them feeling guilty. Either I hadn’t been around enough or I’d spent more time with the other one or the time I had spent with them wasn’t as valuable and rich.

Dad pulled one hand out of his pocket and placed it on my upper back. “Of course, Son. We can talk about it later.”

“Good,” I said. “I love you, Dad.” And I stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and hugged him. I meant it. I did love him. He was a great dad after their divorce and after the dust settled. Around the time I turned eleven, they’d both had enough rest from the toxicity that had rotted their hearts

away that they could finally focus on being good parents. It was only the first decade of my life that fucking sucked.

Dad saw me out, following me through his spacious, open plan ground floor, and to the other side of the house. My luggage was already gone, though I didn't see any staff. It wasn't like it had once been, when I knew all their names and all their stories. I visited here so rarely that we never moved beyond a polite greeting and etiquette.

“Have a safe flight, Stefan,” Dad said as we walked down the gravel path through the huge front lawn toward the gates. “And don't get carried away.”

I turned my head to look at him with a raised eyebrow. I wasn't one to often get carried away and he knew it.

He chuckled and shrugged again. “I was young once. Vegas can make you do things without thinking them through.”

I laughed awkwardly. “I'll keep that in mind.” Though it wasn't such a risky trip like he made it sound. We all had allowance buddies to keep tabs on how much we gambled away. We weren't going there for the wins. We were going there for the thrills.

And I sure as hell wasn't going to rent a boy off the street or whatever the hell was going through my dad's mind. If we catch a striptease show, that would be the extent of it. Though I wasn't all too eager to do that much, either.

The thing was, Marco was already in Vegas. After two weeks apart, I was itching to just have fun with him. The

whole group, actually, but Marco was a bit more special to me. And the fact that he and I had a certain relationship that I had with nobody else was a big factor, too.

The ride to the airport, the boarding, the flight, all happened somewhere in the periphery of my consciousness. What I was fully aware of was the skip to my heartbeat. Two weeks was the longest I'd been away from Marco since the summer before our senior year in high school. We'd all gone off because our families insisted it wouldn't be the same after that. "You'll be eighteen and you won't want your old dad to drag you around." And there had been some truth to it.

Just a year after that, our entire group had gone to a summer camp for two or so months. And something special happened. Something I would never forget in a million years. Marco and I had been skinny-dipping in a lake when everyone else was busy with tug of war or whatever. We'd swam and sprayed each other and wrestled in the water, trying to dunk one another. We'd somehow gotten our legs tangled and fingers threaded and parts of us touched. Chests, hips... Cocks.

And neither of us pulled back.

By that time, we'd already smuggled some beer into our bunk and gotten tipsy one night, so we had a history of keeping each other's secrets.

As our bodies touched, we stopped laughing abruptly, but our smiles stayed on. I'd seen him naked a million times before in the locker room. I'd seen all of them. And still, something was different that time.

We didn't kiss. We didn't do anything more than look into each other's eyes as the moment dragged on and on, both of us reluctant to let go. I couldn't remember how we ended up pulling away from one another, but I remembered how I felt when we did. Emotions soared through me that I didn't even need to swim; they'd kept me afloat.

It wasn't until later that night that we crossed a pretty big bridge. And again, my memories of it were hazy, but I remembered clearly that a moan came from Marco's phone. I remembered that we scooted closer on his bed and watched the video. Both of us were fully dressed and neither did anything for a long while.

"I like this guy," Marco told me five minutes into the video. The action was just beginning at that point. The smaller of the two was on his knees and the jock still had his underwear on.

"I like both of them," I admitted.

Marco let a chuckle out and we watched the video in silence, doing nothing. We were barely breathing as the waistband of the jock's underwear went down and a long, thick cock flashed on the screen. The twink wore a grin on his face as he licked his lips and I glanced at Marco, whose eyes were wide and lower lip stuck between his teeth.

I couldn't remember who made the first move. I just knew that Marco had his hand on his crotch lazily and, in an instant, we swapped places. His hand was on me, mine on him.

How he managed to hold his phone up through all of that was a mystery to me, but we'd given each other the most

explosive orgasms ever with nothing but our hands.

Suffice to say, we would annul that statement soon enough. That night, we'd discovered just how far our friendship stretched. We'd discovered how comfortable we were with one another.

For the rest of that summer, we showed each other our favorite videos, talked about our favorite actors, dared each other to see different kinks, then talked about them whenever we were far away from the rest of our friends. They would tease us if they knew. They would think we were a couple.

We weren't.

At the tail-end of that summer, Marco and I had a conversation. Neither of us had ever made a move to turn our friendship into something more, but we both started to suspect that the other one might want that. Suspect or fear, it was the same to us.

"I don't believe in relationships," I admitted to him a week before college began. He'd known that fact about me, on some level, but I had never spoken the words aloud until then. "I've seen them at their worst, you know? I've seen what happens."

"Yeah, I get that," Marco said.

"So... You don't actually want us to...date?" I asked. The idea of dating him terrified me. Just the word alone made everything look different. If we suddenly started *dating*, things would get complicated. Getting out of friendly hand jobs was a helluva lot easier than getting out of a relationship. Nobody's

heart was ever broken if they didn't have someone to lend them a hand. Or mouth, as we soon discovered.

“Hell no,” Marco said. “Why make things official?”

And that was when I knew I would love him forever. As a friend, of course. A friend who sometimes got naked with me and blew my mind. We haven't talked about it since. We went with the flow, exploring these messy and complicated things with each other instead of doing them with total strangers.

Even now, I couldn't imagine a life in which you entered this strange and wonderful world of pleasure with someone you didn't trust. Guys and girls my age had made mistakes so many times, losing their virginites with people that dumped their asses the next morning. Me? Hell no. I'd taken care of all that with someone who would never dump my ass because we weren't boyfriends. And if we wanted, we could just stop fooling around and nothing would change.

So, when I got to the hotel in Vegas that evening, Marco was the first person I looked for. It wasn't a disappointment when Dayton was the one I found instead. Big like a mountain, blond, and with a face that belonged on the cover of a magazine, Dayton started laughing as soon as he saw me. He spread his arms and embraced me just as I dragged my suitcase through the lobby.

“I sensed your fuck-off-karma,” Dayton said as he squeezed the air out of me.

“It's running strong today,” I admitted. I was still shifting between feeling guilty and annoyed. On one hand, Dad was

forcing me into something ridiculous, at least partially to show how much better it is to hang out with him. On the other hand, I shot him down when he felt like we didn't have a lot of time together. It was a pickle.

"They didn't serve martinis on the flight?" Dayton teased. "Eh. It was like an hour. Guess they wouldn't."

"You're making it worse," I mock-snapped. "Am I the last one?"

"Nah, Caleb and Jayden are going to be late. Caleb is doing some reshoots on that show and has a play tonight."

"You have to give it to him, the guy really works hard," I said. It was admirable that he didn't ditch theater as soon as his first TV appearance happened. He squeezed in as many plays as he could. "Everyone else is here, though?"

"Yep. Hudson and Tate got here an hour ago, said they would take a quick shower, but I haven't seen them since." Dayton shrugged as if neither of us knew where Hudson and Tate were and what they were doing.

I rolled my eyes. "A mystery for the ages."

Dayton pressed the tip of his finger against my chest. "You, mister, need to check in and get ready. Marco won't even come close to the casino until you're there to keep a tab on his allowance."

I chuckled and agreed, then did just as he told me. My luggage went up and I followed with my key. We'd been planning this trip for weeks and looking forward to it for far

longer. Most of us had two-bedroom suites, except for the couples who shared a bed.

I shared my suite with Marco, obviously. So, when I entered the room and tipped the young man who'd carried my luggage, I found minimal traces of Marco being here. We didn't leave the same clues, though. Had I arrived earlier and Marco joined, he would find clothes on every chair, spilled chips on the kitchen counter, underwear at the entrance to the bathroom, a wet towel on the back of the sofa, and so on.

But because Marco had arrived earlier, I found a pristine room that showed no signs of ever being entered. And while the staff of the hotel must have done a great job cleaning this place, I knew for a fact that Marco had gone around and made sure there was no dust behind books and that all the appliances in the kitchen were unplugged for safety and efficiency.

He was the sort of guy who could juggle a million little tasks in his head, do them all in the most ideal order, and shrug like it was nothing.

Right now, as I leaned into one of the bedrooms, I found a copy of *Call Me By Your Name* on the nightstand and it was all that could indicate that this was Marco's bedroom. His suitcase was, no doubt, packed in the closet where he'd already sorted all his clothes. He'd probably showered and ordered laundry services for what he'd worn already.

I walked into the bathroom and, sure enough, the glass of the walk-in shower was wet.

It felt so familiar to come to a place he already occupied. Nothing surprised me, really. Nothing could. Marco was particular and organized, while I was the polar opposite. And he wouldn't be surprised in a few hours when he returns here only to find that my suitcase is gaping in the middle of the living room with half my stuff still inside, only tossed around because I was digging for my favorite pair of boxer-briefs.

After I washed the stink from flying off of myself, I dressed a little flamboyantly to kick things off. My shirt was pearly white with a stiff collar. The top third of it was unbuttoned so I could show off my pecs unashamedly. All my friends were certified studs, so whenever I fell into a bit of a gym habit, I was proud to show off.

Again, Marco was a little different from them all. He'd spent a long time undernourished early on, until he was twelve and adopted by people who bothered to give him more than scraps of junk food. He was still built like Adonis, but he was all cut where most of the guys were bulky and defined.

I took the elevator and headed down. The hotel had it all, designed never to be left. A massive casino was in the back, a huge bar sprawled across half the ground floor, and there was even a club. Underneath it all was a spa and relaxation center, though I didn't expect we would spend much time there.

When the elevator door slid open, my heart tripped again. Two whole weeks had gone by and we were finally about to be reunited. The world was going back to normal.

CHAPTER TWO

Pushing Our Luck



I WAS SWIRLING A straw in the tall glass of my extra minty mojito when I felt a pair of eyes on the back of my head. I didn't need to look to know they were the bluest eyes there ever were.

I looked anyway because it had been two weeks since I'd last seen them. And when I did, they shone with mischief and excitement.

"Stefan," I squeaked and hopped off my barstool to hug my best friend.

"Marco," he said right into my ear as we clutched each other like we were trying not to fall. "Boy, am I glad to see you."

I laughed, but before I could say anything, Dayton sauntered closer to us. "Will you two just kiss already?"

“Shut up,” Stefan barked at him, though he was still very close to my ear, so I jerked away.

I shot Dayton a carefree look and shook my head.

“What? I’m only saying what we’re all thinking,” Dayton said with a shrug and tipped his glass back, pouring the last of his scotch down his throat. He cringed. “I think I’ll add some coke for the next round.”

I ignored Dayton and turned my attention back to Stefan. “How are they?”

Stefan shook his head and grabbed my sleeve, then pulled me back toward the bar.

“That bad, huh?” I asked. Since I’d met him, there hadn’t been a time he visited one of his parents without returning a broken guy.

“I’m reinstating the old rule not to talk about them,” Stefan said and waved at the bartender, then gestured at my mojito and lifted two fingers. “I’ll gladly put my hand into a beehive if that’s what it takes.”

I chuckled, though it was dry and emotionless. But I also knew my job for the evening; keep Stefan entertained and occupied.

Hudson and Tate strolled in and Dayton, who was just sitting back next to me, roared with laughter. “Got cowboied again, did you?” he asked Hudson.

Tate let out a strangled sound and looked at Hudson, who smirked. “What?”

“You have that cowlick again,” I explained.

Hudson’s eyes widened for the shortest of moments before he pulled himself together and patted the back of his head. They’d obviously had some action and Hudson had been lying on his back for a long while if the pillow managed to do that to him.

Stefan raised his finger to make a point. “Cowlick aside, what the hell is up with those wrists?”

Hudson, with a hand still patting the back of his head, pursed his lips to suppress a smile, but Tate snatched his hand and examined it. “Shit,” he hushed.

“We’re not kink shaming,” Dayton pitched in. “In fact, I’m buying the next round. Gotta celebrate when your friends dare to tie each other up a bit. Am I right?”

I face-palmed myself, shaking my head as I did so. Hudson squeezed Stefan’s shoulder in a way of greeting and Tate gave a curt nod. He was, more or less, one of us now. Maybe not as generous with sharing his feelings, but always quick to joke at someone’s expense. A month into Hudson and Tate’s relationship, Dayton was the first to crack a joke back at Tate. Silence had fallen around our common room in anticipation. I had been sure Tate would take it the wrong way, especially because it had been one of Dayton’s dick jokes. But, after a heartbeat that had seemed to last an eternity, Tate had shrugged. “If you wanna measure them, you’ll go home crying,” he’d said, deadpan, and a totally new era began.

Even so, I often thought that Tate maybe felt like a satellite of the group, sticking near Hudson for protection even if none of us had wronged him. But with every new day and every new joke, he became a more important part of our group.

“You guys are all prudes,” Dayton said, picking a squabble. “But guess what? I’m not. And I’m going to have the best time of us all.” He grinned and looked around the bar as if seeking who to hit on next.

“Sorry, buddy. I think Hudson and Tate beat you already,” I said reassuringly, patting his back. I glanced at Stefan and realized he’d already had half his cocktail, then turned back to Dayton. “If you’re buying us all a round, you better hurry. Stefan’s thirsty.”

Dayton shot us both a mischievous look. “Stefan is *thirsty*? It’s like you’re intentionally setting me up for a joke.”

Stefan narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you dare.”

Dayton swallowed and called the bartender over. We all ordered and Dayton said we’d take our drinks with us to the casino in the back.

Walking into it felt like being transported to another planet. Where the bar was rich with ceiling-high windows and subdued lights to give off cozy feelings, the casino was bright, totally cut-off from the world with no windows anywhere. It was like a maze of entertainment, bombarding your senses with a sweet promise of fun. “Come in,” it spoke to us. “Let yourself go wild.”

“Dad told me not to go too wild,” Stefan said for my ears only, scoffing. “As if I’m some daredevil.”

I laughed at that. Stefan was a lot of things — chaotic, messy, a great kisser on those rare occasions we practiced kissing — but he was not someone who made important choices in the spur of the moment. His whims were way more mild; like replacing regular beer with light because of some TikTok.

“What do you think he meant by that?” I asked.

Stefan shrugged. “It’s just a dad thing. Advice giving, I guess.” We queued to buy us some chips at the entrance and I noticed Dayton was generous with his allowance. In the back of my head, I wondered who his accountability buddy was. Probably Justin. But where Justin was now, I had no clue.

My parents were nothing like Stefan’s. For one, they were happily married. Another major point of difference was — and Stefan couldn’t let go of this — that he was an accident. My folks had kept trying for years until they decided to adopt and I was the lucky winner of that lottery. They’d met me by chance and somehow, through all the mess my life was at the tender age of twelve, they managed to love me. It still bewildered me that they had, especially when I couldn’t love myself.

I’d already figured out I was gay by the time they met me at the orphanage. It wasn’t my proudest moment, but I’d come out to them out of spite when it had become obvious they were interested in taking me in. It was as though I wanted them to

know how well and truly fucked up I was. It was like I tried telling them they didn't really want me. Why adopt a twelve-year-old kid who wouldn't give them the normal life they were looking for? Especially when the orphanage was full to the brim with younger kids.

But the more I'd tried pushing them away, the more they wanted me. They kept visiting, asking me about my life, asking if there were any boys I liked as though it was no big deal. Yeah, there had been a boy I liked; the very boy who I saw and realized that I liked boys. No, my life hadn't been nice. A series of foster parents who had behaved like cheap bed and breakfast owners had been all I'd known until then.

Stefan turned around and grinned at me. His mood was growing brighter with every minute that passed. He took a swig of his drink and his blue eyes glistened with disobedience.

Sometimes, when he looked at me, he looked like a portrait. His back was fairly broad and he turned his head around, looking at me over his shoulder. His pearly white teeth — all natural, I might add — with black eyebrows and hair so brown it almost looked black, were in such contrast with his shining eyes.

Out of the two of us, I was the one who carried an air of broodiness. My hair was longer, falling on either side of my face. More often than not, a wavy, black lock of it fell over my eye. Stefan had once called me an emo dirty fantasy and I liked it. It turned me on.

Everything he did and said turned me on.

Even now, as he broke eye contact and stepped up to the counter to buy the chips, his presence made my heart flutter. I'd missed him. We hadn't been apart for this long in three years.

When we all finally had our chips and walked on, Stefan fell back to walk by my side. Dayton was strolling with all the confidence in the world, measuring where to put his money.

"I'll be you my ass, he's going to burn through his allowance by the end of the night," Stefan said.

I chuckled. "You know, you don't need to mask it with a bet. I'm happy to have your ass."

Stefan shot me an excited, dirty look and bit his lower lip. He had a way of doing it that fully earned him the title of a fuckboy. He'd close his teeth around it, then let it slide out. His grins were crooked, ever so slightly imperfect, just like the front two teeth that were a little bigger. He used these imperfections, probably without knowing it, to pull at my heartstrings. "I'll still bet you."

"Fine. Just know that you're basically serving your ass on a silver platter," I said with a casual shrug like we were talking about ten bucks.

Dayton's ears wiggled and he looked over his shoulder at us. *Shit. He'd overheard that part.* "And if I don't? Will it be Marco's ass or what?"

Stefan pursed his lips and I just laughed.

Dayton didn't push it. He let his gaze linger on us a few moments longer, then shook his head with a smile creeping to his face.

What Stefan and I did was purely platonic. We didn't want the other guys to know every last detail about it because they would get all soft and romantic on us. For a group that wore the name 'Fuckboys' with pride, they were all a bunch of swooning softies. They wouldn't get it. They would practically marry us.

And if there was one thing Stefan detested, it was marriage. I couldn't blame him, either. Soon after we'd met, he'd opened up and told me everything about his parents' divorce. He'd told me how his dad would drink and brood until the room temperature went down because of his mood. He'd told me how his mom would put out cigarettes in her half finished dinners in return. He'd told me how much they had made each other physically sick when they were near and how much better they were after the divorce.

What he hadn't told me, but I knew anyway, was that he blamed himself. They'd stayed together to have him, though there had been red flags in their marriage already. They'd expected a baby would solve it all and Stefan solved nothing. He'd only prolonged their misery until the very air in the house became poisonous and nothing could survive.

Now that his mood was better, I was determined to keep it that way. "Let's let Dayton lose his money on blackjack and rent boys while we have some roulette fun."

“I like the sound of that,” Dayton announced. “Do they deliver or do I have to drive through shady quarters?”

Stefan took me by my elbow and dragged me away. Hudson and Tate followed us. As I looked around, I found London and Gabriel moving after Dayton.

Time sped up from that moment on. More and more of our friends joined. The groups merged when Dayton lost all his chips on blackjack and half a dozen turned to a dozen. We gathered around the roulette table, cheering Stefan’s lucky streak.

All the moments merged and converged. Tate announced the next round was on him as a slot machine screamed and the sound of coins filled everyone’s ears.

We moved from one game to another as our group grew bigger with strangers observing our tomfoolery. Several new people tagged along, exchanging glances with us, nodding affirmations, and simply having fun.

A couple in their mid-twenties, Hugh and Christine, joined our roulette table after we accidentally exchanged a few glances. We were a welcoming bunch, even if we didn’t always look like it, so when they joined us to watch Stefan’s lucky streak, we bombarded them with questions. They’d been together for a little over two years. This was their first time in Vegas. They’d seen a drag show the night before and highly recommended it.

And when Stefan miraculously cleared the table yet again, I dropped the conversation, grabbed him with both my arms,

lifted him, and spun him around. We laughed and celebrated by doing a shot, and Christine asked the question everyone always asked us.

“How long have you two been dating?” It was as innocent as questions went, except...

I shrugged. “We’re, uh... We’re not dating.”

“You’re not?” Her eyes widened in embarrassment. “I’m so sorry. I thought...”

Stefan waved his hand. “Don’t worry about it. Everyone makes the same mistake.” He laughed and glanced at me, but something was a little off in the way he looked at me. It lasted a bit too long and there was an air of softness that Stefan didn’t share with everyone all the time.

“I don’t know why I thought that,” Christine said.

I jumped in. “Really, it’s not a big deal. We know we look like a couple.”

She took the out I offered and laughed it off.

“Maybe you should be, though,” Dayton said out of nowhere.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” I said with a shrug. Being ambiguous was always better than trying to explain. Besides, it wasn’t like we could just flip a switch and become boyfriends. It didn’t work like that. Not for us, at least.

Stefan was the only person I needed in my life in the way he was present. He was, in essence, my everything. He was the

best guy I knew and risking losing him to a relationship scared the life out of me. Because, if we were dumb enough to try, it would end in a disaster. He rightfully had plenty of reservations when it came to dating. And me? I'd already lucked out once in my life, when my parents adopted me against all odds. I couldn't hope to score a guy as awesome as Stefan for some ridiculous happy ending.

We were good the way we were; best friends with benefits. Who could ask for more?

In one drunken moment, I spotted Dayton throwing his arm over someone's shoulders. The guy looked a few years older than us with a cropped beard and an impeccable haircut. The guy, his eyes obviously glued to Dayton, grinned as a younger, smaller guy joined the two of them. Swingers, I figured and chuckled to myself. Dayton's expression was of mild surprise and total ecstasy when he threw his other arm over the younger guy.

A moment later, I couldn't find any of them.

As our minds dimmed with alcohol, Stefan decided it would be wise to go all in and I, as his accountability buddy, decided he was right. He tossed the dice as we all held our breaths. It seemed to last an eternity and nobody moved.

I didn't even know what the hell happened, but the outraged groans and desperate wails pulled the outcome into focus. Stefan stood, eyes wide in shock, a massive grin on his face quivering, and supporting hands reaching to shake his shoulders. He'd lost it all.

“Holy shit,” he said casually. “This actually felt good.” His gaze met mine and every trace of possible regret was wiped away. Expensive, yes, but this last toss was the most fun he’d had the entire night. “Well, I’m out for the night.”

Drunk and confused, I managed to pull my thoughts together for long enough to suggest returning to our room. Hudson and London wanted another round, but Stefan agreed to join me.

We left the casino with much lighter pockets. Stefan’s were as empty as Dayton’s, but we were too drunk to serve asses on any kind of platters tonight. Instead, we quietly found our room and I swiped the key for us.

“I needed this,” Stefan said quietly.

“I know you did,” I said. That was why I hadn’t stopped him.

Inside the room, Stefan turned all the lights on and headed for the mini fridge. He grabbed two bottles of water and tossed one my way. I caught it, somehow, even if my awareness of everything happening around me was delayed by a second or two.

Stefan crashed on the sofa and lifted his feet onto the coffee table. “Did you have a good time these past two weeks?” he asked. We hadn’t been alone since he’d arrived. Being alone always helped when we talked about personal things like these.

“I don’t want to rub it in,” I said as I sat next to him and downed half the bottle in one go.

“It’s not your fault if it was good, Marco,” he said seriously. “I don’t want everyone around me to suffer just because it sucked for me.”

“Still.” I shrugged. After a few moments of silence, I spoke again. “It was nice to spend some time with my folks.”

“See? I am *happy* for you,” Stefan said and reached over with his hand. It ran through my hair; something he liked doing. “Now say you missed me or I’ll make you.” A smile crossed his face and my heart leaped.

“I missed you like hell,” I promised. “Stuff’s just better when you’re there.”

Stefan rested his head on my shoulder and chuckled. “Keep telling me how I’m the best,” he joked.

I snorted and rested my head against his. “You are, though.”

“Nah,” he said, shifting his body a little to get more comfortable. “That’s all you, Marco.”

As his voice faded away, so did the reality around us. Like someone had struck me on the back of my head, I fell asleep. The last thing I remembered doing was making sure the bottle of water was closed before I let go.

Whatever happened after that was a mystery to me. All I knew was that I woke up for the briefest of moments and realized that we were lying down on the sofa. Stefan, always a

messy sleeper, was lying on top of me, head resting on my chest.

Before I knew it, I was falling back asleep. And as I did, I moved my hand around to scratch Stefan's back lazily in circular motions, just the way he said always soothed him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Bachelor Party



I SQUEEZED MY EYES shut the moment a ray of sunlight pierced my brain. “Fuck,” I murmured.

“Good morning to you, too,” Marco said.

My hand moved around and found a cushion. I covered my face with it and groaned. “Who let me drink so much last night?”

Marco laughed. “Whoever he is, he made you some coffee now.”

I dropped the cushion onto the floor and blinked. “He did?”

Marco laughed out loud and spun away to face the small kitchen counter. He turned back around holding two mugs, steam rising from them.

“I swear, you are the fucking best,” I croaked, my voice sore from the night before. “How...? How did we fall asleep here?”

Marco shook his head. “We’re such dummies, man. Two perfect bedrooms with big, fancy beds, and we slept on the couch.”

I strained and suffered, but I got up. And that was going to be the biggest event of the day, I swore to myself; just succeeding at getting up. It was good enough for me.

Marco placed the mugs on the coffee table and sat down into a recliner, letting out a satisfied sigh. “Hungover?”

“Not sure yet,” I said and rubbed my eyes. “I might just be dead.”

“Nah. You’re still with us,” he said. “Do you, er, remember anything?”

I reached for the mug and blew in it, then took the smallest, safest of sips. It felt like the mere smell of coffee turned my brain on. Well, tried to, anyway. “Ugh. I remember I got carried away.”

Marco laughed out loud. “I love the irony.”

“You don’t need to remind me,” I muttered and took a bigger sip. I was pretty sure this was exactly what Dad had warned me about. “Well, now that it’s out of the way, we can have a nice couple of days.”

“So, no more getting carried away?” Marco asked and nodded comically hard. “Got it.”

I squinted at him. “You don’t sound convinced.”

He shrugged. “Sorry, I’m a shit accountability buddy. You were having a great time, I couldn’t take that away.”

I took a long swig of my coffee and sighed. “It was fun. Now, I’m ready for boring.”

“Boring. Right. I can provide boring,” Marco said with a quick smile. His eyes twinkled like he saw some joke I wasn’t getting, but I let it slide. “There’s a sauna in this hotel.”

My ears perked up. “Hell yeah. I need a detox.”

Marco nodded and emptied his mug, then disappeared into his bedroom. A few minutes later, he returned, changed into casual clothes, and gestured for the door with his head.

See, Marco had already sorted his clothes in categories. I was sure that if I looked into his bedroom, the clothes he’d taken off wouldn’t be on the floor. Me? I didn’t even bother. I emptied my mug and undressed down to my underwear in front of him. He’d seen more of me in the locker room, let alone in our late night thrills. My shirt ended up on the back of the sofa, my pants down under the table. I dug through my open suitcase in the middle of the room and found a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, threw them on, and was ready.

I wasn’t going to psychoanalyze my best friend to his face, but I knew where his obsession with order came from. He’d been thrown out of houses for less than just a messy bed. “Unmannered little shit,” one guy had told him after two weeks of foster parenting because, for three days in a row, Marco ate his dinner before saying his graces. I suppose calling a child a little piece of shit was alright if the graces

were said every evening. Like a transaction; I pray every day and I get to do whatever the fuck I want.

But Marco had gotten a loving family and a big group of friends in the last eight or nine years of his life. I felt like he should have relaxed by now.

The reason he was so well ordered and careful wasn't only because he liked it. He couldn't care less that our dorm room perpetually looked like a hurricane had just raged through it because of me. Oh no. Marco was so careful because he felt he needed to prove his worth. He needed everyone to know he was good enough to be kept around, even if nobody would look twice should he make a mistake.

I wondered if he was permanently stuck in this feeling of dread that something bad would happen to him if he wasn't careful. Or if he was so used to it that he didn't notice it.

The sauna was a lot more than just a sauna. The entire underground complex was one sprawling spa center with artificial daylight, budding flora, and tranquility soaked into the very walls and foundation of the hotel. Had I been brought here blindfolded, there would be no way of knowing we were underground. Sure, there were no windows, but there was so much going on with different rooms for various activities that one didn't notice the lack of the windows unless they knew what to look for.

The greens, blues, and turquoises, combined with bamboo and hardwood on top of tiles that reflected the light, gave the entire space a dreamy feel.

Like walking into a secret cove on some desolate, tropical island, we walked down the spacious hall to a changing room, got ourselves big, white towels, and stripped down. With towels around our waists, we made our first stop at one of the sauna rooms.

The heat and mugginess of the place made my skin slick with sweat by the time I crossed the dimly lit room to a wooden bench. Marco sat across from me, face to face, and let his head rest on the wooden paneling of the wall. He breathed steadily and I found myself biting my lip. Naturally lanky, Marco put a lot of work into his body. His chest and shoulders had broadened a lot since I'd met him and he had a pretty visible six-pack. His waist was narrow and cut with a V line leading down under the towel.

As his chest rose and fell with deep breaths, the thin layer of perspiration reflected the gentle light of the steam room. His legs were spread, though he was well covered all the way to his knees.

“This feels good,” he murmured.

The heat made my brain spin. It pulled my eyelids down and made me drowsy. All I could do was hum my agreement and close my eyes. The image of Marco's body was vibrant in front of me, even when I wasn't looking.

Not five minutes later, I opened my eyes at the sound of shifting, and found Marco adjusting his back against the wall. His hair was already tousled, his pale face now pink. “Sweaty suits you,” I blurted before I thought it through.

Marco let out a soft laugh. “Sweaty, tired, and naked suits you.”

I snorted. Yeah, I was all three of those things. And him mentioning it made my heart want to leap out of my chest.



Marco had known exactly how to lift my spirits. A day of tranquil, lazy relaxation had me ready for whatever the night might bring.

We steered clear of the casino, but the entire group filled the bar late that afternoon. Dayton was the most cheerful one of us all, as though he hadn't gambled away his entire casino allowance on the first night. We all still had some left, but we were poor in the desire to gamble department.

“I mean, it was all new to me, but I'm always down for a challenge,” he said about the night before. “And let me tell you, those guys are no cheapskates. By dawn, we emptied their mini-fridge. Man, it was wild.”

Marco, sitting next to me, shook his shoulders with laughter. He glanced at me and I found that never-ending spark of humor in his eyes. It made me wonder if tonight was the night. It had been a while, though for no particular reason, since we'd last had any sort of bedroom fun. And all this talk of threesomes was kind of doing it for me.

Maybe Marco wouldn't want to. He hadn't made a move in some time. Perhaps there was someone else who sparked his interest. I couldn't blame him. It was one of the things we were quietly aware of. Should one of us want something more, the other one had to understand. We'd never spoken those words, but we both knew they were true. I, for one, knew it better; Marco had no future with me. I wasn't serious relationship material. And if he ever as far as hinted that he liked someone, I would back off instantly. And I would be happy for him. I really would.

I looked around the large booth our group occupied. Hudson was nibbling on Tate's ear, while Tate was squirming and gently slapping Hudson's chest to tame him. London and Gabriel had a language of their own which mortals like us couldn't understand. They said the most mundane things like 'an engine light turning on the other week,' but they followed them with soft smiles and eyes pooling with adoration.

And then, there were Caleb and Jayden. They stormed in like the power couple that they were, ready to do business. Jayden probably had an entire suitcase of paperwork up in his room and Caleb was surely on the lookout for talent scouts to have a few drinks with.

"We're so sorry we're late, you guys," Caleb said as he blew out a breath of air. "I would have missed it if I could."

"How was playing Body In The Bag Number Two?" I asked.

Marco poked me in the ribs for that. Caleb had stayed behind to reshoot a scene for his guest appearance on one of those crime shows. We were all secretly hoping he would be the villain of the episode, but his non-disclosure agreement prevented him from revealing any details.

“You’d be surprised, but those bags don’t have air holes in them,” Caleb quipped.

“And yet, you’re still with us,” I said with mock-disappointment.

He took it in the spirit in which it was meant and grabbed his stomach as he laughed. Jayden scooted into the booth and yanked Caleb with him. “You’re all gonna have to have fun without me. I’ve got time for one drink. And even that one is going to have to be quick.”

“You don’t say,” I told Jayden.

He shot me a proud smile. “Gramps is counting on me to deliver.” That was Caleb’s grandfather and the family patriarch who was more or less retired from the family business. His say still carried a lot of weight, so when he demanded Jayden get an entry level position at the company, Caleb’s dad reluctantly allowed it. Even though Jayden had proved himself twice over and the things between Caleb and his dad were pretty smooth these days, Wallace Ellison still didn’t fully trust Jayden’s ability to handle high responsibility assignments.

“Can’t wait to see the look on Dad’s face on Thanksgiving,” Caleb said. “You’re going to blow his mind, babe.”

Jayden leaned in and kissed Caleb on the cheek.

Dayton picked up his tablet and lit up. “And joining us via satellite is our Andalonian correspondent and the royal court jester, Joshua Sterling,” he announced as he turned his tablet around for Josh to see everyone who was gathered here.

Joshua was yet another of our friends who had found his happy ending. Not only that, but he found it with an actual, real-world prince of a small kingdom wedged between Spain and France. Mateo, who we all knew as just another student at Highgate, turned out to be Mateo Garcia De Leon, Heir Apparent to the throne of Andalona. He also turned out to be a big softy for our very own Joshua.

Though we were trying to drink slowly, we kept finding the bottom of our glasses. Round after round, everyone, even Jayden who stuck around, talked over each other, joked, and laughed.

We listened to Joshua’s embarrassing fails while trying to speak Spanish around the Royal Palace. “So, I’m looking at Mateo’s valet, looking right into his eyes. What I’m supposed to say is *remera*, which means T-shirt. ‘I want that red T-shirt over there.’ To match Mateo’s pants, obviously. But, of course, I go ahead and say ‘*Quisiera la ramera rojo ahí por favor,*’ basically asking for a red whore. Mateo was red for the rest of the day, sort of making it a self-fulfilled prophecy. He legit wasn’t sure if I was knowingly ordering *him*.”

We all roared with laughter as time went on and more stories filled the room. Justin, a little later, reminisced how

we'd only had two dropouts in the group after two years of college. "And now, a new generation is coming. We're getting too old for this shit."

"It's just Parker, dude," Dayton said. "You're not retiring yet just because your little bro is old enough for college."

"You keep saying," Justin said.

I was about to open my mouth when a total stranger rushed across the bar and slammed his hands down against our long table. "She said yes!" he announced from the top of his lungs.

Everyone went mad in an instant. All my friends jumped up and down, cheering the stranger on, congratulating, and hugging each other.

My face twisted in confusion and I leaned closer to Marco's ear. "Who the fuck is that guy?"

Marco snickered and shook his head. "Don't make me cut you off," he said. "That's Hugh from last night. He was your biggest fan while you were winning."

I frowned. "That rings a bell. He was with that girl, right? Christine?"

"The one who thought we were a couple? Yep, that's them." Marco patted my back compassionately.

The stranger — Hugh, apparently — was grinning much like someone who just got engaged would. Oblivious to the perils of marriage, I couldn't blame him for his happiness. "I have about two hours remaining for my bachelor party," he said.

We all looked at each other with big, bewildered eyes.

Hugh frowned at our lack of understanding and snorted. “We’re in Vegas, you guys. We found an Elvis impersonator who can officiate. We took care of everything this morning.”

Dayton rubbed his hands. “If a party is what you want, that’s exactly what you’re getting.” He had a broad smile on his face, just like he always did when someone mentioned a party. To Dayton, a party meant a high likelihood of scoring with a hot stranger. And scoring with a hot stranger meant a happy Dayton.

He grabbed his phone and tapped furiously as Hugh squeezed into the booth.

“What’s he doing?” I asked Marco as I gestured my chin toward Dayton.

My best friend shrugged. “I don’t think I want to know.”

I only had enough time to chortle before Dayton dropped his phone and clapped his hands. “Bottoms up,” he ordered.

Something about not getting carried away rang somewhere in the back of my mind as I lifted my glass and poured all of its contents — minus the ice — down my throat. I couldn’t quite remember what it had been.

Dayton got up and ushered us to get going. He handed Joshua to London, whispered something to Justin, who laughed out loud, and we were off. Nobody knew where we were headed, but nobody cared.

My legs were like jelly and my fingertips numb. How many shots had I had? The fact that the outside world, as we sauntered out of the hotel, was tilting like I was on a ship, alerted me that I might have had a few too many. The hysterical laughter of my friends was like music that I was more than happy to join in on. Whatever it was I was laughing at had gotten lost in transmission, but that hardly mattered.

The heat was still raging outside, though the sun was dipping below the horizon fast. Luckily, the destination was far enough to merit getting everyone a taxi. The cars that picked us up formed a column and I watched as we turned right and entered a part of the city I hadn't visited before.

Two heartbeats after getting out of the taxi and walking into a huge, dark space of a flashy building, I knew where we were.

"I can't believe him," I told Marco.

My friend laughed out loud. "He was just looking for an excuse, that's all." He threw an arm over my shoulders and promised we would get through it. "All we need is a couple more rounds and we'll enjoy it."

Yeah, early evening strip-club visits required at least that many shots.

The place wasn't too crowded, but it wasn't as deserted as I would have expected. It looked like a lot more people were curious about bare skin than I'd imagined. Music pounded loudly even at the entrance, where a polite young man recited some rules. Only looking, no touching. Lap dances are extra. And so on.

We stumbled through darkness to the middle of the club where there were several empty tables. Quick staff helped us join the tables and took our orders. There were two dance stages, sprawling from two corners of the club and reaching one another, where they merged. On the left stage, three sexy police officers with thick mustaches and hairy chests were dancing for equal parts ladies and gay guys. On the right side, three sexy firefighters were doing the same.

Of over a dozen of us, only Hugh was out of place, but he didn't seem bothered that his bachelor party was marked by male dancers.

Marco and I kicked back and watched the officers swing their batons suggestively as servers brought four pitchers of whatever Dayton had ordered. I should have known better than to drink that. Dayton was a big, strong guy. He could drink twice as much as anyone else and still be totally fine. Me? Not so much. I was a little bulky, but the keyword was *a little*.

Mere minutes after I took a long swig of a severely alcoholic cocktail, my life flipped upside down. The lights of the club shone brighter, the movements of the dancers seemed slower, and the volume of music, cheering, and laughter seemed to shift rapidly. Louder and quieter, brighter and dimmer, reality around me morphed and shifted as I found myself numbing further and feeling totally and utterly shit-faced.

I didn't know how long we spent at the strip club. I couldn't keep track of the guys ripping off their pants and gifting the

shreds to the bustling crowd. Muscles flashed and shone under the lasers and limelights. The crowd shifted and we were walking again. Well, stumbling more than walking. Hugh seemed sober enough, at least in comparison.

He checked his phone as we exited the club and walked out into the night. He squealed joyfully and spun. “She was here all along.”

It took me a moment to remember what the purpose of tonight was, but I spun and recognized Christine, who was walking out of the same club, laughing with three girls we had yet to meet. She threw her arms around Hugh and the two kissed. In hushed, hurried voices, they double checked that the other one was serious about this.

Somewhere in the outer rim of my awareness, I thought that marriage was the biggest gamble of all. Then again, we were in one giant casino of a neighborhood. I told myself to keep my mouth shut. Yeah, every couple would hate each other at some point, but maybe they would have a few happy years before that happened.

Our growing procession required a whole score of taxis to get us downtown, to the end of the Strip, and into a chapel that had Elvis all over it. Neon lights at the entrance were made into a line-art portrait of his entire body as orange, red, and yellow glows filled the hallway inside.

Hugh and Christine, together with the girls who’d joined us, talked to a woman at the entrance. A moment later, more people flooded the entrance. They separated Hugh and

Christine into rooms that were opposite from one another and someone led us into the chapel where we waited.

Joshua, still held by London, was the only sober one in the crowd. It wasn't even dawn yet in Andalona and he had his Spanish lessons every morning. He was the voice of reason, however faint, when he asked the question. "Are we seriously at a strangers' wedding?"

Dayton lifted his index finger to make a point. "They're not strangers anymore. Hugh is our Josh Two-Point-Oh."

"How dare you?" Joshua asked in mock-horror. "I could have you jailed for saying that."

Dayton chuckled. "No, you couldn't."

A murmur passed through our group and silence fell when Elvis strode up to the altar and gave us a tune. A few verses later and the ice was broken. Half my friends joined Elvis in singing about still falling in love.

Dayton, eyes twinkling with humor, leaned into Justin and whispered something. Justin's gaze shot to Marco, then quickly back. He smirked and nodded. I only saw it because they were right in front of me. Dayton pulled out his phone and looked at me over his shoulder, then shifted his weight from one leg to another to hide the screen better.

Moments later, all my friends pulled their phones out simultaneously.

Marco and I exchanged a glance, then took our phones out, too, but there was nothing new. Except, everyone was tapping

furiously and giggling like schoolyard kids preparing a prank.

“What’s happening?” I whispered as heads turned and Hugh strode down the aisle and stood at the altar. But before he did, he reached over to Gabriel and the two whispered something. Then, Hugh handed Gabriel his iPad with some guy on a video call. London and Gabriel now served as gadget stands, but neither seemed to mind. Gabriel was probably holding Hugh’s best man.

Marco shook his head in reply to my question, but Dayton turned around and answered it himself. “The votes are in. Someone’s getting married tonight.”

I frowned. “Yeah, we know. We’re at their wedding.”

Dayton’s eyes sparked brighter. “You’re not getting it. *Someone else* is getting married. We’re not leaving Vegas until someone says the vows.”

I shuffled through my thoughts. It had to be Caleb and Jayden. They were the closest ones to marriage and, occasionally, they let loose so much that they were unrecognizable. Maybe tonight was their night. “But why didn’t I get a text?” I asked, one step from being offended at exclusion.

“London?” Marco asked. That was a legitimate question, too. With Joshua and Mateo on the other side of the world, they were out. And Hudson and Tate had only been dating for a few months, though behaving like they’d been married for a quarter of a century, London and Gabriel were the only other candidates.

“But why didn’t you ask us?” I demanded from Dayton, who’d obviously organized it.

Dayton’s grin was almost sinister. “I *am* asking,” he said. “That’s just it. We all think it should be you, guys.”

My heart dropped into my stomach and ice clogged my veins. Perhaps an airy ‘What?’ left my lips. Perhaps not.

Dayton blinked like he was the surprised one. “Should I get down on one knee? I’ve never played matchmaker before.” A chuckle rippled through our side of the crowd, but it sounded somehow distant and detached from reality. Well, they were all obviously detached from reality.

“Dayton, I don’t think that’s a great...” Marco tried.

“Oh, come on,” Justin said over his shoulder. “You two have been a couple for the longest time no matter what you say. Just get married in Vegas so that we can all go home.”

“You make it sound like we are keeping you hostage,” I whisper-snapped.

“At this point, you kinda are,” Justin said with sarcastic sadness painting his face.

They found this funny. Of course they did. “We need new friends,” I told Marco, though my speech was a little slurred.

“Just get it over with already,” Hudson chimed in. “So we can all relax.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Not too long ago he was accidentally boning his worst enemy, then had a tantrum that

nobody told him who his mystery man was. For them, it worked like a charm. Tate wasn't nearly as bad as he'd made himself look and Hudson was a few notches more romantic than I'd given him credit for. "Aren't you relaxed?" I asked. The redness in his cheeks wasn't embarrassment but wine and cocktails. "You don't look tense to me."

Dayton decided to cut this conversation short. "You're up after Hugh and Christine. We'll do a double reception at the hotel. I'll arrange things myself. I only need a tentative yes from you both."

"Tentative?" Marco asked. "Sure."

I narrowed my eyes even more. "How about a firm hell no?"

"Sorry," Dayton said. "This really isn't an open answer kind of thing." He snickered and hushed everyone, including himself, when Christine walked in.

She had a small frame, but her style dominated the room. As she slowly walked up following the three girls who were with her, her eyes were sparkling. Tears, I realized.

Something tied in my throat as I watched this ridiculous wedding, put together on a moment's notice. They obviously loved each other. Were I slightly more naive, I might have started believing in love, myself.

And though the wedding couldn't be described as anything other than cheesy — I mean, Elvis officiated. Come on! — I still found myself biting my lip as the two said their vows.

Ultimately, it didn't matter who officiated and where; it didn't matter that the best man was on a video call and still groggy. It just mattered that Christine and Hugh had a glimmer of hope in their eyes and hearts. They hoped they would be the ones to break the wheel of suffering and have that happy ending. They hoped that the woes of commitment wouldn't weigh so heavy on them like the rest of the world.

And I hoped for them, too.

So, when they kissed and when Elvis pronounced them a husband and wife, and when they signed the glorified piece of paper, my heart was pounding so hard that I needed to take Marco's hand to steady myself. Perhaps I was just drunk.

But drunk or not, I was doing the exact thing I'd said I wouldn't. I was getting carried away.

And when the wedding was officially over, Dayton went after Elvis. "What the hell is he doing?" I asked, but my voice was no longer so stiff and determined against this ridiculous idea. In fact, I was hoping for a very good argument by one of my friends so I could give in. It was just Vegas, right? I wouldn't get married for real in my life; I might as well see what it feels like.

Justin pulled the phone out of his pocket and turned it around for me and Marco. The rest of our friends all gathered around to watch. "This," Justin said. "This is Isla Catalina, or Catalina Island. Not to be confused with the one off the coast of California. Oh no. We're no cheapskates. This Catalina Island is in the Dominican Republic. It's home to three

different indigenous species of plants, one funny looking frog, the location of at least seven viral videos of e-boys lip-syncing clumsily, as well as one of the best honeymoon resorts on this side of the world. And it's yours for a week, all paid for by your friends."

I pursed my lips and shot a look at Marco, who's pupils dilated. "Is that all inclusive?" he asked.

I was torn between slapping Marco's shoulder and asking for extra details.

"Let's just say you'll be able to open a tab wherever you go and a certain good Samaritan will cover those particular costs," Justin said.

"Which Samaritan?" I asked, eyes narrow in an attempt at hiding my hopeful expectation.

"Dayton himself," Justin said.

Marco and I exchanged a look. The thing about us was that we could speak silently. The exchange went something like this.

We would get to drain his entire allowance, I said.

We would be evil to do that, Marco said, but playfully.

A twitch of my eyebrow told him I wasn't sure what constituted evil. That question was better left to philosophers.

Just then, Dayton returned with a broad grin that wasn't leaving his face. "Elvis is in, guys. So far, we have a chapel, a honeymoon resort, airplane tickets that need to be purchased

within ten minutes or else they'll expire, and plenty of guys to choose from for your best men. We just need the grooms."

I rolled my eyes. This really was ridiculous, but the eye-roll reminded me how drunk I actually was. How truly reckless and carried away I was, one might say.

One more glance at Marco found him questioning the idea less and less. In fact, the corners of his pretty lips were quirking up and he wiped his palms against his pants. The white shirt he wore was unbuttoned on top, the suspenders made him look an inch taller, and those pants packed a firm ass that I hadn't toyed with in a long while. Did it matter if we signed some paper for a little while and scored a free vacation?

What I really wanted was some time alone with Marco. I loved all my friends, no matter how obnoxious they could be at times, but I needed Marco. I needed to slog through all this guilt of disappointing Dad and knowing I would soon have to disappoint Mom. I needed my friends with me to find a way to the other side of this mess.

Maybe — just maybe — a week abroad, away from everyone, would give me some time to clear my head. Did it really matter if I was technically married?

"What the hell? It's just a week," I huffed. "Let's get married."

Marco's eyes widened. "Are you sure? I was gonna say no in case..."

In case it made me uncomfortable. I knew that. “I’m sure. If you are. I mean, it’s a free vacation.” I leaned in as if to whisper into his ear, but I intentionally said it loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Let’s drain these assholes’ allowances.”

They all laughed. Dayton laughed the loudest. Then again, he had the most anxiety to cover up; he was, after all, paying for whatever we spent at the resort.

In a whirl of activity, my friends buzzed around and I heard confirmations that the tickets were being booked. Someone asked for passport numbers. Someone else knew where we had our personal data stored for easy access when one decided to treat everyone with a quick trip. Yet another voice was smoothing things out about the ride from the airport to the dock where a ship would take us to the island.

In all this, Marco and I barely managed to share a word. They hauled us away into dressing rooms all the while Elvis sang at the altar and Dayton channeled his inner wedding planner, directing everyone around him.

I felt like I’d stepped through a looking glass into some new reality.

Screw it. I was getting married.

CHAPTER FOUR

In Sickness And In Health



MY WEDDING WAS A whirlwind of snapshots, all disconnected from one another. Time fell out of place and we abandoned all logic and laws of physics. Somehow, it all seemed to happen at the same time, yet all the moments had gaps between them in my memory.

Hands — oh so many hands — were on my shoulders as well as Stefan's. Our friends shook us, tugged us, urged us to get going. Elvis sang and pulled the moves, thrusting his hips like he was being electrocuted.

Stefan met my gaze for half a heartbeat. Something in his deep blue eyes sparkled, but I was too far gone to understand what it meant. There was softness there, for sure. I found the warmth he often reserved for no one but me. The corners of his lips ticked up. Though the glance didn't last any longer than that, it etched itself permanently into my memory. I would remember the way he looked at me until the day I died.

It was a look that said so much more than words in our loud crowd ever could. *Are we really doing this? I mean... What the hell? Let's get married.*

Where his shift had come from, I could only speculate. Two hours ago, it was a wonder that he would even attend someone else's wedding. Yet here he was, biting his lip to suppress a grin.

The next thing I knew, I was being hoisted onto Dayton and Caleb's broad shoulders, while Hudson and Tanner lifted Stefan. The procession went down the aisle into the hallway where they put us down.

They yanked Stefan and me apart, pulled us into separate dressing rooms. A guy and a girl appeared out of nowhere, ready to do business, looked around with steely, no-nonsense eyes, talking about sizes, taking measurements of my arms, and pulling suit jackets from a rack.

Half of my friends had gone away with Stefan and the other half was snickering around me. Someone clipped a bow-tie around my neck. Someone else spread my arms apart and dragged a black suit jacket with red lining onto me. They spun me around to look at the mirror and what I found there was a fairly handsome guy who was about to get married as a joke.

"Here comes the groom," London sang in the background.

"I'm getting the rings," Hudson announced and disappeared from my dressing room.

My heart pounded as a series of moments flashed in front of my eyes. Hudson measured my finger with sample rings, running back and forth. I was looking at my tall, broad-shouldered reflection in one moment. The next thing I knew, I was walking down the aisle.

Elvis picked up his guitar and sang about how he could have danced with him all night. “Da-da-dee-da-DA-DAAAA... Thank you, thank you very much.”

I spun when I noticed the other heads turn and my heart climbed into my throat. All the guys who’d been there with me sat in the very front row of the chapel. I looked over them and at the door. Stefan was fucking gorgeous. He had always been gorgeous. When he felt lazy and wouldn’t leave his sweatpants all day long despite the bolognese sauce stain on them, he was beautiful. When he got carried away and overdressed for a Sunday barbecue, he was breathtaking. When he let professionals dress him up for his mock wedding in a dark blue suit with silver lining and a slender, long black tie, brown belt, and matching brown shoes, he was the reason my pulse increased.

He flashed me a crooked smile, never shying away from an imperfection when I was at the end of his gaze, and I bit my lip hard.

Dayton, Elliot, Tanner, Justin, and Damien were followed by my husband-to-be as he walked up and stood next to me. In that moment, everything disappeared. This hadn’t been exactly what I’d expected of my wedding, especially not when we

knew it was a temporary thing, but I had no room for reason. It wasn't *really* a wedding, right? We were in Vegas, whatever difference that made.

Elvis sang, but it was all muffled to me. Our friends joked and teased and Joshua rolled with laughter on the tablet that Caleb was holding. Nothing came through to my conscious mind, though. It was all just background noise. In the very center of my awareness was Stefan. They'd fixed his hair a little, though I always thought his hair was perfect. He wore it cropped short on the sides and longer on the top. It had natural waviness to it, even if only a little.

"You look good," I said quietly.

His eyes flashed with mischief. "You're not too bad yourself."

"Oh, that's nice," I joked. "Perfectly mediocre."

He licked his lips, biting the lower one and letting it slide out.

We let our gazes linger on one another for a few moments longer. Maybe even for a few moments too long because Stefan's light brown skin, from his Hispanic father, turned a little pink and he shifted his weight from one leg to the other, leaning closer to me. "Catalina Island, baby," he whispered encouragingly.

"Hell yeah," I said. To be honest, I knew very little about the place. It was in the Dominican Republic, it was a high-end resort, and it would cost our friends a fortune to ship us there.

All in all, a pretty good deal. And if Stefan was into it, I was sure as hell into it, too.

Elvis finished a couple more verses and my friends cheered him on. My awareness narrowed and expanded, pulsed through the short speech of the holy matrimony and Elvis being a certified officiant by the powers given to him by the state of Nevada.

“And now, if you have any vows, you may exchange them,” Elvis said, followed by another “thank you very much” impression.

Stefan chuckled as he took his hands in mine. I was so damn unsure of what was going through his mind. He kept smiling and laughing like everyone else — and, in fairness, I did, too — but the way he looked at me was...different. I couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe we were just a little drunk. Maybe we got carried away.

He cleared his throat and squeezed my hands. “Marco, since the day I met you, you have been my best friend in the world. We've done it all.” This part received a wave of stifled laughter from my friends, to which Stefan deadpanned for a few seconds. Yeah, they all guessed that Stefan and I had done the dirty every now and again.

What Stefan actually meant by this was that we'd gotten drunk for the first time together, we'd gotten high together, too. We'd shared vacations and we'd held each other accountable with college work. He and I really had done it all.

“And, as all romances will tell you,” Stefan went on with a note of excited humor in his voice. “It’s only reasonable to embark on this adventure together. I vow to be your companion for the next week, in drunkenness and in hangover. I vow to help you squeeze these assholes’ allowances dry. And I vow to be your faithful husband so long as we’re on the sandy Caribbean beaches downing daiquiris.”

A murmur of laughter passed through our friends. It had a trace of nervousness to it. They were about to get their money’s worth and then some.

Still, every word Stefan said made my heart trip. I had no vows that I could say without spilling too much. Some things were better left unsaid and, in my drunken state, I worried I might say too much. *I never thought I would see the day we do more than what we always do. I never thought I would stand here, even as a joke, with you by my side. Whatever feelings might be coiling in my stomach, should stay exactly where they are because I will forever be happy to be your friend. You mean to me more than you could ever know.* I said none of that. Instead, I tried to be more careful.

“You are my favorite person, Stefan. You’re the greatest human I know and of all these fuckers I call friends, you’re the best one.” I glanced at all our other friends who were pissing themselves. “You’re the Bert to my Ernie, you’re the salt to my pepper. It will be my honor to force all our friends into bankruptcy and to receive a firm scolding from their parents.”

Stefan laughed louder than all the others who were gathered around.

“Thank you very much, boys,” Elvis said, tripping over his tongue in his spot-on impression. “Now, repeat after me.”

We did.

I, Marco Lancaster, take you, Stefan Ortega as my lawfully wedded husband. Yadda, yadda, yadda. And so on.

“The rings?” Elvis singsonged.

Hudson pushed a hand into his pocket and sought the rings. I glanced around and found London fake wiping his tears. “I promised myself I wouldn’t do this,” he whispered to Gabriel over-the-top theatrically. The others laughed.

Hudson handed us these two gorgeous silver rings, plain except for a single line etched through the middle of them. They were matching, except that Stefan’s was smaller, and I thought nothing could be more appropriate than this.

Stefan and I exchanged the rings while everyone snickered.

“And now, you may kiss your groom,” Elvis said and picked up the guitar, strumming it once before waiting patiently.

My heart drummed like it wanted to win a jazz competition. It wasn’t all that often that Stefan and I really kissed. More often than not, we’d sort of give each other a helping hand, but there had been times when we’d taken it a few steps further. Kissing him was always like visiting something incredibly familiar, yet deeply exciting.

Gently, I pulled his hands closer, then let go so I could close mine around his face.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” Over a dozen voices chanted.

Stefan blinked in a way that encouraged me to kiss him. It was like an invisible nod telling me he was ready.

I leaned in, closing my eyes as I neared him, letting all my other senses take him in. My lips grazed his for a split second and my senses went wild. The smoothness of his skin under my fingertips, the citrus scent he wore, the sweet taste of a fruity cocktail on his lips, and the tiniest of moans escaping down his nose enchanted me.

Then, after the appetizer, I parted my lips and leaned in for the main dish. Stefan also let his lips part, welcoming me as I sucked his lower lip between mine, closing my teeth carefully around it.

His hands gripped my biceps and he tugged me closer, letting out another, louder moan. Though it lasted less than five seconds, it felt like it went on for an eternity. I kissed him until every cell in my body woke up and soaked in the feeling. I kissed him until the flames spread through my soul.

I kissed him like this was real.

When my awareness expanded around Stefan and everything else came back into focus, my senses were flooded. Whoas and wows and hell yeahs filled my ears as firm grips yanked my shoulders and Stefan and I parted.

I opened my eyes just when Stefan did and we just gazed at one another while our friends bent over with laughter and wolf-whistled at our scorching kiss. Stefan's chest was rising and falling in quick, shallow breaths and I wasn't breathing at all.

He did that sexy thing with his lower lip, sliding it between his teeth, eyes glued on me.

A part of me was pretty sure tonight was one of those occasions when we had fun naked. The way he looked at me was pure sex.



Midway down the aisle, on our way out of the chapel, London spread his arms and hugged Stefan and me from behind, hanging between us. "You two need to pack," he said, his speech just a little slurred, much like everyone's. It seemed like Stefan and I were the most sober ones, yet we were the ones who'd done the craziest thing of all.

Stefan was holding our marriage certificate, pondering on London's words. "When do we fly?"

"Five am," London said. "Plenty of time for a reception, too."

"Reception?" I asked.

Dayton caught up with us. "Yup. You can't get married without a reception. And Elvis is joining us at the hotel bar."

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so hoping to get Elvis to your room later, aren’t you?”

Dayton laughed. “Elvis is hoping to get me to his room if you must know.”

Stefan chuckled at that and looked at me. “We better start packing, then.”

In a flurry of activity, our friends decided to kick the party off without us after we got back to our hotel. They ushered us into the hotel elevator and promised we wouldn’t miss a thing. “We’re saving the best bits for when you join us. Hurry, now,” Hudson said as the elevator doors closed.

This was the first time Stefan and I were alone the entire night. There was a heavy silence in the elevator as we ascended to the fourteenth floor. It seemed to take us an eternity to get there.

Stefan busied himself looking at the marriage certificate. “I’m not sorry,” he said with a casual shrug.

“We’re going on an all-inclusive vacation, hubby. Nothing to regret,” I joked.

He looked up from the certificate. The same air of softness and warmth pooled in his big eyes. He looked at me like he expected me to do something, but he didn’t say what. He didn’t ask me to do anything. He simply waited.

My first thought was to pin him against the wall and kiss the life out of him, but that was probably not what he was waiting for. Then again, whatever the cause of his expectant look was,

I couldn't figure it out. Though I knew Stefan better than anyone, he was still a mystery I couldn't hope to solve.

I swallowed and looked away just as the elevator stopped and the doors slid open. At the end of the hallway, we entered our shared room, as everyone traveled in pairs anyway. Stefan's things were scattered around the living room and his bedroom, some in the bathroom that separated our bedrooms and had a door to each.

I ran both hands through my hair and shook my head. "The fuck are we supposed to do now?"

Stefan walked over to the coffee table in the living room and set the certificate down. His back was turned to me and I watched him breathe in silence. His shoulders were broad and waist narrow and his ass was packed in the dark blue pants to emphasize every curve.

Stefan turned on his heels and faced me, a puzzled look on his face. "That kiss..." He fell quiet, almost like the words strangled him. "It was fucking amazing." He met my gaze, then looked away in an instant.

"Oh?" I opened my mouth, closed it, and opened it again. I'd rarely been speechless this many times in close succession. "I... Great."

Stefan stepped toward me once, twice, then shrugged. "It wouldn't kill us to... I dunno. Kiss again? We haven't sinned in so long we might earn a ticket to Heaven." He shuddered and grinned.

My mouth opened one more time, but no words came out. My voice seemed to be isolated inside my skull. *Yes! Fuck yes! Please!*

“Since we’re married and all,” Stefan said and allowed himself to smile his crooked, sexy smile. “What happens in Vegas, huh?”

I should breathe, I reminded myself. *I should try to take a breath of air before I faint*. Inhaling by sheer force of my will, I thought about it. “Like kissing friends who happen to be married?” I asked.

Stefan took another step toward me. There was smoothness to the way he walked and swung his hips back and forth. He was always the most seductive person I knew even if he wasn’t aware of it or doing it intentionally.

Standing a couple feet away from me, Stefan kept his eyes firmly on me. “Something like that,” he said.

“Are you...?” I didn’t want to ruin this. *Please, God, don’t let me ruin this*. “Are you sure, though?”

He shrugged again. “Why not? It wouldn’t be the first time. Unless you don’t want to anymore.” He took a short step back, retreating.

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” I said in haste. *Shit. I’m already ruining this*. “I just want to know how you feel.” *Good luck hearing his answer over the pounding of your heart*, I told myself.

Stefan made a step toward me, but with less certainty. “I just know that this is all surreal and that we’ve been transported into some kind of alternate reality where consequences can wait.”

I chuckled at that.

“Are you...sober?” I asked.

He laughed out loud. “I’ve only had water since we left the club two hours ago. You?”

I nodded. “Same.” Maybe sober wasn’t the right word, but I was sober enough to know I wanted him more than I wanted to breathe.

“Well, then,” he said as he made the last step toward me. He took my suspenders in his hands and looked into my eyes like he was trying to read my mind. “You looked so fucking handsome in that suit jacket and with a bow-tie. And when we kissed, I thought... Maybe we should... Do it again.”

I didn’t let him say anything else. I couldn’t wait any longer. He had a way of drawing me in at times like these. Not that there had been many times we got married. But Stefan and I... We sometimes did this. It didn’t mean anything more than two friends having the most fun ever, fully on board with the whole idea.

Sometimes, months passed and we did nothing. Other times, we helped each other finish to a hot video. And on occasion, we took it all the way.

My left hand touched the small of his back, my right rested between his shoulder blades. In an instant, our torsos touched, and I leaned in to do what I'd wanted to do all along. I kissed him deeply and slowly.

Every part of me awakened to the feeling of Stefan's proximity. His heat and the sweet taste of his lips filled me and enveloped me. It consumed all of me.

I pressed his back harder, grinding his body against mine. Then, carefully, I parted my lips just as he did, and let my tongue slide into his mouth. At first, the touch was shy, almost like we were just getting familiar with one another after a long time apart. The tip of his tongue brushed over mine and nothing happened for a heartbeat or two. Then, his lips parted more, and I filled him with my tongue, exploring every inch of his mouth.

Stefan gasped and pulled back, eyes wide open. "That... Shit, Marco, that's hot."

"I've got plenty more where that came from," I said and inhaled a shallow breath of air.

"Hell yeah," he whispered. "Give me all of it."

Haziness took away the room, the glimmering city lights on the other side of the window, and the entire task of having to pack and travel. Mist swallowed all of that and left Stefan in front of me, sexy as hell and as beautiful as the first ray of sunshine after a mother of a storm.

I pulled him into my arms possessively and pressed my lips against his, hungry for the kisses he was offering. I was starving for him.

I kissed Stefan without any filter to my lust. Clutching the fabric of his shirt on his upper back, lifting my hand to run it through his hair, grabbing a fistful of it from the back of his head and tugging him away to examine his face.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” I murmured, dropping my voice lower.

Stefan bared his teeth and grinned. “Kiss me, then.”

“You don’t need to dare me,” I said and kissed him harder.

Stefan clutched the sides of my shirt, holding my body pressed hard against his. Each sigh that left his lips and slid into my mouth traveled straight to my dick. When I placed my other hand on the small of Stefan’s back, he didn’t mind being pushed closer to me. His crotch pressed against mine and I discovered, with celebratory fireworks setting off in my chest, that he was just as hard.

The pressure I applied made him moan harder.

“Fuck, Marco,” he whimpered over my lips. “We should have done this more often.”

I chuckled, though it entered his parted lips and I felt them stretch into a smile over mine. As we kissed, more of my world orbited Stefan. Each second that ticked away while our bodies were connected, was a second I would never let evaporate from my memory.

Stefan dropped his hands lower down the sides of my torso. He slid them behind, feeling my lower back, then cupping my ass so firmly that I moaned. Holding me so, he jerked me forward, forcing our bodies closer together. My dick throbbed at the sensation, trapped between the two of us, pressing against his own hard length.

“Ah, Stefan,” I sighed. “What are we...?”

“Shh,” he whispered, kissing me again after a moment apart. Then, he pulled back just enough to say the sexiest four words I’d ever heard. “Tell me to stop.”

Silence lingered between us for a few seconds and Stefan smiled freely when I said nothing, then kissed me again and again, each time harder and brighter with burning lust.

Stefan’s right hand moved around my waist and cupped my balls through layers of clothes. He raised it a few inches, then dragged it along the length of my pulsing dick.

He found the tip and balled his fist around it, squeezing it enough to tease me until I lost my breath. The pressure, the itch somewhere deep in my body, jerked my arms. I spun us, slammed us together, then grabbed Stefan’s ass and lifted him off the floor.

He went along with it freely, happily. His legs spread, his one free arm shot up and wrapped around my neck, and he hoisted himself up on me, wiggling his right arm to join the left.

Stefan wrapped his legs around my waist as I supported his weight with my hands on his ass. He leaned down to kiss me as I carried him across the room and pinned him against the empty wall between my bedroom and the living room. There, his head dropped back against the wall, and I kissed the length of his neck, sucking and biting and licking, marking him as mine.

He was sure to leave this room with a hickey and I didn't give a damn about that.

The more I kissed him, the louder he moaned. His head moved left and right continuously until I kissed every last unclothed inch of him. Then, he wiggled his right hand around and began unbuttoning his shirt. Each button he undid revealed more of his bare, lightly tanned skin. It was smooth and taut over his muscles, slick with a fine layer of sweat and heated from within.

I rested my lips against the middle of his chest, kissing him gently all the while pinning him against the wall harder, grinding my crotch against his ass, sliding him up and down the wall.

My muscles burned with the tension of holding Stefan up, but I wouldn't put him down even if my life depended on it. Once I had him in my arms, I wasn't letting him down.

Stefan leaned his head back against the wall, his shirt partially open, his chest heaving. "My bed's a mess," he said as if I didn't know that already. I didn't need to look, either, because his bed was always a mess. "Take me to yours."

The words soared through me, lifted me off my feet, gave me the strength to push us away from the wall and carry Stefan into my bedroom. There, when I reached the bed, I threw us both onto the soft mattress and buried my face in the crook of his neck. Kissing him harder as he moaned and gasped for air, I thrust my hips back and forth, rubbing against him and sliding my lips down the middle of his chest.

Inch by delicious inch, I licked him and sucked his skin until he laughed in panic and I was sure I left a small mark. Then, as I reached the middle, his shirt got in the way and I straightened, pulling him to sit up.

Hurriedly, I ripped the shirt up and over his head, threw it behind my back, and snapped my suspenders to my sides so I could take my shirt, too. Stefan busied his fingers with the buttons, breathing in quick, short breaths as if we were running out of time.

We definitely weren't. Our friends would have forgotten about us by now, downing cocktails and listening to Elvis sing. At least, they would have forgotten about the passage of time. Once we returned to the party, it would be like this had never happened. So, I savored it. I let every moment last a little longer.

Stefan slid my shirt down my arms and let it fall onto the floor. Then, he used his long, slender fingers to pop the button on my pants and unzip them.

He bit his lip hard as the fly opened and pressed his palms against my hard abs, then dragged them all the way up to my

neck. "Let's make it one to remember," he said, voice husky.

As he lay back down, he pulled me with him. And when our bare torsos touched and pressed and rubbed, I was sure I wouldn't last very long. Every moment in which Stefan feathered his fingertips along my bare skin, was a moment that brought me closer to the edge. Every touch of his lips against mine filled me with the sweetest anticipation I'd ever felt.

I shifted my hips left and right, shedding off the pants just below my underwear. Stefan felt the movement and smirked, then smashed both his hands against my ass and pulled me to him.

I kissed him again and again, everywhere I could reach. I licked his ear and bit his chin and dragged my lips over his collarbones, then kissed each of his closed eyes. His hands groped my ass with neediness and force, sending bolts of lust into my chest.

"Take them off," he husked. I obliged, though not quite the way he meant. Instead of taking my pants off, I knelt back and undid the button and zipper on his, then dragged them down his legs. The plain yellow boxer-briefs he wore had a saliva-inducing wet stain exactly where the tip of his cock was pitching a tent.

Carefully, I pulled a little back and freed his legs of the dark blue pants, then leaned in and hooked my fingers inside his underwear. Before I pulled the waistband over, I kissed the tender skin of his lower abdomen, letting my hot breaths tickle him and make him wiggle.

Then, I dragged his underwear over his cock, letting his eight inches rise and stiffen.

I stroked him gently, edging him until he throbbed and his moans filled the room, then loosened my grip and licked my lips. Taking him into my mouth, memorizing every details about this — the way my left hand found his right, the way our fingers threaded, the way he sucked in a deep breath of air and held it — I loosened my throat and swallowed a third of him on the first go, half on the second. His precum was salty-sweet and creamy on my tongue, the faint musk of the day comfortable in my nostrils, and his voice pitched high and choked, filled my ears.

He murmured a litany of profanities at the ceiling the deeper I took him and I couldn't tell which part of this excited me the most. His filthy words or the flexing of his dick in my mouth or the very fact that this was Stefan I was naked with.

Sucking him harder and faster, I made myself aware of his sensations. I knew just by the way his fingers tightened through mine that he was getting closer, so I slowed down. Nobody could ever accuse me of rushing things.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Stefan spilled over his lips and grabbed a fistful of my long, black hair with his free hand, then pulled me away.

I lifted my head, chin wet and grin wide, and looked at the way his cock spasmed.

“Fuck, that was close,” he whimpered. “Take. Them. Off.”

I hopped onto the floor and took the rest of my clothes off, then returned to lie on top of him. Equally hard, I moved my hips slowly back and forth, rubbing my cock against his, shivering in every part of my body.

Stefan wrapped his hand around our hard dicks and tightened his grip. His gaze, glassy and shiny, met mine. “Fuck my fist, Marco,” he commanded.

I dug my closed fists into the mattress on either side of his head, lifting myself off of him just enough to look into his eyes as I moved. My abs were still pressed against his and every flex of his muscles caused mine to flex in return. I swung my hips forth, pulled them back, thrust forward again, harder, and we simultaneously opened our mouths, but neither had any voice to show.

I fucked his fist mercilessly, rubbing against his slick cock and bringing us closer to our climax. Not even a moment passed where our gazes weren't locked in a vicious staring contest, Stefan's mouth opening wider, air flowing freely in and out of his lungs.

“Harder,” he moaned suddenly. “Just... Almost...”

He squeezed his eyes shut, arched his torso up, pushed his head deeper into the mattress and surrendered himself. All of his body shuddered, his grip on our dicks tightening painfully.

I only managed to lift myself a little further off of him when his cock pulsed hard and cum squirted all over us both. Half a moment later, I was growling, body spasming and muscles shaking.

My voice balled in my throat and choked me as I rode out my orgasm, thrusting my hips forward, sliding through Stefan's iron grip.

Stefan grabbed the back of my neck as we squeezed the last drops from one another and pulled me in for a long, fiery kiss. We breathed and moaned and kissed with burning passion until I collapsed on top of him and smeared the mess we'd made between our bodies.

One of my hands held the side of Stefan's torso, the other played with his hair as our kisses grew slower and lazier.

As our heartbeats and breathing returned to normal, I pushed myself up and walked into our shared bathroom to grab a washcloth. I returned and wiped my newly wedded husband clean, then cleaned myself up.

Still naked, I returned the cloth to the bathroom and walked to the edge of the bed where Stefan lay in tranquil silence. One of his legs was folded over the other, knee pulled up, and his hands were twined under his head. He was, quite simply, the most beautiful thing I'd seen in my life.

Wherever the light from the living room touched him, he glowed. And then, as though he only just realized I was watching, he met my gaze and extended his arm toward me. "Join me."

I looked at him, lying down so peaceful and beautiful, and wondered if there was anywhere else I'd rather be.

"Just five minutes. Please," he said.

And when he tacked that please on, my heart melted in my chest and I slid next to him on my large bed, wrapped my arms around him, and held him so tightly that he had no possibility of escape.

Silence settled in the room, save for our calm, steady breathing.

Minutes passed, then more of them. And more. We lay together, neither of us sleeping, neither ready to leave the bed just yet.

“Should we join them?” Stefan asked. “Or just leave them to it?”

I chuckled. “And let them get away with paying for fewer drinks? I don’t think so.”

Stefan laughed out loud. “This is why we’re married.”

This was, in essence, why we were best friends. We thought alike. And if we didn’t think alike, we understood the other one anyway.

Stefan and I, wearing nothing but our underwear, stuffed two small suitcases with pretty much all our belongings without a lot of planning. I was energized by what we’d done together and couldn’t calm my tripping heart any time I glanced at my fake husband. Or, my real husband for all the wrong reasons.

Once that was done, we put on the rest of our clothes and headed for the door.

“Marco,” Stefan said as I reached for the knob.

“Yeah?” I turned to look at him over my shoulder.

He bit his lip and didn't need to say a word.

I let go of the knob and pulled him in, pressed my lips against his, and kissed him for a long while. Stefan inhaled through his nose, kissed me back, let our tongues touch, then pulled away.

Smiling to himself, he murmured, “That's better.”

“Let's get wasted now,” I said as we headed out.

And that was exactly what we did. For the next five hours, alcohol was flowing and laughter filled the VIP room. Dayton ended up making out with the sexy Elvis on one of the sofas and Stefan kept glancing at me. I glanced at him just as many times, wondering if this would finally be an action that had consequences. We'd pushed the limits of normal friendship pretty far. Was getting married crossing the point of no return?

Alas, I was way too drunk to answer that question.

CHAPTER FIVE

Just Married



LAS AMERICAS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Santo Domingo

Dominican Republic

There were two different forms of silence taking place at our table.

Marco ate his bagel, carefully collecting crumbs around the table, sweeping them with the back of his thumb, making a neat little pile. Then, he picked up his frothy latte, took a sip, and licked his upper lip. His gaze was mostly on the table, darting left and right when something attracted his attention. Occasionally, but not often at all, he would look at me. Those glances would linger for a heartbeat or two as if asking me to say something, then he would look back at his coffee or the pile of crumbs.

His silence was expectant. It shifted between us, morphed from patient to impatient then back. His silence asked me if there was anything we needed to talk about.

A headache throbbed in my skull. Watching Marco eat made me both jealous and sick. I wished I could have a bagel, yet I knew I couldn't keep it down. I was having one of the worst days of my life as I let the silence linger. My eyelids were heavy and my breaths were steady and deep.

My silence was monotonous. I was empty.

“Any word of our chauffeur?” I asked Marco, who had pulled out his phone and was swiping at something.

He shook his head. “We got through passport checks sooner than planned.”

We returned to our silence, then.

My mind wandered back to the evening before. Bits of it came through; but only the bits before we went down for that damned reception and blinded ourselves drunk.

I'd gone along with everything in the spur of the moment, not even thinking about the consequences.

“Maybe we should wait outside,” I said and shifted in my chair. The buzzing of people and the clatter of plastic trays against metal tables picked at my aching brain.

“Wait,” Marco said abruptly. “I need to ask you something.”

Finally, I thought. He'd been sitting on that question since waking up, no doubt. I raised my eyebrows, eyelids only

partially following up.

“Before we go,” Marco began and immediately went quiet. He mulled over the words he would use; he was always careful like that. And I couldn’t blame him. He blew out a breath of air and pushed his tray in frustration. “There’s no easy way of asking this. Do you regret having sex with me?”

“What?” I gaped. That hadn’t been even close to our first time. Unless he thought it meant something more now that we were married.

He bit his lip in expectation. “We had a few drinks. I need to know.”

“I... No. Marco, no. It’s not that.” I crossed my arms at my chest as Marco’s shoulders seemed to relax a tad.

He nodded, thinking about my answer. “Then what’s up?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Isn’t it...” *Obvious?* I didn’t get to ask the question.

“Something’s up, Stefan,” he said. “You can’t hide that shit from me. And if you’re not regretting having sex with me last night, then I don’t know what’s got you worked up.”

At least he was challenging me on it. Marco was a timid creature, really. He rarely let himself enter conflict of any sort; he did as he was told; he didn’t like to break any rules. After all, his parents gave him up before he’d had a chance to do anything to deserve it. They’d left him to a faulty system that moved him from one home to another. He’d learned early on not to be trouble because if you were trouble, you weren’t

worth the government checks. Basically, Marco had learned not to get kicked out.

And even though he was demanding an explanation from me, I couldn't help myself but feel a little proud of him for standing up for himself. It made my heart flutter. Even my headache went away for a moment.

But I still needed to answer his question and I didn't know where to begin.

He began for me, though. "It's the marriage, isn't it?" He shook his head. "I agree. It was a dumb idea but *you* went with it before I did. I was gonna say no."

I shrugged. "I got carried away. I wasn't thinking straight."

"And now it's the end of the world," Marco muttered.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Do you see me blaming you for it? No. Am I bitching about it? Hell no. Can you blame me for freaking out? I mean, how often do you wake up married and can't remember what the hell happened?"

He kept his lower lip firmly between his teeth as he thought about it. Then, he shook his head. "I just don't get why it's such a big deal now and it was all fun and games last night."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. It seemed to help with the pressure in my head. "Because we didn't think this through," I said.

That was the best I could offer. All the other things I could have truthfully said were too dangerous to mess around with. *Because we're going on a romantic getaway and I'm*

perpetually one wrong choice away from falling in love with you and dooming us to the fate of my parents. Because we could wreck our friendship like it's made of glass if we went down that road.

“Think what through?” Marco demanded. “Dayton and the rest are paying for this so it’s not like we’ll have any explaining to do. It’s a vacation. Besides, we can annul this as soon as we’re back.”

That twisted my heart. Yeah, we could. At twenty-one, we were going to be two best friends who’d been married for a week, then divorced. I knew it was dumb, but I didn’t want to have a divorce before I even graduated college. Sure, it was stupid because it didn’t mean anything. It wasn’t like we were going to wreck a happy marriage. “We shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place.”

“Then travel back in time and tell that to yourself,” Marco said, voice growing colder.

I tapped my foot in annoyance. He was right. It was too late to change things. “Let’s just go outside and wait for the car.”

“Fine,” he said, voice lacking any emotion.

We dragged our suitcases out the main gate and stood at a platform crowded by taxis. All that Dayton’s message said was “You can’t miss it.” In short, those weren’t the most encouraging words.

We paced back and forth for a while, not talking about anything. We still had a couple of hours before we reached our

destination this evening and I wasn't sure where we stood. Marco rarely said what he really wanted. It was yet another thing he'd learned early on. *Don't ask for too much or you could lose the little that you have.*

The car that arrived made Marco laugh. I didn't find it nearly as funny. It was covered in roses and the back window had 'JUST MARRIED' painted all over it.

I shot Marco a look and he shrugged. "What? We are." A grin flashed across his face, quickly replaced by a more somber reaction. "Since it's a honeymoon resort, maybe we better pretend like we're actually happily married."

"Yeah." I sighed. He was totally right about that. "Let's just go," I muttered and waited for the driver to come out and open the trunk.

"Congratulations," the middle-aged man with a thick, black mustache said. "Welcome." He helped us load our luggage, then opened the door for us.

We thanked him as we got in. The car was blessedly air conditioned. The windows were tinted, but I looked through mine as the car started moving. Despite the tint, I couldn't stop staring at how green the landscape around the highway was. The palms, the shrubs, the richness of nature was so overpowering that I couldn't look away.

Unlike in the car, the outside air was humid and hot and left me damp while we waited.

We traveled in silence for the better part of the journey from Santo Domingo to La Romana, where we had a ship to board. Every so often, Marco would touch my arm and point at something in the distance. Most of the time, it was a tiny dot of azure sea, just barely visible. Even so, we knew it was miles prettier than the open ocean I'd grown up next to.

The further we went, the more of the Caribbean Sea we saw until an hour and a half had gone by and our chauffeur left the highway. He drove us down a winding road toward La Romana, a seaside town, tucked in a small bay. Just across, some thirty minutes by ship according to the itinerary, was Isla Catalina, our final destination.

The chauffeur helped us with our luggage again and directed us to our ship. When Marco pulled out his wallet, the man waved his hands decisively and said all was paid for.

As Marco and I walked across the harbor where our small ship was docked, Marco snickered. "If Dayton put half as much effort into studying, he'd be acing all the courses."

It was like he kicked a laugh out of me. It burst over my lips before I could stop myself and quite a few people turned their heads to check me out. "That'll never happen."

"You don't say," Marco said sarcastically.

We caught each other's glances and it felt like we slowed down. The dusk sunlight bathed him in gold, making his green-brown eyes shine. His hair, reaching just to his jaw, had always reminded me of those Korean boy bands or bad-ass

anime characters. He ran a hand through it, moving the stray locks out of his eyes.

My heart tripped and I looked away, panic rising in my body. Everything was strange and not at all what either of us had expected or wanted. We'd agreed, two years ago almost to the day, that we would make better friends than boyfriends.

"I think we're just too young to commit," I'd told him. "It'll never work out long term. We have a good thing going on."

Marco had nodded and agreed. By that time, I'd known him well enough to know he would agree no matter how he truly felt. But, he'd agreed that we should be friends first and that fooling around was fine so long as we didn't start getting some ideas. We'd both been nineteen at the time, horny more often than not. There really hadn't been a way to make sure we stayed together forever.

Nothing has changed since then. Speaking for myself, I was no less horny, but I acted on it rarely. I was too busy with school to have the time to fuck around. Marco was the same. He busied himself with school. And every once in a while, we blew off some steam with each other.

We boarded the ship and waited a little while until the clock struck half past seven. There were tables and chairs on the small deck and they served drinks, though neither of us could imagine having any wine just yet.

The salty breeze made Marco's half-buttoned shirt billow. His gaze wandered into the distance and I found myself staring at his partially bare chest. The way he breathed deeply

reminded me of what he'd looked like the night before, after we'd finished. He'd crashed next to me because I had asked him to; he'd held me for minutes upon minutes until we had to get going.

Marco was, without a doubt, the most attractive guy I'd ever laid my eyes on.

And, somewhere deep down, I hoped that we might do one of two things. Either I would get over him and successfully move on, or we would be mature enough and be ready to give it a chance.

Would we ever really be ready for that? There was no future in which I would gladly risk our friendship. I'd done it last night, swooning from Marco's vows and melting from his searing wedding kiss. I'd been weak; I'd given in to the temptation.

Whatever happened next was my responsibility because he was right; he hadn't wanted things to go this way. He'd only done it because I'd said yes.

I rubbed my temples and tried to turn my brain off.

"Holy shit, Stefan, look!" Marco jumped to his feet and leaned over the rail to point. "Are those...?"

"Sharks?" I screeched.

Marco laughed out loud. "Dolphins, you silly duck."

I frowned for the shortest of moments, glancing at the back of his head. Did he really just call me that? It tugged on the corners of my lips, pulling them up. I leaned over the rail, too,

and sure enough, fins were rising out of water, disappearing into the depths, and returning once again. Then, taking my breath away, one of the dolphins emerged fully, like jumping out of the water, and looked straight at us until it dove back in.

I grabbed Marco's upper arm. "Did you see that?" My heart was pounding, full of excitement and joy, as another dolphin did the same, greeting us in its clicking language. They swam alongside the ship, jumping out of the water, doing flips and twists and filling my heart to the brim with joy. These intelligent, social creatures came out to greet and welcome us.

In a heartbeat, everything changed. The ship neared the island and steered right, following white sand coast. What had looked like jungle from one side, revealed an azure lagoon.

Marco and I stared at our destination in pure awe. The closest to us was a dock that was all wood with concrete pillars supporting it. Beyond it, a vast sandy beach sprawled as far as we could see, bending and curving, kissed by the clear, blue waves.

The closer we got, the shallower my breaths grew. Beyond the beach, under the mountainous, jungle backdrop, scattered among the coconut and palm trees, were log bungalows every way I looked. It was only the center of the resort that wasn't fully in touch with nature, but it fit into godly perfection. There, a sprawling beach bar stood with colorful light bulbs spread out in every direction. Small tables under straw umbrellas were surrounded by wooden chairs. Wherever two palms stood close enough, there was a netted hammock. And

where there weren't enough trees, there were high poles with round chairs hanging from them.

Further up the beach, torches were scattered around and lit, their flames dancing on the breeze this way and that.

Just behind the open beach bar was a house I suspected was the reception. Soon, as people started getting up from their tables on the deck, the captain spoke. She spoke in Spanish first, then English, basically confirming what I'd assumed.

As dock hands tied the ship, a couple of smart-casual looking people holding folders showed up. They greeted us in Spanish and English, then stuck with English for the rest.

"We'll first make a quick stop at the reception so everyone can check in. This will only take fifteen or twenty minutes. Our staff is here for any and all of your needs, should you have questions or special requests. We can show you to your bungalows if you're having trouble finding them or recommend our favorite beverages at the bar," the curly-haired girl was saying.

"And be sure to enjoy your stay," the young man with Hollywood-grin added.

"Follow me," the girl said cheerfully and waved at the crowd standing on the wooden boards of the dock.

We all moved in a herd and my anxiety went wild. I wasn't fond of crowds of strangers. I worried someone would ask me something I didn't know or, worse, strike up a conversation with the goal of becoming friends. These things scared me to

my marrow and I began scratching my thumb with my index finger.

Marco placed a hand in the middle of my back and rubbed the spot for a few moments, calming my heartbeat and my breathing. It was only when he removed his hand that I realized what he'd done.

He knew all my quirks. And I knew his.

The path toward the reception was paved with stone tiles, winding for no real reason beyond the cute aesthetic, and everyone's suitcases joined in a symphony of wheels thundering against the stone. Finally, once we reached the reception, the thunder stopped.

As the curly-haired girl had promised, the check in was swift. Somehow, Marco and I lingered around the longest before joining the queue, so we checked in the last. And after we did, Marco frowned.

"What is it?" I whispered, holding the key to our bungalow.

"Shit," he murmured and looked up. The Hollywood-grin guy met his gaze at once and stepped up.

"Can I help you?" he asked. He had a trimmed mustache and some hair on his chin, giving him the *Nightmare on Elm Street*-era Johnny Depp look. It didn't help that he had the finest, natural tan in the world and stylish, short hair with faded sides. I was sure as hell that this guy caused many heart-bruised tourists to leave this place with teary eyes.

“I, er... Is there a place where I can buy swim shorts or something?” Marco asked and scratched the back of his head. His bicep swelled as he bent his arm, making the fabric of his white shirt tighten.

I mentioned I was perpetually horny, right?

The hotshot smiled politely. “There is, of course. But just around the bend on the left side of the main beach, is a ‘clothes optional’ beach. It’s a well secluded cove with plenty of privacy for those who prefer going natural.”

“Clothes optional?” Marco asked, his lips stretching into a curious smile. He glanced at me and chuckled at the way my eyes had widened and heat turned my face pink. “That’s good to know, but I’d still like a pair of shorts.”

“Of course, sir,” said the guy who had to be four or five years older than us.

“Uh, no need to *sir* me. Marco is fine,” my best friend said with a strangled laugh.

“Alright,” said the guy cheerfully. “Romeo, by the way,” he added. “Here for anything you need.” He turned away from us to point Marco in the direction of the shop.

Marco smiled back at him as I rolled my eyes. “*Anything* you need,” I muttered.

“Shush,” Marco snickered and caught up with Romeo. That had to be a fake name, right? Nobody was really named Romeo.

I followed Marco and his new boyfriend outside, huffing and puffing to myself. Romeo showed us a tiny dirt square hidden in the trees behind the reception house where all sorts of stores were dotted in a circle. It looked like a village square in some fantasy movie with rustic design that blended in with the surroundings. Beyond it were stone steps, mossy and old, leading to a slightly higher level, twice as hidden, where Romeo said all the good restaurants were. “Not that there are too many. We’re specializing in catering to smaller groups. It helps to make the experience more personal.”

This time, he looked straight into Marco’s eyes as he said the last three words. Was he...? Was he hitting on my husband?

I grabbed Marco’s hand. “I’m sure we’ll have a *great* experience here. Won’t we, babe?”

Romeo’s smile didn’t falter.

Marco blinked twice, then nodded. “Yup. We totally will. I mean, clothing optional, huh?”

Another wave of heat climbed into my face and I dropped Marco’s hand from mine. “Right, we’ll see about that.” The thing was, I wouldn’t mind seeing Marco gloriously naked. I wouldn’t mind that at all.

Romeo took his leave after a few more flirtatious words.

“Ugh. I bet he’s a rent boy,” I grumbled.

“That’s not nice, Stefan,” Marco said.

This time, the heat in my cheeks came from embarrassment. No, it hadn't been nice. "Sorry," I whispered. "It's just that he's all over you."

"You think?" Marco asked with a frown that was in contrast with his smile.

I said nothing. Instead, we walked into a shop that sold swim trunks, towels, snorkeling gear, blow-up mattresses, and a myriad of beach items. Marco picked two pairs of shorts, the first ones he saw, and asked if they could bill the room.

"Of course," the nice woman at the counter replied. "And the room would be...?"

"Lucky thirteen," I said, looking at the wooden plaque hanging from the key chain with a laser-carved *13* in the middle.

"Very well," the woman said after glancing at the key herself, typed something, and then bagged the shorts.

At long last, we walked back to the reception house and from there took a narrow stone path into the forest where all the bungalows were scattered. None were fenced, but all of them had yards upon yards of open space between them. Nicely kept bushes, old palms, and grass with sprinklers in discrete spots for overnight watering, separated the bungalows.

Each bungalow was a little different. For one, there was a large number painted neatly on the door of each. Another difference was the layout. Some had their front doors centered with a window on each side, others had their doors on one side

and windows on the other. There were a few that didn't even have doors in the front walls, but somewhere behind. There were bungalows with verandas and bungalows with wraparound decks, then some with neither. And the colors were all vastly different, too. From pink to neon green to good, old plain wood like ours. It was a relief to be put into one that didn't scream with brightness.

The roof of our bungalow looked to be straw, but I was sure they had some layer of insulation beneath it. All medium pale logs and a brown door with a black *13* painted in the middle, the bungalow gave out warmth and coziness that suggested I might actually get some rest here.

My summer, so far, has been stuffed with activities. Family vacations, unofficial extracurriculars, and a trip to Vegas had burned me up. Maybe — just maybe — this wasn't the worst idea in the world.

I unlocked the door and barged inside. The AC unit was already humming, keeping the room temperature so low that penguins would have complained to the management. I snatched the remote and brought the temperature up, then shuddered. "We'll have to huddle for warmth," I said.

Marco chuckled. "I'm happy to oblige."

"Romeo's not invited," I teased.

He poked me in the ribs with two fingers. "Keep going and I'll think you're jealous."

I shrugged. "It's our honeymoon."

“We’re not really husbands,” Marco said.

I scoffed. “Romeo doesn’t know that. That’s all I’m saying.”

Marco laughed out loud, his broad shoulders shaking, and I smirked to myself.

“Gotta give it to Dayton. This is a nice bungalow,” I said as I looked around. A small kitchen was separated from us by a wooden counter extending from the wall to my left. In front of me was a small corner with a round dining table and four chairs. To my right was the open living room with one couch pressed against the wall. Two armchairs were placed on either side of the wooden coffee table and a TV mounted to the wall, surrounded by shelves stuffed with decorations and books. Left of the couch was a door that was, no doubt, a bathroom. I flicked the bathroom light on and found that it was the biggest room in the bungalow with a huge walk-in shower and other necessities.

Left of the bathroom door were stairs that led to an open loft where the single, large bed was.

The narrow hallway that was situated behind the dining table and chairs, and to the left of the stairs, had only one door opening to the back of the bungalow. There, as Marco and I stepped out, I found the coolest thing of all. The backyard was hidden by shrubs and bushes and in the middle of it was a massive jacuzzi with pipes leading underground and something there was humming and vibrating, making the water restless. I figured it was a filtration system or something.

“Holy hell, I’m gonna get mileage out of that thing,” I said in awe.

Marco chuckled. “Next to the Caribbean Sea?”

“Hell yeah,” I said. “No sharks or jellyfish here.”

He shook his head, still chuckling. “Right. I’m gonna head out for a swim among the sharks and jellyfish. Are you coming? I’ll let you pick your shorts.”

I glared at him. “Swim? Now? I’m still dying, Marco. How are you even standing on your feet?”

He shrugged. “I guess Romeo will have to do.”

I narrowed my eyes at him in mock envy. “Fine. I hope you two make a happy couple, *hubby*.”

Marco went inside still laughing and I followed after a minute. As I walked down the hallway, I held my breath. I almost choked, really. Marco was already naked and dragging his swimming shorts on. I caught him just as he pulled the waistband over his firm, round ass, then fixed the front.

Forcing myself to breathe, I cleared my throat.

“If you change your mind, I’ll be on the decent beach,” he said cheerfully.

He walked out while I was still laughing. I was glad that the prospect of a lazy evening excited him. As for me, I was going to take a long shower and sleep off this hangover.

CHAPTER SIX

Clothing Optional



MY NEWLY WEDDED HUSBAND towered over me. The last rays of sunshine bathed him in red gold and cast a long shadow over me and my castle.

I looked up from my hour's work and squinted against the sunlight. "He lives!"

"Barely," Stefan said, inspecting my work. "That wall will never hold."

I looked down and tilted my head, examining the wall around my sandcastle. "It's not supposed to hold."

"What's the point, then?" Stefan asked and crossed his legs, then sat down like a ballerina taking a bow. The last few inches, he plopped on his ass, then began gathering wet sand from around the castle.

"Building it is the fun part," I explained. "Not admiring the finished work."

“And I thought having the biggest castle on the beach was the whole idea,” Stefan said, giving me a mischievous look.

“You’re confusing castles with dicks, babe,” I teased.

He laughed quietly and added a layer of sand at the base of my sea-facing wall. We toyed with the castle in silence for a little while. “Can you believe we’re really here?” Stefan asked out of nowhere.

I lifted my head and took in the resort. This one was specifically for couples, though there were more resorts scattered around the island. It was by far the most romantic place I could remember ever seeing.

“I can’t believe we got married for it,” I said.

Stefan laughed at that. “It’s all a haze in my head.”

“But... You’re not regretting it anymore?” I checked again.

He shrugged. “It’s not like it’s permanent.”

We grinned at one another and returned to quietly shaping the towers. Stefan used his fingernail to carve out windows and murder holes while I attempted to dig the trenches and put up a bridge that just wouldn’t hold.

Stefan and I had been close pretty much from the day we’d met. His was the only desk with an empty space when I entered English Lit class and Stefan’s easy smiles made me think that maybe, just maybe, I belonged there.

He had already been friends with most of our current group for years, but I’d joined them from the outside. My parents —

adopted parents, though I hated mentioning that because it always sounded apologetic and less real when they were the only true parents I'd ever had — had insisted on putting me into the best high school on the West Coast. For them, it meant relocating, which had been a novelty. Me? I'd been moving around for so long that I'd forgotten what a home was meant to be. But, they'd adopted me nearly two years earlier and had gone out of their way to accommodate.

Secondary school hadn't been easy. My parents had transferred me to a private one in their area and striking up friendships had been impossible. Everyone had already known each other there and I, a kid who'd never had more than he needed to barely function, couldn't adjust.

I'd expected all the worst from high school, until I met Stefan.

“You can sit with me,” he'd called the moment he'd realized that I had been standing still for too long, searching the classroom for an empty chair. And when I sat, he was already smiling. “Your hair is gorgeous,” he'd told me.

From that moment on, we'd been friends.

And as such, after six years, boundaries were a little hazy. People thought we were a couple more often than not, even though we totally weren't. He was... Stefan. He wasn't my boyfriend. That was ridiculous.

But he was my husband, apparently.

“The tide is coming,” he said.

“Just think, in an hour, nobody will know there was even a castle here,” I mused.

“We’ll know,” he said.

That was the case with most things we did. We’d pull a prank on one of our friends and nobody would suspect us, but we would know. Or, we would sort of shrug and play with each other under the covers and nobody would know.

There was nothing unusual about that. Not to us, at least. It didn’t mean we were a couple, right?

“I thought you’d be out like a light by now,” I said. “The way you suffered the whole day.”

Stefan rubbed his left eye with the back of his hand — the only part that was clean of sand — and shook his head. “Shower helped. Besides, I can’t let Romeo think we had a falling out already. You wouldn’t survive it.”

I snorted. Yeah, the resort attendant was a hottie with an easy smile. Was he flirting with me? I doubted it. He was probably like that with everyone. “I wouldn’t resist it, you mean,” I said, mock accusing him of jealousy.

A bigger wave rolled over the smaller ones and licked at the walls of our castle, filling the trench I’d dug out. Another one, even larger, took the better part of the southern wall to Stefan’s distress. He moaned and punched one of the towers, then laughed out loud. “A thousand lashes for the sea,” he demanded.

I got up, abandoning my nearly finished castle that the waves were now ravaging, then extended my arm to Stefan. “Come on. Let’s walk around.”

Stefan lifted his gaze from the ruins and grabbed my hand to pull himself up. While I was wearing nothing but a pair of shorts and hadn’t even bothered to find a pair of flip-flops, Stefan was fully dressed. I noticed, however, that he’d changed into the bright pink swimming shorts with psychedelic blue and green palm leaf prints, even if he was wearing his white sneakers and a black T-shirt.

As he got up and we started walking, our hands remained joined. “Reconsidering a swim?” I asked.

“I couldn’t let sharks have all the fun with you,” he mused.

I tightened my grip on his hand. We strolled along the beach, Stefan on my left, waves licking the sand on my right, and sunset behind us.

I nudged Stefan with my elbow when I noticed a man and a woman walking in the opposite direction, glancing at us with a smile. “They think we’re a couple,” I whispered under my breath.

Stefan snorted. “Everyone always thinks that. What ever happened to good old friends who sometimes fork?”

I threw my head back and laughed out loud.

“Seriously, the way people presume,” he continued with his fake rant. “A couple? Us?” We both looked at the couple as they passed us and exchanged smiles. They seemed to be in

their early thirties, both brown-haired, brown-eyed, and drop dead gorgeous.

“Crazy, I know,” I said. It was a ridiculous idea on quite a few levels. For one, neither of us was looking for a relationship. What for? We were already getting all the perks of a relationship without the responsibilities. Besides, our friendship was a helluva lot more important to us.

We kept on walking as the last of the sunlight slowly disappeared. I glanced over my shoulder to find only a small patch of sky still on fire, but ahead of us was dusk. As we walked aimlessly, the sandy strip narrowed. Some rocks appeared here and there and a lot more greenery that was allowed to grow thickly. It wasn't until we reached the bend where rocks that naturally didn't belong there were, that I realized where we were headed. The rocky wall shielded the other side of the beach from sight and I smirked to myself. “And so, the road leads us to where we'd always been going.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Stefan ogled me.

I chuckled. “That right there,” I said and pointed with my free hand. “That's the clothes optional beach.”

Stefan laughed. “You're dead set on it, aren't you?”

I shrugged. “We're already there.”

“Alright,” he said simply as if to say, “If it means so much to you.”

I bit my lip and we walked on between the rocks and boulders and to the other side where more white sand lay. We

passed a discreet sign that confirmed my assumption, warning off people who might stumble upon the beach unknowingly and get scarred for life.

Stefan inhaled and held his breath for a little while as we let go of each other's hands. Then, blowing out a reluctant breath of air, he grabbed the edge of his black T-shirt and pulled it over his head, kicked his sneakers off, packed his socks inside the sneakers, then hooked his thumbs inside the waistband of his swimming shorts.

"Right," he whispered to himself as I did the same and dropped the shorts carelessly, then stepped out of them.

Stefan glanced at me for a moment, a corner of his lips ticking up. Then, he followed my lead and took his shorts off.

The fact that the beach was empty helped, though I didn't particularly mind if anyone saw me. Still, being around the naked Stefan always carried a risk of ending up in an awkward situation. Like exactly now. A glance at his abs, the V-line leading to his long, thick, mostly soft dick and swollen balls made something stir in me.

He and I had been naked around one another from pretty much the first week we'd met. The locker rooms and showers after P.E. made that inevitable. But, as time had gone on and we figured out more about ourselves and each other, we stopped caring if we saw each other naked. Until the summer camp before college where something changed and we both realized we could do more than just look.

Stefan's crooked smile made me feel these things the most. The front two teeth that were slightly disproportionately larger, the glint in his deep blue eyes, the dance that his eyebrows did when he felt naughty... Everything mixed together to lure all my blood down to my dick.

This was going to be a fun honeymoon.

"Race you to it," he said and kicked the sand with his feet as he ran for the sea. Before I even had a chance to run, Stefan was splashing water with his feet and extending his arms to dive.

I ran, but not for long, because he'd beat me to it. Then, I slowed down and stepped through the shallow water. It was warmer than anywhere in Santa Barbara, but still chilly enough to cool us down. It was, put simply, pure perfection. Had someone decided to test the ideal water temperature, they would have found this to be the correct answer.

I dove just as Stefan emerged on the surface. Knowing him, he would come right back to splash the crap out of me until I was soaked, and I actually liked doing things of my own free will instead of being pushed into them.

Not that I wasn't pushed into things. Hell, I was probably pushed into most things in my life without even having an opinion. But that didn't mean I liked it very much.

I submerged myself fully, exhaling through my nose and leaving a trail of bubbles as I spread my arms and gained more depth. Naked, one with nature, I kicked my feet a little and propelled myself up.

When I emerged, I spun my head left and right, spraying water out of my hair in every direction.

“As a very intelligent and social being, Marco occasionally makes a magnificent appearance if you’re patient enough. Tourists from around the world pay a visit to Catalina Island in hopes to meet this playful and elusive creature,” Stefan narrated as he floated toward me.

I chortled as I moved my legs back and forth to stay afloat. “Magnificent, huh?”

Stefan swam closer, closing the distance between us. As he kicked his feet around, he brushed the tip of his toe over my foot. He tilted his head as if to examine whether I was magnificent or not. “You’re alright, I guess.”

My right hand swept across the surface and splashed Stefan in the face, kicking bubbles of laughter out of him. He splashed back, getting drops of salty water up my nose and making me cough, but I returned the favor by leaping at him. With my arms around his shoulders, I submerged us both and the sea swallowed Stefan’s screeching protest.

He grappled me around my waist, not letting either of us emerge for a few moments. Then, a hand wrapped around my semi-hard dick just as we floated up and I moaned into the empty night. He gripped and squeezed me so hard that I ended up whimpering.

“Are you hard for me?” he teased.

I snorted. “Like you’re not.” Wading with my hand between us, I found that he was, in fact, fully up. He throbbed in my hand once and I grinned. “See?”

He bit his lip, then let it slide out, turning his head away but looking at me from the corners of his eyes.

As we let go of each other, he spun in the water, then faced me again. Perhaps it was the tiredness from the past twenty-four hours or the fact that we were, by all accounts, a married couple, but I asked a question which we’d never asked one another before. “Do you think it’s kinda weird?”

“Is what weird?” he asked, letting a little frown creep into his brow.

I shrugged and splashed water as I pointed my hands between us. “Just this. Us.”

“You mean the way we’re, like, naked and horny? We’re twenty-one. What else are we supposed to be?” He looked at me like I was crazy.

Maybe I was.

“No, I mean... Other people aren’t *this* close. Like, we don’t do this with the rest of the gang.” I wasn’t sure why I was asking. Perhaps I wondered if we felt the same way. In no way did I think we had something to change. “Like, have sex sometimes.”

“We buy different flavored ice-creams and swap halfway through,” Stefan pointed out. “Having sex with you isn’t weird.”

“I don’t mean that it’s weird,” I said, catching my breath as the sea pressured my lungs. “Not in a bad way, at least.”

Stefan smiled with one side of his lips. “Yeah, but I feel safe with you. The way I see it, we’re still young enough to experiment. And who better to experiment with than someone you trust?”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“There are more intimate things that fucking,” Stefan pointed out with a cheeky grin. “You’re my best friend for a reason.”

I swam a little closer to him. “And you’re mine.”

Stefan placed his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. I tensed, ready for him to dunk me underwater, but he didn’t. “And I’m not actually jealous of Romeo. You can hook up with him if you want.”

I laughed out loud. “Yeah, no. I don’t think I will. But thanks.”

“I mean it,” he said. “This is why we’re still at it. We don’t suffocate each other.”

The thing was, I really didn’t want to hook up with Romeo. Especially not after Stefan tugged me in for a friendly hug. Er... It was mostly friendly. We were both still pretty hard and, as our bodies pressed together, he let out the softest moan.

“But, um... If you’re not gonna go looking for Romeo, maybe we could get some use out of that amazing bed,” Stefan said more quietly as he let go of me.

“Hell yeah,” I whispered, eyes blazing with immediate lust and lips spreading into a broad smile.

Stefan chuckled and pushed himself to float on his back. As he did, he didn't shy away from letting me see how excited he was. He swam toward the shore on his back as the rising moon bathed him in silver.

And I followed, pretty much leaving a trail of drool behind me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

You And Me



I ONLY PUT MY shorts on so we could march through the more decent part of the resort. My T-shirt and shoes were hanging from my left hand and I was holding Marco's hand in my right.

On our wedding night, we hadn't done anything too intense, but only because of the packing. Now, though, my heart was pounding in my chest. It had been a long while since we'd done anything more than lend each other a hand to a hot movie.

We rushed down the sandy beach and onto the stone paved path, around the bar, and into the foliage to find number thirteen. There, I produced the key from the pocket of my tight shorts — I knew exactly what Marco had been thinking when he'd gotten me this size and I loved it — and barged inside.

The moment we closed the door and I flicked the lights on, which were actually just many lamps scattered around the

living room and no overhead lights at all, I held my breath.

Marco stood behind me, facing my back, and I turned around with a growing smile on my face. I'd been hoping for this — I'd even gotten myself ready for action — so I couldn't hide it from my eyes and lips.

I dropped my sneakers and T-shirt and let a moment pass. We faced one another, chests rising and falling, eyes shining. That moment before the first kiss was almost the most special to me and Marco knew it like he knew everything. He let it linger, the anticipation growing, the pressure rising. I wanted him right this instant, but we toyed with each other until standing so close without touching became unbearable.

Then, as if pushed by some unearthly force, I stepped forward and pinned him against the door, my chest against his. Our stomachs pressed together and my crotch pushed into him, letting him know freely how excited I really was.

As Marco thumped against the door, he grinned. But it only lasted a heartbeat because I wiped that grin off his face with my lips. Parting them to suck his lower lip in, I inhaled and immediately moaned against his parting mouth.

Marco's tongue slid into my mouth and he grabbed me around my waist, turning us around and pressing me against the door.

I loved it when he was a bit aggressive with me. I liked the grappling for control as much as I liked finishing together.

My hands moved up the sides of his ribcage, then I dug my fingers in, making him laugh out loud and wiggle out of my grip. “Not fair,” he protested as he leaped back at me, rubbing his bulge against mine and sucking the life out of me right through my mouth.

When Marco growled, every hair on my pretty smooth body straightened. He pulled his head back, then buried his face in the crook of my neck, kissing the spots where he’d left small marks from the night before.

We never *really* bothered to hide that we messed around from time to time. It was just that being too open about it among our friends would lead to a whole lot of speculation, so we avoided it. Here, though, we could go wild.

I hooked my fingers inside Marco’s shorts and held him firmly against me. His body was hot, muscles tense, and skin salty from swimming. It gave our kisses a bit of a kick.

Moans seeped out of my open mouth and knotted my throat in waves that matched the intensity of Marco’s kisses along my neck.

“Ah, fuck,” I whimpered. “Take me... To the... Bed...”

Marco balled his fists and pressed them against the door on either side of my head, then pushed himself away. For a moment, we didn’t move. He just gazed at me with his piercing eyes. Then, he kissed me on the lips once more, shortly, before snatching my hands out of his shorts and pulling me away from the door.

Marco rushed up the stairs as I stole glances of his perfect ass.

He paused by the bed in partial light from all the downstairs lamps and waited for me. Once I joined him, he slowed down the pace. He took a determined step toward me, eyes locked on my face, and reached with his right hand to hold the back of my head. “You’re such a great kisser,” he said, voice deeper than usual.

“Then, we’re matched perfectly,” I said. Because Marco was the best kisser I knew. Not that I knew many, when I thought about it. Sure, we’d both fooled around with other people, but nowhere near enough to merit the nickname we carried. The Fuckboys. The two of us were least deserving of it among our friends.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Marco’s tongue was in. He tilted his head and explored every part of my mouth. I welcomed him, then returned the favor. Turning and shifting, tipping the balance of power, grabbing a hold of one another, we inched toward the bed and thirsted over each other until Marco pressed his bare hands against my chest and pushed me.

I’d totally lost all sense of orientation and for a moment didn’t know where I was going to land. A yelp escaped me half a moment before I fell back onto the big, soft mattress, arm resting above my head, legs spread for him to kneel between.

My cock pitched a tent as much as it could in shorts as tight as these. Its thick outline made Marco share a sinister smile. He lowered his head and watched me from under his eyebrows, lowering himself inch by inch as he knelt on the bed. Then, as he reached for my stomach, he extended his tongue and licked me all the way up to my Adam's apple, sucking all the air out of my lungs.

My head spun and I forced myself to breathe. Breathing meant staying alive and staying alive meant having more of this.

Marco let out a soft, quiet laugh against my chest, then moved swiftly to suck my left nipple between his teeth. It curled my toes and made my arms shoot down. I grabbed fistfuls of his gorgeous hair and tightened my grip the harder he sucked it. And when his teeth closed around the tip, turning my nipple tiny and hard, I squealed and pushed him away.

He laughed harder, bent down, and dragged his lips back to my stomach.

“No, wait,” I whispered in haste. “You did that last night.”

Marco looked up, lips still forming a kiss even though they were no longer on my body. “So?”

“It's my turn,” I said. Before I even finished speaking, I grabbed him under his arms and yanked him up. He collapsed on top of me, but I put in the muscle and turned us over so that I lay on top.

Smiling his naughty smiles, Marco wiggled his hips and I realized he was taking his shorts off. It never stopped being a thrill to see him undress.

I pushed myself off him just enough so I could free myself of my shorts. “Damn, these are way too tight,” I hissed as I pulled them down.

“Yeah, but your butt never looked better,” Marco said. He managed to get his shorts down to his knees, so I got off the bed, finally dropped mine, and reached to rid him of his.

Marco tucked both hands under his head and kept his eyes on me. His expectant smile radiated the room far more than the faraway lamps could.

I knelt on the bed and wrapped my fingers around his swollen cock, felt it pulse in my hand, and licked my lips as I lowered my head. A little salty from the swim, Marco’s cock was delicious, sweet precum slicking the tip. It slid into my mouth and I held my breath. I paused, holding him a third of the way in, and let myself memorize this feeling of thrill and joy.

Slowly, I proceeded to swallow him as far as my throat allowed before pulling back and sucking in a breath of air through my nose.

Marco rolled his eyes back, mouth wide open, as I squeezed the base of his cock and sucked him into my mouth again. I held my gaze on his face as I did so, waiting for him to look at me. And when he did, the intensity of his green-brown eyes penetrated through my very soul.

I felt his gaze in my chest and my curling toes, I felt it in my pulsing cock and my constricting throat.

Marco bit his lip hard as I dragged myself down his cock as far as I could, holding there, applying immeasurable pressure on him. He released his lip and opened his mouth as if to moan, but no sounds came out. Instead, his abs flexed hard and he jerked his hips up, stabbing down my throat.

I pulled back, wiped my chin with the back of my hand, and grinned with mischief at him. *Is that how you want to play?* I asked silently.

I wrapped my left hand around his shaft, sucked him in again, and cupped his balls in my right. Slowly, I used my thumb and index finger to close a makeshift ring around his sack, pulling his balls gently, making him gasp for air. The knuckles on the rest of my fingers massaged his taint as I swallowed half of his cock, gripping the lower half with my hand. As I moved my mouth along his length, my hand stroked him and then he was hyperventilating.

His hands shot down from behind his head and clutched the bedsheets like he was about to tear them apart. “Yes, fuck, yes,” he spilled over his lips. “Just like that. Ah, fucking hell, Stefan... Don’t stop...”

The faster I sucked him off, the tighter my grip around his sack grew and the steelier his abs appeared. His skin seemed slick with sweat and I yearned to press my tongue against his stomach, then lick every last inch of my friend’s body.

Somewhere deep in the corners of my mind, I figured it was an odd thing to want to do to your friend. But that thought could wait for another day.

Marco's cock throbbed and I released him abruptly before he blew.

He breathed heavily for a few long moments as I smirked with pride. Yeah, I'd gotten him to the very edge, then denied it to him. He wasn't getting off the hook so easily with me.

As Marco closed his eyes and calmed his breathing, I reached for the nightstand. Earlier, I'd discovered their complimentary pack in there and grabbed the small bottle of lube and a condom from the drawer.

I made a quick job of opening the condom and Marco was just getting back to the real world when I reached for his cock. It pulsed twice in my hand, forcing me to be gentle, and I slipped the condom on.

Marco said nothing, but his effort to suppress an excited smile failed quickly.

I lubed him up, then myself, and crawled along his body until my ass was above his crotch. There, I rested my clean, right hand against his chest, palm open, fingers spread. Marco's hands reached for my ass, cupping the cheeks, spreading them for me.

With my lubed up fingers, I circled my hole for a few heartbeats, then slipped one inside. Being a bit of a regular sex toy user, getting myself ready was no hard job. My finger

probed me while my friend watched me excitedly. As I slipped another finger in, stretching myself slowly, my entire body contorted. I arched my back and swung my hips back and forth, teasing Marco of what was to come.

He moved one hand away from my butt and gripped his cock, then began stroking it slowly. Now and then, the tip would touch my balls or taint, making me thirsty for him.

Moments passed as Marco waited patiently, breathing in steady breaths, his body hot under my hand. And when I was ready, I slipped my fingers out and took hold of his cock. Once again, he pulled his hands up and tucked them under his head. He would, no doubt, grapple me for control very soon, but he was enjoying the switch for now.

As his tip met my hole, I held my breath and curled the fingers of my right hand, letting my nails gently scratch Marco's smooth, sculpted pecs. I held him firmly, my heart beating hard in anticipation. How long had it been since we'd taken it this far? It felt like ages. I wondered why.

But I didn't have long to ponder these thoughts. Marco's tip pushed into me, sending a blissful wave of warm pain through my abdomen. It melted away before I was even fully aware of it, but it made me bite my lip to choke back a moan.

When he was in, everything felt easier. And not just sex, but everything at all. No problem remained; no question was unanswered. I relaxed and sat on him, taking most of his cock within a minute of gentle swings of my hips. Then, letting my

left hand join my right on Marco's chest, I rode him like there was no tomorrow.

He filled me and transcended me into some alternate reality where everything felt possible and reachable. Resting there, beautiful as he was, Marco gazed into my eyes as fire burned brighter and hotter with every move I made. More and more and more, I increased the pace, added a kick to the swing of my body, taking him deeper and harder inside of me.

Our moans mixed together when they first emerged as I ground my ass against his crotch, welcoming his big cock inside of me. The night before, all he'd done was fuck my fist, and it had been the hottest thing I knew. Now, as beads of sweat collected over our brows and I rode him harder, every encounter we'd ever had with each other or other people paled in comparison.

My carefully planned moves that teased him without letting him unleash his full force frustrated Marco enough that his arms abruptly shot up and closed around me. He pulled me down from sitting nearly upright to bending all the way until our torsos pressed together. He thrust his hips up and smashed into me, fucking me balls deep and faster than before. His crotch slapped hard against my ass, his hold on me tightened.

In an instant, one of Marco's hands found the back of my head and grabbed a fistful of my hair. He gripped it and yanked it back just enough that I could open my mouth in a gasp, but he choked my gasp by pressing his mouth against mine. A sloppy, dirty kiss ensued and lit me up from the

inside. His tongue pushed into my mouth and probed all of me, but I returned the favor a few heartbeats later.

We moaned and gasped and sighed into one another as Marco jerked his hips up and down, increasing the pace all along and wrecking us both.

When I cried out into his open mouth and made his lips stretch into a smile over mine, he stopped, let go of my hair, closed his arms around my waist, and spun us around. It seemed, for a moment, like he turned the entire bungalow upside down. Without letting himself slip out of me, Marco turned me to lie on my back and pressed down on me with all his weight.

I raised my legs as Marco pushed himself up. He swung slowly back and forth, rubbing against my prostate with each push, and helped me lift my feet to his shoulders.

His unruly hair closed in on both sides of his face, a stray lock falling over his left eye. He swung his head a little, failing to move the lock away, and gripped my ankles hard as he fucked me faster.

Each time Marco hit my prostate, my dick pulsed, jumped off my stomach as it stiffened and fell back as it relaxed. Moment by hot as hell moment, my balls tightened and my moans grew louder until I thought I was going to bring down the roof of the bungalow. I cursed and hissed and reached for Marco's hips to nudge him harder. "Yes, fuck, please, yes..." And the harder he went, the dirtier I became. "Fuck me with that big dick. Fuck me harder, please. Marco... Marco..."

Please...” My brain spun; everything fell out of balance. Nothing but Marco’s slick and shiny body remained in focus, lit softly by the subdued lamplights from downstairs.

Marco bent down, pushing my legs with his shoulders, and reached for my throat. When his fingers closed around my neck, my eyes rolled back and I sucked in a deep breath of air. It wasn’t a hard squeeze — it had never been — but it was firm enough to keep me in place.

Moments flashed in front of my eyes. I blinked and saw Marco baring his teeth, biting his lip like he was hellbent on drawing blood. I breathed again, slamming one of my hands over both of his, urging him to squeeze a little harder.

My dick pulsed and itched and the dirty, slapping sound filled my ears as Marco held the fast pace constant, smashing against me like our lives depended on it.

The symphony of our sins culminated in the gigantic final cord as our hands grabbed for one another. Heartbeats hastened, whimpers burst out of me, and Marco placed his hand over my lips, staring into my eyes like he could suck my soul out by nothing more than looking at me.

I bit his hand not to be naughty or daring, but because my body tensed and the need for something soft between my teeth grew excruciating.

Marco grinned harder in return, pulling his cock nearly all the way out, then shoving it all the way back in, up to his balls. Once, twice, thrice... I released his hand and grabbed his hips again, pulling him in one last time and holding him there as

my hole pulsed around the base of his cock and my dick throbbed, squirting cum all over my chest.

I groaned a long, endless “Fuh-ack,” just as Marco’s cock twitched and he jerked his hips shortly a few more times, tipping himself over the edge, spasming and filling the condom with his cum.

Neither of us moved for what felt like an eternity. I wouldn’t have minded an eternity of this. I wouldn’t have minded us turning to stone at the first ray of dawn sunlight and staying locked in forever, just like this, holding our breaths and shivering as the last sensations of our orgasms thundered through us.

Then, Marco pulled his dick out of me with slow and gentle care, slipped the condom off, and collapsed on top of me. He didn’t mind the mess on my torso and neither did I.

I wrapped my arms around his sweaty back and held him tightly as I gasped for air and cooled down a notch.

I couldn’t say how long it lasted. Time was a foreign concept to me. It passed, but I didn’t know how quickly or how much of it. Instead, I knew that Marco’s heartbeat made itself known against my chest and that it matched the pace of mine. It was growing slower as Marco nibbled on the soft spot of my ear, exhaling through his nose and tickling me.

Getting out of the bed was a spontaneous act, like all the acts that had led us here, and we both headed down the stairs with a bit of a swing to our strides. We showered together like guys did in any locker room, except we shared the shower

head and didn't shy away from helping one another soap up our backs.

Then, showered and dry, we put minimal clothes on; Marco simply pulled a pair of everyday shorts on while I padded myself with an extra layer of underwear, first.

"That was fucking amazing," Marco said as he crashed onto the sofa in the small living room and reached for the remote. The TV lit up and my friend shuffled through channels as I examined the contents of kitchen cabinets. They were filled with snacks of a million kinds. Sweet, salty, savory, spicy, mixed; gummy bears and chocolate bars and crispy chips. We had it all.

"My ass is still burning," I said and glanced at Marco. He didn't look at me, but one corner of his lips ticked up in an irreparable show of pride. I loved the feeling after sex, both physical and emotional. I was calm and warm and fuzzy.

That was, I was sure, the reason why we did this sort of thing. Simply because we could. He was the guy I trusted the most in this world and helping each other feel so warm and fuzzy was just another aspect of our friendship.

"Oh, look," Marco said. "There's a *Doctor Who* marathon."

My head spun so fast it nearly fell off. Two-thousand-and-five's revival season was still my ultimate favorite and the titular hero was just about to meet his nemesis. "This day keeps getting better," I squealed.

Grabbing a few big bowls from the kitchen cabinets and pulling the snacks that would later be charged to the room, I bit my lip. “Thank you, Dayton,” I hummed as I opened each of the bags.

Marco laughed out loud and hopped over to help me carry the snacks to the living room. There, he crashed down in one corner and I spread all over the sofa. It was a small one, so my legs dangled from one end, but Marco put a cushion into his lap and I rested my head there.

As we snacked and watched one of the finest hours of television, Marco’s hand aimlessly ran through my hair, lulling me to sleep. Episode after episode, we giggled like kids at all the best bits and I fell in and out of sleep multiple times all the while his petting persisted.

It was calming and relaxing. He probably didn’t know he was doing it. He definitely didn’t know it was one of the two ways my parents calmed me down when I was a baby. The other one was leaving me near a window to look at the way the leaves danced on a gentle breeze. The smaller the leaves, the calmer I would get. They would shimmer in the sunshine and put me to sleep.

I didn’t know what time it was when Marco scratched my back and said we better go to bed. I knew that we were late into the season of *Doctor Who* and that we’d depleted all the bowls we’d carried over. It was mostly Marco’s doing with me napping on and off for the better part of the evening.

And when we got to bed and took one side each, I sort of missed him.

Without a word uttered, I scooted closer to the middle and reached behind my back fumbling for his hand. When I found it, I tugged him, and he rolled over to wrap his arm around me.

Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Under The Morning Sunshine



THE THING ABOUT STEFAN was that he was one seriously messy sleeper. We rarely shared the bed, but when we did, it was always an adventure. I would always wake up tangled in a cover so twisted that it looked more like a thick rope than a blanket. A discord of limbs would surround me and for a few moments I wouldn't be sure which of them were attached to which one of us.

This morning was no different. I was on my back, but bent at my waist at an odd angle, sort of leaning into Stefan. And Stefan was everywhere. His head was on my pec and his left arm was tangled with my right and under my shoulder. The fingers of his left hand were in my hair. Half of his body was on me with his right leg raised and bent so that his thigh pressed against my morning erection, but his leg was bent at the knee and following the outer side of my leg. His other arm rested over my torso, then sneaked under me.

I tried to move, but Stefan grunted in protest.

The best I could do was lick the index finger of my left hand, then push it into his ear.

Like a lightning bolt, Stefan freed his right arm and slapped my hand away. “I will murder you,” he groaned and buried his face into my armpit.

“Who’s gonna bring you coffee if you do?” I whispered.

Stefan’s head shot up, eyes wide open and pooling with desire. “Coffee?”

I couldn’t hold my grin back.

He mock-pouted. “I didn’t know coffee was on the table.”

I took hold of his shoulder and rolled him off of me. “It will be if I ever get out of the bed.”

Out of the two of us, I was the morning person. I was also the night owl. Stefan was neither. He was a koala bear, but with a lot higher libido and unquestionable sex appeal.

I never slept much unless I was blind drunk and even then, it was just to detox. When sober, I slept even less. I could probably go for weeks with nothing more than power naps whenever I got a chance.

Having gone through foster homes where midnight yelling was a thing, I was pretty sure some part of me was always on high alert. You never knew when the fight might stumble into your room — if you were lucky enough to have a room to call your own.

“Hello, there,” he said when he dropped his gaze to the raging erection that had woken me up.

“I’ll let you hang out with it later if you let me go,” I said, but Stefan only returned his arm around me and fussed.

I sighed. He only really left me with one option and it was the nuclear one. I shrugged to myself and did the unimaginable. The fingers of my left hand dug between his bare ribs and I tickled the crap out of him until he hyperventilated and pushed away all the way to the edge of the bed, begging for mercy.

As he rolled onto his back, I realized I wasn’t the only one rocking a casual morning boner. “Hey, you’re up,” I pointed out and he chuckled.

“Will you get us that coffee or what?” Stefan asked, then pressed his open fist against the tip of his bulge and pushed it all the way down as he stretched in the bed.

“Fuck, that was... A lot,” I said, breathless. You’d think we hadn’t been releasing all this sexual frustration enough, but we really had.

I shook my head as if to clear my mind of the sudden urge to return to bed and make him stretch some more. Then, I went downstairs and got the coffee going.

The last ten years of my life had been in huge contrast with all the years that had come before. By right, I should have gotten used to this by now. But as I replaced the filter in the coffeemaker and filled it with water, put it to brew, and leaned

back against the counter while looking outside at the jungle we were in, a familiar sensation filled me to the brim. Were I made of glass, this sensation would shatter me.

It was a sense of dread that filled my chest like a volcano eruption. *What the hell am I doing here?* I asked myself in a moment of panic. *I don't belong here.* It felt like it had only been yesterday that I'd yet again lost the roof over my head. That had been the last time I was put back into the orphanage, but I'd known the routine well by then. And I had known that the older I'd gotten, the less likely I was to get a permanent home. The cycle never stopped. And in walked Mom and Dad, who had only been Liz and John at the time. Or Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster, to be more precise. They'd come to meet us, talk to us, just like people had done all the time. I'd known they would pick a cute, quiet toddler and didn't care much.

Yet something had made them talk to me. I'd been sitting in a corner when Mom joined me. Even then, I hadn't paid her much attention. *You're being nice*, I'd thought. I'd appreciated it, but it hadn't crossed my mind that I would move in with them within two months. It hadn't crossed my mind that they would adopt me from out of all the other kids. There had been nothing special about me. I couldn't draw or sing or play any sports. I'd been sickly skinny and more of a poster boy for undernourishment and pity than a kid someone would want to raise. I'd been too old to be raised by a family. Right? Wrong. Mom and Dad had chosen me precisely because people didn't want to risk it with older kids. Mom often joked she didn't want to change diapers.

And in the blink of an eye, I had found myself with everything I wanted just a request away. They'd moved me to a better school, then moved altogether so I would get access to the best high school. They'd taken me from my shared little room, to a penthouse, then a house, where I had a massive bedroom en suite, game room, a pool, wealthy guests with kids my age, and so on. And nothing could have prepared me for that change.

A part of me had stayed in the orphanage. It never left.

As coffee trickled into the pot, I pushed away these thoughts. I loved my parents not only because I was grateful, but because they were the best people ever. They'd been stern more than once, making me a fairly responsible adult — aside from getting drunk and married that one time — and they'd given me a shot at life that was more than just a hustle.

But it could have been someone else. They could have picked anyone. Had the foster parents I'd been with not gotten drunk and entered a shouting match only to turn their anger at me, I never would have been at the orphanage to meet Liz and John.

I walked around the bungalow and found my phone where I'd left it the night before. Several messages cluttered my screen and I ran quickly through them. They were mostly in our group chat.

Dayton: How's married life treating you, guys?

London: They're too busy to reply.

Dayton: All my wishes have come true.

Hudson: Busy? I don't need to imagine this. Thanks.

Caleb: Guys, they'll block us if you keep this up.

Dayton: I should have gotten them one-way tickets, then.

I chuckled to myself and muted the chat. There would be plenty of time to talk to them. I was already considering whether to order a thirty-two-year-old or thirty-three-year-old Macallan for a photo op. Dayton would lose his mind.

When Stefan joined me downstairs, he was casually dressed in a sleeveless T-shirt and a pair of pale denim shorts. His hair was messy and he was still blinking himself awake. "Smells delicious," he said as I poured coffee into mugs.

We sat at the dining table with our hot mugs in perfect silence. Being quiet with Stefan had never been a problem. We could share silence as much as jokes or meaningful conversation. It was something I didn't have with most people. The need to say something with the lack of anything to say wasn't present here.

Instead, I glanced at him now and again. My heart clenched each time, but I tossed it to fatigue. Last night, we'd spent the

last reserves of energy. It would take a beach hammock for the rest of our stay for our batteries to charge, but I didn't fool myself expecting anything close. Passion had devastated us in all the best ways last night and I craved more.

As the late morning sunshine from a faraway window touched Stefan's light brown face, steely-winged butterflies took flight in my stomach. My palms grew slick with cold sweat in an instant. My pulse increased as I examined his long, dark eyelashes, framing his blue eyes like mascara. The urge to reach across the table and run my hand through his hair yanked my heart down into my stomach and squeezed it with an iron-clad grip.

The sudden sensation choked me. It welled in me until it climbed into my throat, where it pulsed in the rhythm of my heartbeat.

You're beautiful under the morning sunshine, I wanted to say. I couldn't get the words over my lips. Physically, I could not speak. Emotionally, I had no clue where the line was. Telling him how beautiful he was — and not just in passing, but truly and fully — wasn't a thing you just told your friend. Right?

"Are you okay?" Stefan asked the next moment.

"Hungry," I blurted. My fingers trembled and I hid them under the table in my lap. I wasn't ready to start this conversation. At best, I would get a reminder of what we were really about. At worst, I would lose what little we had.

Stefan shook his head. "Let's go out and eat, then."

And that was exactly what we did a few minutes later. We finished our coffee in silence that was a lot more tense now, for me, got ready, and headed out.

Our second day in heaven was a lot more somber. We didn't plan on seeking the nudist beach or swimming at all. Stefan had his headphones on and I napped in a hammock in partial shade. Yet whenever I closed my eyes, I saw him. Somewhere along the way, Stefan had acquired a huge chunk of real estate in my mind and he had no intention of leaving.

I wondered if this would ever lead us anywhere. Today was fine as it was, but where were we heading tomorrow? All my friends were settling down, one by one, in lustful whirlwinds of falling in love. But Stefan and I had been this way the longest and I felt like we were the furthest ones from ever reaching a conclusion. Save for Dayton who couldn't handle spending more than two hours with any guy.

Stefan was sleeping with his headphones on, swinging left and right every once in a long while, when I looked at him.

I had never allowed myself to imagine my future when it came to love. How lucky would I have to be to score a guy half as great as Stefan? Simply put, I would have to be *impossibly* lucky.

With a sigh, I pursed my lips and drifted asleep once again.

CHAPTER NINE

How Well Do You Know Me?



SOMETHING WAS BREWING BEHIND the warmth of Marco's brown eyes, but he wasn't going to say it. He was never going to say it. The fear of abandonment, so deeply seeded within him, outweighed his need to know.

He stuck to aimless chat and jokes the entire afternoon, as we left our hammocks and lounged in the beach bar.

I didn't push him. Yet.

Instead, I let the sangria flow down my throat and enjoyed the summer breeze coming from the sea. The white sand reflected the sunlight and lit up all of the scenery around us.

Every so often, I would glance at him, and my heart would trip. The ink black hair, curly and tousled, the gaze lost somewhere in the distance, his creamy skin lightly tanned. And when he met my gaze, something opened up in my chest and I couldn't ignore it.

The way he looked at me was different from anything I knew. Nobody looked at me quite like that. I wondered what he saw. I wondered why he seemed to soften whenever our eyes locked.

Absentmindedly, I played with this ridiculous silver ring on my finger. I shouldn't have been wearing it, really. It was a reminder of everything I stood against. Rings didn't bring people together; people brought themselves together. And we both knew it was meaningless. So why hadn't I taken it off yet?

"Excuse me," came the voice from the table next to ours.

Marco was quicker in turning around. "Hey. Yeah?"

The man who had spoken to us was familiar. It took me a moment to put the pieces together. It was his companion, this gorgeous, brown-haired woman in a light summer dress, that sparked the connection. We'd seen them smiling at us the day before. "We were just wondering about sangria. We haven't had any and can't decide if it's worth a try."

Marco laughed out loud. "We're enjoying it more than we should."

I chuckled to myself and downed whatever was left in my glass before it got too warm.

"So, it's good?" the man asked.

"Here," Marco said and waved at the waiter. "Could we have two more glasses and another pitcher?"

“Right away, Sir,” the waiter said and disappeared from my vision.

“You don’t have to do that,” the man said.

“We’ll have another pitcher with or without you,” I chimed in. It was easy to be generous when your friends sweated with anxiety over a joke that had gone too far and would cost them dearly.

“That’s so kind,” the woman said. “Thank you.”

“Jude, by the way,” the man with a cropped beard and a wide-open shirt said as he extended his arm over the small space between our tables. “And this is my wife, Pauline.”

Marco introduced us without saying I was his husband. It was implied, considering our location.

“Do you mind me asking how old you are?” Jude gave a shy little smile.

“Not at all, we’re both twenty-one,” Marco said.

“Ah, that is so romantic,” Pauline said. “When true love happens, it doesn’t matter how old you are.”

Jude glanced at her kindly and smiled. “We met in college. Both of us were nineteen, many years ago. We’ve been together ever since.”

Marco almost swooned off his chair. His parents were just like that, too. They had been high school sweethearts and by the time they had gone to college, they had already fallen in love. They’d never even considered dating anyone else.

Not at all like mine. Mom and Dad, though they'd met in college, too, had never had a great relationship. What they had was me, by chance, to tie them together in a decade of misery until he reeked of alcohol and she put out her cigarettes in his plate. I had never seen two people affect each other that badly, before or after them. Their divorce had been a blessing in disguise; no matter how bad, it had set them both on the right track. He'd stopped drinking, she'd quit smoking, and they pretended like they had never met each other. When, on rare occasions, they needed to mention the other, their eyes twitched.

I looked at Jude and Pauline from the corner of my eye and wondered how long it would take them to start hating each other. Ten more years? Twenty? I shrugged to myself; it didn't matter how long. It was destined to happen. I would never say such a thing out loud to a seemingly happy couple, though.

"We met in high school," Marco said. "I was so out of my depth when I walked in. Being adopted by people who are well off and transported into this new world scared the life out of me. Middle school sucked, I couldn't fit in, so I walked in fully expecting to be the target of bullies for four more years. I'd already accepted that. But then I saw Stefan, sitting alone, grinning and waving at me to sit with him."

"You were such a cute boy," I murmured before I could stop myself. My heart fluttered so hard that it blurred my vision. He had only just begun letting his hair grow longer. "You were so awkward in that uniform like you had a stick up your ass, but there was... Something. Your eyebrows were high like you

were still hoping for something good, even if your lips were curving down, expecting the worst.” I stopped talking abruptly because my throat seized. Marco had been the most beautiful boy I’d seen in my life, but he’d also seemed the most timid and vulnerable. By that time, I’d already had a soft spot for the underdogs of this world, having gone through watching my parents descend into pure hatred and contempt, I’d developed a sense for people who were hurting one way or another.

“That’s such a beautiful story,” said Pauline and Jude nodded in agreement.

Luckily, the waiter interrupted us before we could dive into our shared history. The pitcher had large slices of mango, kiwi, and pineapple, soaking in wine, triple sec, soda water, and orange juice. The waiter placed glasses on our table and Marco turned to Jude. “If you’d like, you’re free to join us.”

“We don’t want to intrude,” Pauline said politely.

“You won’t be intruding, I promise,” Marco said.

Pauline and Jude exchanged a look and shrugged. “Sure. That’d be great,” Jude said. And in an instant, two tables became one and two couples became a group. Marco poured us drinks and raised his glass.

“To sangria,” he said. “Bringing people together since it was still called *hippocras*.”

We laughed at that and let our glasses touch, then poured the sweet beverage down our throats.

Jude and Pauline loved it, wondering how exactly they'd avoided it all their lives. Pauline thought she'd tried it once, ages ago, and disliked it, which explained why Jude never tried it. They had shared their lives to their very heartbeats and I bit my lip as I realized that.

The more you were twined, the harder it was to get out.

As time went on, I managed to silence these thoughts that kept creeping in. Well, sangria managed to silence them. The daylight was turning gold, then orange, and we kept ordering drinks and snacks.

They told us how they'd gotten married five years earlier and renewed their vows now, for their anniversary. "We decided it was a good time to revisit them. The thing about vows is, they don't always last. But so long as you know that, you can update them," Jude explained.

"Which vows did you break?" Marco asked, curiosity lighting his eyes on fire.

They laughed and Pauline answered. "One I can think of is that I vowed to be grateful for every day we would spend together. That's easier said than done. See, when you feel like you've failed at everything you've done and the person you love keeps telling you've got this, it's hard not to feel like it's nothing more than pity. I was definitely not grateful at the time when all I wanted to do was quit my passion project and return to office work."

"But the vow we kept," Jude said. "Was to revisit and revise. And that's why we're here. Our second honeymoon."

“Vowing to be grateful for *most* of the days we spend together,” Pauline joked with a kind smile.

They grew increasingly interested in Marco’s story and he loved to share it. He had a way of retelling it to everyone who wanted to hear that struck all the highs and lows of his life. To this day, six years after I’d met him, he still talked about his life like he could lose it any minute.

“I’m just very lucky, you know,” he said toward the end. “Nothing so random has happened to me since.”

“It was meant to be,” Pauline said.

Marco nodded, but he didn’t believe it. I knew he didn’t believe it. Whenever the story of his adoption came around, he slouched like that little boy who had just been offered a seat in English Lit, sat down, and still wondered if it was a prank. Well, until I couldn’t keep it down and told him how much I loved his hair. That shattered the ice between us nicely and for good.

“Oh, actually,” Jude said. “We got this game up in the shop, thinking we could play with our friends back home. You know how it goes? Married couples only hang out with married couples. Singles don’t want to do anything with us.” He laughed. “But if you guys want to give it a go, it’s right here.” He bent under the table and pulled out a box from their beach bag. It was a pink package with a large title embossed on the front, ‘How Well Do You Know Me?’

“Uh, hell yeah,” Marco said, lips stretching into an excited smile. Even I couldn’t help but feel the thrill. I loved games.

“How do we play?”

“Easy,” Jude said. “We pull a question for each round, write our answers, and the other person rates them on a scale from one to five. Whoever’s got the least amount of points, buys the next round.”

I took a deep breath of air to get myself ready. Jude unpacked the box with Pauline’s help, sorting through question cards, answer sheets, and handing out small whiteboards with dry-erase markers to write down our answers.

For a test round, Marco took a question card and read out loud. “Can you name three of your partners closest friends?”

I chuckled to myself and scribbled on the board. Half a minute later, Jude was biting his lip and sweating, Pauline was smirking, and Marco and I exchanged glances like we were about to win the next round right away.

“Ready?” Pauline asked.

Jude turned his boards around and had three names crudely scribbled. I didn’t know who these people were, but Pauline scoffed. “I don’t even like Angela,” she said and made a sharp mark on Jude’s score paper. Then, she turned her board around with three names with exact ratings on the scale of one to ten on how much Jude liked them.

Jude covered his face and laughed out loud. “Crap. I dropped the ball on this one, didn’t I?”

“Uh-huh,” Pauline said, mock-angry.

Marco and I turned our boards to each other and burst out laughing. To a dot, our answers were identical. “We have the same friends,” I said as the boards revealed.

“Great minds and all that,” Pauline chimed in.

Smirking, we both marked the other one’s answer. No doubt, we both rated each other five out of five.

Pauline pulled the next question from the bunch. “Who was your partner’s first crush?”

I thought about it for a moment. Marco had never talked much about people from his past. He had mentioned, a few times only, a boy named Liam, but I bit my lip in thought. Was it Liam? I didn’t actually know if he’d had a crush on Liam or not. He’d said that Liam had been cute and a few years older.

At a loss, I wrote Liam’s name and shrugged to myself.

When Jude and Pauline turned their boards, then both giggled. “Ah, pretty Luna,” Jude said fondly. “And Steve, here, took Pauline to prom. He was her first and only crush before we met. Luckily, Steve smuggled some vodka and got blind drunk, took Pauline to dance, and puked all over the floor between them. She was lucky to escape the flood. And that, my friends, is why they never ended up dating.”

Pauline laughed at the story that must have been told many times before. It was one of those ‘when the stars align’ tales that couples loved to talk about.

I turned my board to Marco who took one look and his smile froze. He let out a strangled laugh and said nothing, but

scribbled on the score sheet what felt like a whole lot to his left, where the lowest score was. “Not even close,” he murmured when he noticed Jude and Pauline watching him expectantly.

Marco turned his board around. It only said, ‘Stefan says he doesn’t have crushes, but...’ And he took a breath of air, a shining grin on his face. “In secondary school, his music teacher retired and a new, fresh-out-of-the-academy guy took over and Stefan decided to become a professional musician when he grew up even if he had zero interest in music and less talent. And if that is not a crush, then I don’t know what is. Bonus points, when he told me this story, he mentioned that the teacher was cute as a pie.” Victoriously, Marco met my gaze and waited.

“It doesn’t count if I didn’t know I was crushing,” I muttered under my breath and marked his answer four out of five only because I’d had a bit of a stirring in my chest for another boy a year earlier. It had taken me a few years to put all the pieces together and realize that I’d been gay all along, but Marco knew that story, too. I supposed the teacher story was just more fun to tell.

Jude, still laughing at Marco’s tale, pulled the next question card. “What’s your partner’s favorite dessert?”

We set down to scribbling. Jude guessed Pauline’s second favorite, while Pauline totally missed. Marco simply wrote ‘All the cheesecake.’ And I turned my board last after giving Marco five out of five.

Mine said, 'He says fruit salad, but...' to return the favor of an embarrassing story. "He actually loves these off-brand Oreo cookies that are pure sugar and food coloring that one of his foster moms fed him for breakfast. He thought he was the luckiest kid in the world, getting Oreos every day."

Marco slapped his mouth against laughing too loudly, but it burst out anyway. "I actually really love fruit salads."

"But..." I added.

"Ugh. Fine!" He scribbled on the score sheet and kept chuckling.

I grabbed the next question and laughed immediately. "Can you list the relatives your partner cannot stand?"

That was an easy one. There was nobody that Marco couldn't stand. He was the most tolerant guy I knew. Even if he actually couldn't stand someone, it was a secret only Marco knew. Not even I had that much knowledge of him, and I had the most.

As I thought about my answer, and as everyone around me giggled like school kids, I thought of my parents again. The vicious contempt they had developed for one another was the perfect image of not being able to stand someone. That was what happened when relationships went for too long. They had been just like Jude and Pauline the way Granny talked, but it all twisted and perverted into pure disregard. They made each other physically ill just by being near one another.

Jude turned his board around and told an elaborate story of Pauline's aunt, who'd pressured her into getting married so much that she ended up asking a friend to play her girlfriend for a family gathering just to piss her off.

Pauline told us about Jude's great-uncle who tried to break them up when he realized they were seriously committed. When the truth came to light, the great-uncle said he didn't like how pointy Pauline's chin was.

I turned my board around with a doodle of a stick figure shrugging. "If there's anyone Marco can't stand in his family, he'll never say it."

Marco smiled. "Five out of five." He turned his board and smirked. It simply said Bud. "Not a relative, per se, but Bud was Stefan's mom's first relationship after the divorce and the guy seemed more interested in painting himself as a father figure than anything else. He used to take Stefan for baseball practice and insisted on calling him champ or chief. It escalated when Bud tried teaching Stefan how to fix a broken lawnmower and Stefan dropped his very first F-bomb."

I bit my lip hard remembering that. Bud wasn't a bad guy but he was an awful choice that hardly even functioned as a rebound relationship for Mom. "He'd once insisted I tried his beer even though I'd already tried Dad's and hated it. That guy *really* wanted a son. My Mom was like a side dish."

Laughter erupted around the joined tables and I marked Marco's answer with five out of five. We caught each other's glances and time slowed down. It felt like something lifted us

out of our chairs and we hovered above the sandy ground, looking at each other. But when time resumed, only a heartbeat had passed.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a couple who shares this much,” Pauline said and pressed the side of her sangria glass against her lips.

Jude glanced at her. “Twelve years on and we’re still not there, huh?”

The two shared a laugh before Pauline asked the ultimate question; the one that everyone always asked. “How long have you officially been together?”

Marco and I exchanged glances and I found myself unable to answer. I couldn’t shatter this evening with a bombshell like that and, however foolish it sounded, I couldn’t take it away from myself. If only in this reality bubble that was outside the real world, I sensed what a relationship was. It was a lot better than all my nightmares had made me believe, though I could hardly change my mind. Real life always finds a way to ruin a good thing.

Still, I wanted to live in our lie for a moment longer.

“Uh, this is awkward,” Marco said. My heart leaped and I meant to tell him to lie, but I couldn’t in time. “We aren’t actually a couple.”

Our new friends frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?” Jude asked. “You really are.”

Marco laughed. “We’re really not. We’ve been married for, er, forty-two hours, but we never dated.”

“I don’t get it,” Pauline said with a cryptic smile.

I blew out a breath of air. We were out of the illusion, so it didn’t matter anymore. “We got drunk and got married because our friends thought it would be funny.”

The couple laughed. I wondered if it was a trait of all couples who’d been together long enough to laugh in similar pitch and for nearly the same amount of time. These two surely did. It was like they changed and changed until they both had the exact same sense of how long one should laugh in any given situation. “This is the first time I’ve heard anything like it,” Pauline said.

Marco and I shrugged and he continued talking. “It’s stupid, I know. Everyone always teases us that we should just get married and we happened to be in Vegas. Eh, one thing led to another. You know how it goes.”

“I really don’t,” Jude said with a hearty laugh.

“We gambled, went to a strip club, and got married in front of an Elvis impersonator,” Marco explained like it was the most natural course of events.

“I’m pretty sure Dayton had sex with Elvis,” I murmured.

“Right. He’s fun like that,” Marco said sarcastically.

Not even realizing it, Marco and I fell into our usual banter for a moment there. It made the other couple exchange a

meaningful look. Jude leaned back in his chair and folded his hands on his stomach. “You two are definitely a couple.”

“There’s no question about it,” Pauline said, twining her fingers on the table.

Marco and I laughed, but neither looked at the other. Even the laughter sounded a little off. Was it funny? Not really. My laughter was nervous because a simple statement like that threatened to start an avalanche of questions I wasn’t ready for.

I was perpetually feeling two things at once. And these two things were like streams of two rivers flowing in opposite directions. When people talked about going with the flow, they meant dipping themselves into that river and letting it carry them. Me? I couldn’t do anything like that. The two currents worked against each other, yanked me back and forth, but ultimately left me stuck in the spot.

I didn’t know what lay beyond the horizon. I didn’t know where these rivers led. Either way, I could never pick one over the other. The risk of moving away from the comfortable status quo was too great.

I wished we could stay exactly the way we were.

CHAPTER TEN

The Setting Sun



WARM AFTERNOON BREEZE FLICKED a lock of my hair over my face. I jerked my head to move it away, then glanced at Stefan. He lay on a huge beach towel, hands folded under his head, a pair of big, black sunglasses shielding his eyes.

I scanned every curve of his body, every line of his muscles. He'd tanned more in the five days we'd been here than the entire summer so far. After a day spent in the shade, from hammocks to the beach bar, we'd done little more than lounge on the beach. The azure sea drew my gaze no matter where I was looking. It called to me and Stefan was more than happy to go along.

Yet in doing nothing, my mind raced.

Stefan faced the clear blue sky. He didn't look any one way but up, if he was looking at all. So, when I turned my head left and rested my gaze on him, it was hard to look away.

I wasn't about to ruin a perfectly nice day with saying something stupid, but stupid things to say roamed through my head perpetually. Since Jude and Pauline insisted that Stefan and I were, in all actuality, a couple, everything in my life changed, yet remained the same. It was the oddest of feelings. It was so familiar, but it scared the life out of me. It took away my ability to look at Stefan without my breathing turning shallow and my tongue being tied. It made me especially alert when I had to speak because I feared he might suspect it.

And keeping it a secret... Well, that just didn't sit right with me. I kept nothing from Stefan. Even the smallest, most unimportant things on my mind would always find their way to him. But when it came to something so monumental, so tied to Stefan's life, I couldn't get the words out.

I turned to lie on my side and watched Stefan's chest rise and descend, skin shiny with sunscreen, brown like his father's.

"I kinda miss them," Stefan said out of nowhere. I hadn't even realized he was awake.

"Who?" I asked. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I expected him to say his parents. I thought he might finally talk about it.

"The guys," Stefan said. "All of them. Including Dayton."

I chuckled quietly and closed my eyes a moment before I heard Stefan turn his head to face me. He had no way of knowing that I had just spent a solid five minutes taking in his beauty. And I still needed more. A lifetime wouldn't suffice.

No matter how many times we were reborn and spent our lives together, I would always die needing a moment longer.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Stefan said. “A week with you in heaven is the best thing I could have asked for, but I sort of miss the chaos of it all by now.”

“I miss it, too,” I said. Two more days and we would be off.

I didn’t take it the wrong way, either. Stefan and I tied our lives pretty tightly together. We lived with one another, we went out together, and we indulged in each other’s bodies on a whim. Until a few days ago, I hadn’t quite realized how dangerous our games were. It hadn’t occurred to me that we had been playing with fire.

One of us, if not both, was going to get burned. And I had a nasty feeling I would hurt either way.

Here lay a guy who deserved so much more than the pitiful creature I was. Yeah, I’d learned which cutlery to use for what kind of food. I’d learned to dress nicely and laugh loudly. I’d learned to carry myself like all my peers. But deep down, I knew I would always be that same kid who didn’t believe he could ever get adopted. The kid who knew life was about to turn upside down yet again. It was a treadmill of misfortune and it was bound to happen again.

My buzzing phone pulled me out of my thoughts. I fumbled around the pocket of my casual beach shorts and found it, then raised an eyebrow. Dad was video calling me.

I cleared my throat before picking up, ran a hand through my messy hair, and pressed the green button. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Marco,” Dad said. “Nothing much, just checking in. We haven’t heard from you in a while, Son.”

“Is that John?” Stefan asked. “Say hi.”

I did.

“Hi, Stefan,” Dad singsonged. He was in a well lit office, perfectly positioned to have the view of the city skyline behind his back. The high resolution image meant he was probably calling me from his computer. “How are you boys doing?”

“Uh...” I swallowed. “We’re, uh... Good, Dad. There’s just... We...”

Dad chuckled. “Oh, God. Spill the beans, Son, else I’ll start to worry.”

I bit my lip guiltily. I should have told them where I was. It had slipped my mind, at first, then it grew harder and harder to face it. I figured I would just tell them after the fact. “We’re in the Dominican Republic,” I said and winced.

Dad tilted his head. “How come? Not that I track your expenses, Marco, but I think I would have noticed.”

I shook my head. “Long story. I’ll tell you all about it when I’m back. We’re not paying for anything, actually. Our friends sort of shipped us away from Vegas.”

Dad narrowed his eyes in thought and mulled over it. He was clean shaven and had a fresh haircut, but he wasn't wearing his suit jacket. Instead, he wore a pale blue shirt with dark blue dots. He must have had a busy morning if he was shedding layers of his clothes. We sometimes joked that he was just one tough meeting away from becoming an exotic dancer. "So, your friends all chipped in to send you two to the Dominican Republic? That's very sweet of them, but you could have asked. If you boys want to do something, you know your mother and I will always make it happen," he said, then, in a more fatherly voice, added, "Within reason."

I laughed. "Like a spur of the moment trip to Catalina Island?"

Dad's ears perked and, a few heartbeats later, I realized my mistake. A corner of his lips ticked up. "Is there something we should know, Marco?" he asked, voice amused, dripping with humor.

I bit down on my lip for a moment, then shook my head. "Nothing particular, no. We're flying to LA the day after tomorrow. I won't say no to a car picking us up."

"It's just that Catalina is a well known honeymoon resort," Dad said with a warm chuckle.

"Is it?" My voice squeaked. I cleared my throat. "It's full of resorts. I can't keep track of them."

Dad kept his smile on in silence for a few moments longer as Stefan snickered, hand pressed against his mouth to keep himself quiet.

“Alright,” Dad said. “Send me the details and I’ll see that someone picks you boys up.” I confirmed I would, but Dad wasn’t hanging up just yet. He seemed to be looking for words, glancing around the camera, then taking a deep breath in. “I hope you’re having a really good time, Son,” he said gently and I couldn’t ignore the double meaning in his words. *I am glad that you two are together*, he was saying subtly.

“Yeah, great time,” I blurted and we wrapped it up. I sent a hi to Mom and we were done.

After hanging up, I shot Stefan a murderous look. “I thought you wanted to keep this a secret,” I said sourly.

Stefan cackled from the top of his lungs. “But it was so hilarious.”

“It was stressful, is what it was,” I said.

“But you gave it away,” he insisted, still laughing. “God, you’re still blushing.”

“You’ll be blushing in a minute if you don’t stop,” I threatened playfully.

Stefan sat up abruptly, lifted his sunglasses, and looked right into my eyes. Something wicked brewed in there. “First you gotta catch me,” he said, voice full of thrill and dare.

As I swallowed in the shortest moment of silence, Stefan hopped up, grabbed his towel, and sprinted away. By the time I knew I was, in fact, supposed to catch him, he had a huge head start. And when I scrambled to pick my towel up and run

after him, Stefan was already past the bar and on the way to our bungalow.

I ran. I could always run faster than him, but he'd left me behind in confusion. I raced around the bar and toward the scattered bungalows, looking for the lucky thirteen, and finding it just as it was supposed to be. Locked up and empty. The key was with me, but Stefan was nowhere to be found.

The cypress bushes made a fence from each end of the bungalow, but there was enough room to slide through. And when I heard a big splash, I knew where my friend was.

Sliding between one of the bushes that was as tall as me, I discovered Stefan's towel on the ground. A little further away was a sight that made my heart trip; Stefan's shorts.

My throat tied and I tried swallowing the knot. My pulse increased twofold by the time I walked to the back of the bungalow and found Stefan. He had jumped into the jacuzzi, his hair wet. Now, he sat like he had spent an entire day there, in perfect tranquility. His back was turned to me and his defined arms spread to either side of him, resting along the jacuzzi. The bubbling frothed the surface of the water as I quietly approached.

Looking at the back of his head, then at his bare shoulders, then over it at the water, I found that the bubbles sufficiently hid everything that was below the surface. He was, without a doubt, naked. And my heart leaped.

As I walked around the tub, Stefan gave me a lazy look. His sunglasses were perched at the top of his head and he gave a

half-grin. “Go on, then. Make me blush.”

My chest squeezed tight. *When you say things like that, all I want to do is kiss you.* And not just kiss him for the sake of having his lips on mine, either. We sometimes kissed when the action got heated, though never truly. Never properly. Having sex was purely transactional; it was like sharing a bar of chocolate. It was more fun to do it together, but it served a very clear purpose. You take a bite, you feel better. Kissing, on the other hand, was infinitely more intimate and so much rarer between us.

Stefan bit his lower lip in his usual way, then let it slide out from the gentle grip of his teeth. I wanted to put my lips on him so badly that it rocked my body.

“Just be warned,” Stefan went on. “I’m not that easy to embarrass.”

“I don’t need to embarrass you,” I said, confidence rising. This was a lot more like the way we always were. A little flirtatious, a bit naughty, and a whole lot suggestive.

I dropped my towel on the ground, then pulled the string on my shorts, untying the neat bow I’d tied earlier.

Stefan’s ears perked, but that was about the end of it. Whatever else he was feeling, it wasn’t on display. “Joining me?”

I glanced around one last time just to make sure. The cypress bushes were tall and thick and the forest filled all the space between us and the nearest bungalows, which were out

of sight. Someone would need to push through the bushes in order to see us and that was no small feat. Nobody could do it by accident.

I hooked my thumb inside the shorts and pulled them away to loosen them, then stuck my other thumb in and wiggled my hips as I dragged the shorts down. Just seeing Stefan's shorts on the ground moments earlier had given me the boost I needed. Now, watching him look at me so invitingly, sitting in the bubbles all naked and delicious, was enough to make me as hard as I could be.

My shorts dropped around my ankles and I straightened, reveling in Stefan's admiring gaze. He scanned all of me without hesitation, without any shame.

For days, we'd slept in the same bed, we'd even held onto one another during the night, but we hadn't done anything. Since the first night, we'd kept it low. Perhaps it would have gone differently had Jude and Pauline not given me this idea that maybe — just maybe — there was more to us than we thought.

Stefan's quirky gaze sparkled as he lifted it to meet mine.

He could always win me over with playfulness and I didn't hesitate. I crossed the two paces between me and the jacuzzi, lifted my right leg over the edge and dipped it into the bubbling water. It was perfectly cool to combat the heat of the day.

I sucked in a breath of air as I got in and started to sit, cool water licking at my abdomen. All along, Stefan held his

amused gaze on me. I liked him watching me more than I liked breathing air or drinking water. His eyes pooled with wonder and lust the longer they were on the top of my chest, all that was visible above the bubbling surface.

“That will hardly make me blush,” Stefan said and I smirked in reply. I was no longer even thinking of making him blush. “No?” I said as I got up and stood directly in front of Stefan.

I gripped my cock firmly in hand and began to slowly stroke myself. Stefan’s lust filled stare watched the movements as I came closer and stepped up onto the bench that he was seated on. I placed one foot on either side of his thighs and continued to stroke myself as the tip of my cock was mere inches from Stefan’s sinful mouth. “How about now?” I asked, my voice husky as I angled my head a bit to the right.

Stefan seemed to be holding his breath as he looked up from what I knew he craved just then and met my gaze. His lips parted as I moved closer. I let my leaking tip touch his bottom lip and slowly dragged it back and forth. “Cat got your tongue?” I whispered as I continued to use my precum to paint all over his soft lips. Stefan let out a shuddery breath that tickled the tip of my cock. “I’ll take that as a yes.” I said, a smile slowly spreading over my face. Without hurry, I stepped back down off the bench.

Stefan continued to hold my gaze as he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth. My whole body shivered as I watched him pull my taste on to his tongue.

I sat down, right next to my best friend, our shoulders touching. He drew a deep breath of air, his chest rising. Then, with my right hand, I reached over and cupped his left breast. My palm was on his nipple, feeling its sharpness as it grew smaller.

Stefan let a shivering breath of air out as I lowered my hand along the side of his ribcage, feeling every inch equally. Then, when I was holding him above his hip, I pulled him toward me.

He moved freely, willingly, until his arm was around my shoulders and the side of his torso was pressing against my front.

Thirstily, I buried my face in the nook of his neck and kissed his skin, feeling the pulse in his vein under my lips.

Stefan moaned without a single break, without a filter. I knew that kissing his neck always made him shiver, it made his skin prickle and his breaths shallow. I devoured him, licking and kissing, sliding along the neck, up and down. I reached for his ear and sucked the soft bit of it between my teeth, making Stefan whimper and snatch my hand still resting on his waist.

His fingers wrapped my hand and moved it along his body until I felt his small nipple again. Feeling naughty, I pinched it, making my friend grunt and stiffen. I pinched it again, chuckling over his neck, before moving my hand to the middle of his chest.

Stefan freed himself of whatever had been stopping him. He lifted his hand out of the water and grabbed the back of my head, then slammed his lips against mine, sucking kisses out of me.

My heart raced; my body pulsed. I closed my eyes and kissed him back just as roughly, pushing my tongue into his mouth and exploring, probing, tasting my best friend. He welcomed it and made me wonder, distantly, why we kissed so rarely.

Stefan's tongue fought for control and entered my mouth, licking every bit of me it could reach. I let him. I was feeling the middle of his torso, sliding my hand lower and lower and lower until the back of it brushed against his stiff, upright cock.

Stefan whimpered into my parted lips and I grabbed his dick with full force, making him shiver again and moan. I squeezed him mercilessly and stroked him once, twice, thrice. Stefan's head dropped back and he groaned into the empty air, pleasure and pain mixing in his voice.

My grip loosened as I continued stroking him, teasing him with an easy orgasm only to deny it moments later. When he pulsed in my hand, I let go, but not completely. Instead of stroking him, I lowered my hand further, cupping his balls underwater and toying with them just enough to keep Stefan on edge, but not so much that it would tip him over.

We gave each other the best orgasms. That was something we'd discovered a while back. It had always been better

together than solo. There had always been an air of mystery and secrecy, always a sense of danger that intensified our climax.

Two of my fingers moved along Stefan's taint and he sucked my lower lip between his teeth, biting it in return. I rubbed and rubbed the harder he bit me. I liked a little pain and he liked it, too. I liked the danger of getting a split lip and having to explain it. I liked us nearly getting caught and having to pretend.

Perhaps, somewhere in the back of my head, I hoped that getting caught would force us to have the conversation that was well overdue. Then again, if going on a honeymoon failed to make me speak up, I was truly out of ideas.

What I could do was kiss him harder. I could kiss the length of his neck and the place where his collarbones met. I could submerge myself and keep kissing the middle of his chest, the valley between the sculpted pecs. I could take his nipple between my teeth and make him squirm all the while rubbing his taint in excruciating buildup to a shattering finale. And that was exactly what I did.

Stefan grabbed my hand underwater, closed his around my wrist, and yanked it hard inward until the two fingers that had been massaging his taint were sliding between his cheeks.

I lifted my head and pressed my lips against his, taking in the breaths he exhaled in his ecstasy. As I rubbed his pulsing hole, gently but surely, his breaths grew shallow. My tongue slipped across his parted lips, then met his as he returned my

kisses. My fingers grew more determined as I circled the place of his pleasure. It flexed and relaxed depending on my movement and I loved how I could make his body work with nothing more than two fingertips.

Stefan moaned over my lips and pulled his head back. “Wait,” he whispered.

I moved my hand away and waited for him to turn around.

Stefan knelt on the seat of the jacuzzi, folding his arms at the edge and resting his chest against them, head held high. “Like this,” he said.

My eyes shone with lust as I moved through the bubbling water and knelt on the bottom, positioning myself directly behind my friend. Friend... I pushed that thought away as I rested my hands on his cheeks. “Bubble butt in a bubble tub.”

Stefan chuckled and snorted at the same time, then thrust his hips back a couple of inches.

Grinding his cheeks with firm movements of my hands, I watched as his back prickled and his head slumped down. His anticipation must have been going wild; I could feel it trickle into me, fill me to the brim.

I drew a deep breath of air as my heart all but thumped its way out of my chest. Leaning in, I parted my lips and slid my tongue out. Making Stefan tremble, I dragged my tongue over his hole and felt it pulse. Such a simple, little thing, yet it rocked my body. Again, I licked him, not doing much else

right away. Every move was planned to torture him a little longer.

Gradually, I rimmed him harder, adding pressure and making it last. Stefan lifted his head high again, whimpering into the empty air, gasping and sighing as I pressed my tongue into him.

He freed one of his arms just long enough to reach for my hand and nudge it between his cheeks. As I licked him, making him slick and ready, he navigated my fingers to his hole, then grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled me in for a few long moments of suspense.

Then, as he freed me, I pulled my head back and let my index finger gently slide an inch inside of him. Spitting, I pulled my finger out and probed him once more. Entering him an inch deep, then two, I reveled in the shudder that passed through his muscles. Stefan's hole tightened around my finger, then quickly relaxed as I pulled it back.

After a few moments of teasing, I let my middle finger join the fun, and leaned in to lick and spit and sigh over his stretching hole.

Stefan gripped my wrist again, pulling my hand and forcing my fingers deeper in, like I had been teasing him for long enough. He did it lightning fast and nearly lifted his torso up as my fingers entered him knuckles-deep. His moan was all I could hear and his tightening hole was all I felt. As he relaxed it, I increased my pace, massaging the exact spot that was about to make him blow.

With my other hand free, I reached between his legs for his swollen dick and stroked it a few times until the pitch of Stefan's voice told me he was closer to the edge than I'd realized. I wanted him to come, but not like that. I wanted him to suffer and moan and cry out, then blow from the sheer excruciating excitement that my fingers sparked.

Stefan moved his hand away and clutched the edge of the jacuzzi, lifting his torso half upright. His sack weighed heavy and dipped into the water now and again as I quickened my pace, pressing against his prostate with every thrust.

"Just like that," he whimpered. "Ah... Fuck... Just like that, Marco."

My name never sounded so good like when it came from his lips. Especially when he was swimming in lust.

I fucked him with two firm fingers harder and faster as he clutched the edge of the tub, thrusting his hips back and forth, nudging me to finish him already. All bets were off. I could hardly handle the pain of my erection, needing a firm grip and a few good strokes.

I wrapped my left arm around Stefan's waist, then rested my head at the small of his back. His cock was throbbing, pulsing up and down with each push of my fingers. It stiffened and pressed against the back of my folded arm.

I tightened my hold on his waist, fucking him mercilessly with my fingers until my friend cried out and clenched his jaws, letting the air hiss between his teeth.

Quick moans filled my ears as I held Stefan and pushed my fingers in. They escalated fast. In an instant, Stefan's body convulsed and he growled that he was coming. The very next heartbeat, all of him flexed. His hole tightened rapidly around my fingers as his cock stiffened again and again, shooting heaps of cum just over the edge of the tub in Stefan's last ditch effort to straighten his back.

I pulled my fingers out after a few lazy moves and breathed deep breaths of relief. Though I was not done, I felt Stefan's orgasm coarse through my body.

"Come on my ass, Marco," Stefan demanded, face heated and blissful.

I stood in the tub as Stefan leaned over the edge again, raising his ass for me, letting me watch his throbbing hole as I stroked myself just a little above him.

Stefan let his chest rest against the edge of the tub while his hands spread his cheeks for me. Seeing how I'd loosened him made my heart pound like wild. My blood was on fire and my senses were all alert as I stroked myself. My awareness narrowed as the pressure built up and I hurtled toward my climax.

I grabbed his hips and pressed the length of my cock between his cheeks, sliding it up and down, yanking Stefan's body like a toy slowly at first, then faster. I rubbed myself against him, pushing his cheeks together, then pulling them apart.

Harder and faster, I humped him until the world shifted from under me and my body tensed. Cum spilled along Stefan's muscular back and thick ass, trickling over his hole as soon as I pulled back.

Simultaneously, we both dipped ourselves back into the tub and breathed deep breaths of air. Stefan sat right by my side and I had my arms around him, kissing his neck and cheek and even lips.

"Holy fuck," Stefan murmured. "We should have done a lot more of that."

I chuckled, dryly. The reason we should have was that we didn't need to keep tabs on volume. We could speak and moan and cry as much as we wished and felt like. Totally unlike our dorm room where the walls were thin enough to let us hear whenever Dayton had a guy over.

The reason we hadn't done more of this was simpler yet. The more we did, the more I wished to say things that were better left unsaid.



His hair was wet, droplets of water beading on his brow. "There's still time to catch the sunset," he said.

I closed my fists firmly and held my breath. He'd showered with hot water, obviously. His face appeared heated, which

made him as beautiful as he could be. There was a glow in his cheeks and eyes that dragged all the oxygen out of me.

We hadn't done the sunset yet. The resort had a lot to offer to those seeking romance. There was a chocolate shop where couples fed each other. There was a winery for tasting tours. You could order a truckload of rose petals to be delivered to your bungalow and there was one candle shop that made the candles right in front of you, all scented with aphrodisiacs like rose and lavender oil. There was a massage parlor with experts who knew exactly what to do to unleash your libido — apparently there was a spot under the shoulder blades, or so they said.

We'd done none of that.

We had this invisible barrier between sex and everything that was remotely romantic. Like playing some sort of cosmic chess, we moved the pieces carefully, steering clear of the things that might alert the other of our feelings. That was the case for me, at least.

I would be a fool to want to ruin a good thing. I would be a total idiot to give up what we had. He'd be my friend forever, but with every day we spent here, I wanted more.

“That sounds awesome,” I said and released the breath of air I hadn't realized I was holding.

Stefan's lips, full and sweet, stretched into a genuine, guileless smile. The shine in his eyes drew me in to the point where I felt myself leaning toward him. I stopped abruptly and straightened, then shrugged and strolled toward the door. “It's

setting as we speak,” I said in a poor attempt at a joke to move as far away from my thoughts as I could.

Stefan was silent and still for a moment too long. He did that when he read between the lines. He did that when he heard there were things unsaid. And, as always, he let go. He moved one foot, then the other, and we were outside.

The trek through the jungle was cleared and maintained. Much like the rest of the resort, everything here was couple-friendly. The path winded through the forest that thickened with flora and was wide enough for two couples holding hands to pass by each other without letting go. I wondered if that was intentional. I suppose it was, since the architects had given everything so much thought.

Though it was not a particularly long walk, it grew steep very quickly. We turned around a bend, reached stone steps that seemed almost like they were carved into the cliff, and walked up. There were at least fifty steps, lined with tall, old trees on both sides, with branches twining high above us and giving us shade. It was so much more breathtaking to reach the large clearing at the top where no trees stood and the grass was trimmed and stone tiled a lot of the ground in the middle. Every way I looked, save behind, my gaze met nothing but vast emptiness. Left, right, ahead. It was all blue sea kissed by the fiery sunshine of the setting sun. If I squinted, it was like an oil painting. All the way to the horizon, where the sun danced and glided down. It set the sea on fire and appeared larger than I’d ever seen it, but it wasn’t the same as the

screaming midday sun. Its slow descent was graceful. *I'll be back tomorrow*, it seemed to say.

Stefan stood by my side as we neared the edge of the cliff. Iron rails were installed to keep the tourists gazing into the distance from falling over absentmindedly, but the rails were cluttered with padlocks, no doubt engraved with the names of those who'd come here before us.

Further ahead, I saw Jude and Pauline, holding hands. Jude must have felt my gaze on the back of his head because he turned and looked over his shoulder. The moment was as tranquil as sitting in the steam room back in Vegas, so Jude nodded at me and I nodded back. His lips stretched into a half-smile before he turned away and watched the sun near its bedtime.

My throat knotted when Stefan fumbled with one of his hands and found one of mine. He took it silently and squeezed it, breaking the invisible, unsaid rule of not letting romance in.

I wanted to say something. I wanted to ask him what he really wanted. Yet everything he could say to me had already crossed my mind. And all my answers had already crossed his.

And there lay our troubles. We knew each other all too well to ever move from the status quo. You couldn't just start over with someone you'd known for six years.

What are you doing? I wished I could ask.

Just holding your hand, he would say.

Yes. But why? I would ask.

Why shouldn't I? He would ask back.

And we would be exactly where we'd started. The ball would be in my court to tell him all the things I wanted and why I never, ever thought I could get them.

"I'm so sick of them competing," Stefan said quietly.

"Who?" I asked, feeling the tension in his grip. He wasn't holding my hand just to hold it. He was holding onto it so he wouldn't fall apart.

"Mom and Dad," Stefan said, voice strangled. "It's always the same with them. They're never happy to just... Be. They always want more and always want to show me a better time. I'm so sick of it, Marco."

I thought about it for a moment. Stefan hated change. He wanted things to stay the same if they were good. And to him, they were as good as they would get. "What happened?" I asked.

Stefan scoffed. "It's Dad's turn to make drama, that's what happened. I wasn't there long enough, so he's compensating by planning a trip to Europe. Romania of all places." He snorted. "He wants us to go skiing, Marco. It's ridiculous."

"So... You said no," I concluded.

Stefan tightened his lips and looked down, then shook his head. "I called him out on it and..." He shrugged. "I guess I hurt his feelings. Not that he would admit it. Not that he would even show it."

I tightened my hold on Stefan's hand, now. "What did he say?"

"Nothing much. He just kind of shrugged and pulled back and said we could think about it later. I was just so fucking sick of them yanking me here and there just to show how the other one isn't creative enough or doesn't care enough. That fucking cruise, Marco. It drained me. I was seasick for the last three days and by the time I got to Dad's, I was tired. But he wanted me to have a good time and it's never about what I want. It's always about what they want me to want." He covered his eyes with his other hand and gave a long sigh.

None of what he said was exactly the way he said it and he didn't believe it either. This was Stefan at his guiltiest, looking for an argument that would justify him. "Stefan," I sighed. "What do you really mean?"

He let go of my hand and held his own, wringing them both for a moment.

"Seriously," I said. "What's the deal?"

He shook his head as if to say he didn't know. Or didn't want to talk about it.

After a moment of silence where we both gazed out at the horizon and the setting sun, he took a deep breath. "It feels like drowning."

Again, silence. I didn't intervene, I didn't hijack. Instead, I let him think about it. For once, he might formulate all his feelings into words. It was a lesson I kept learning myself.

Maybe, if he did it in front of me, I could do the same. Someday.

“No matter what I do, it feels like I’m disappointing them,” he said after a long while. “Like I’m never there enough or never present enough when I’m there. And it seeps through the cracks and ruins everything that’s nice.”

“I understand something like that,” I said. He knew that I felt like a burden to my parents. Maybe not as much these days, but I had felt that way for long enough to never truly rid myself of that sense. “But maybe the opposite,” I said.

“We’re such fuck ups,” Stefan said and laughed resignedly.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I bumped into him with my shoulder and let the silence linger. Then, the inevitable came. “You need to call your dad.”

Stefan was quiet for a little while, then gave a slow nod. “I do, don’t I?”

“I think so,” I said. “Because neither of us really thinks they’re actually competing.”

He swallowed. “Yeah.”

It was just easier to go with that argument. It was easier than accepting the truth. Stefan was scarred by their divorce more than he wanted to admit. No doubt, he blamed himself a great deal. He’d come along when their marriage had already reached the epilogue and prolonged the inevitable simply by being. And whatever hope there had existed that a baby might bring them together, it had evaporated quickly. He’d done

nothing but doom them to stay together for too long. At least, that was what he thought. “You’re wrong, you know,” I said. “It’s not your fault.”

He blinked and looked away.

“And I don’t think they see it any other way than it is. Sure, they’ll never get along. Their history is too dark for it. But they aren’t toying with you, Stefan.” I put my right arm over his shoulders and pulled him into a friendly hold. He leaned against me. “But you can’t carry all that shit on your own. You have to tell them how you feel.”

It was so much easier to say this than do it. I had to tell him how I felt, too, but I couldn’t.

We stood there until the sun disappeared and its last rays shone from below the horizon. We stood quietly until everyone left. Jude and Pauline greeted us in passing, then walked away. They left me thinking how much I wanted to be just like them. And how much Stefan didn’t.

We really were such fuck ups.

Something had to change. Something had to give.

And, as the last rays of sunlight died out, I wondered if we’d just seen the sunset of our flimsy, undefined relationship.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Heaven's End



AN ODD SENSE OF finality wouldn't leave me. It was with me when the last day dawned. It was there while I packed. It wouldn't leave even when the ship docked and we boarded.

I thought it would evaporate once we set sail, but I looked at Catalina Island and sadness filled me to the brim.

There was nothing I wanted more than to whisper into his ear, "Maybe we should give this thing a chance." But I couldn't. Marco couldn't be my experiment. I would never forgive myself if I asked him that and watched the whole thing go down in flames.

I wouldn't let him be my boyfriend — or husband, for that matter — just to see if it would work.

And I told myself again and again that nothing would change. It was just a stupid, overly decorative piece of paper. It meant nothing. He would forever be my number one guy,

my friend in everything we did. But I couldn't make it official and risk losing him the way my parents lost each other.

Yet the need to seek his hand on the table on the upper deck of the ship, to hold it, to squeeze it hard, overpowered all my senses. I did just that and earned a soft smile from Marco.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

I really fucking wasn't. But to tell him that was to doom us both. There was no doubt in my mind that he would leap at the opportunity. There had been, until recently, but this entire week had changed that. There had been a time when I thought it was as simple as just shrugging at telling ourselves we were all fine the way we were.

Not so much anymore.

The other day, we'd had our best sex yet and with nothing but two of his fingers and mutual desire. That wasn't how friends behaved, right?

At every turn, I found my beliefs challenged. Romeo flirting with Marco on the first day had sparked jealousy; Jude and Pauline calling us out made me think; jacuzzi sex made me feel so many more things than I'd allowed myself ever before. And then, there was the sunset. I'd never felt so close to another human as I did then. He'd listened, he'd advised. He was my everything, when all was said and done.

“Marco?” I whispered.

He perked his ears and lifted his eyebrows, listening.

And me... I had nothing to say.

After a long while, he shrugged. "It'll be okay," he said. I wasn't sure if he knew what exactly he was talking about. Usually, I would know. But everything felt upside down these days. "We'll annul it. You don't have to worry about that."

I nodded my agreement, but hollowness replaced everything I felt so far. "Sure."

"It was just a joke," he assured me. "An expensive and not a very funny one."

I nodded again.

"We were drunk, so annulling it should be easy, right?" Marco tilted his head as if to ask what I thought.

I snorted. "I don't know. Hopefully."

Hopefully...

The fact was, I hated that this was ending. Then again, this entire week had been like something out of a fantasy. Every last detail of the resort was designed to lull us into these feelings and I couldn't shake them off. Maybe returning to the real world would help close this book for good.

I was sad to leave the world of fantasies behind, though. Even if I knew it was nothing more than a mirage, I wished we'd had a little more time. We could have done more; we could have pretended better. We could have used it as a test ride instead of vehemently shaking our heads and insisting we were just friends who sometimes got naked together.

And he knew it just as well.

He felt something. He must have. Even if it was just a fleeting little thing, he would jump on the opportunity to explore it. And I was the asshole for not letting us.

The flight home was just as comfortable as our flight here. More so since neither of us was hungover and near death by exhaustion. We traveled in solemn silence, both of us aware that our silly little marriage play was coming to an end. There was no encore.

We didn't talk about that or anything else, really. A few jokes here and there. Marco showed me some photos he took specifically for Dayton, who was paying for the bulk of our expenses, and those made me laugh out loud. Did we really need room service just for a bottle of their best champagne over *Doctor Who* reruns? Not really. Was it worth it? It would be when we saw Dayton's face. "That's what you get for messing with us," Marco murmured to himself, as though practicing what he would tell Dayton.

I liked it. I liked the sound of "us."

"So," I said, hands in my pockets, suitcase by my side. It was early evening in LA and the car hadn't showed up yet. John Lancaster, Marco's dad, was sending his chauffeur to pick us up. "That's it, then."

Marco glanced at me, then quickly looked away. "I guess so."

It couldn't end like this. I stepped closer to Marco, shoulder to shoulder. "It was nice being your husband for a week."

Marco smiled and lowered his head, facing the curb, and pushed the smile away. “We should do it again sometime.”

We both laughed, though there was no question about it being forced. “We’re good. Right?” I couldn’t help myself but ask.

Marco gave me a bewildered look and a half-smile. “Of course we are. Why wouldn’t we be?”

Because this has challenged everything I ever thought I knew. Because, for an instant, I allowed myself to imagine things I used to think were unimaginable. Because maybe, just maybe, we’re making a terrible mistake.

“I dunno,” I said instead of everything else. “I just thought to check.”

Saying our week abroad had been weird was an understatement. It had existed in some surreal world of opportunities that I’d thought didn’t exist in Santa Barbara. Yet now, waiting for the car to take us to campus, I still felt like there could have been an option.

Marco sighed. “I think...” And he fell silent.

I nudged him with my elbow. “You can tell me,” I said. “Whatever it is.”

Marco chewed on his lip and wouldn’t meet my gaze. Carefully, mulling over the words, he inhaled. “I know we agreed we wouldn’t get serious, Stefan.”

My heart tripped. *Yes?* I was too far gone in my fantasies to say anything. I wanted to hear him out. I wanted him to

convince me otherwise.

“And I know why. Truly, I get it.” He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “I would never, ever blame you for any of this. You know that, right? You’ve been dealt a bad hand. Nobody can blame you for not wanting to go through what your folks went through.” He took a deep breath.

I almost lifted myself to the tips of my toes, expecting him to finally grab my T-shirt and tell me how fucking stupid I am for believing what I believed. I wanted him to shake me out of it, even if I thought it was impossible.

“Stefan,” he said. “We need to stop this.”

I blinked.

He was still not looking at me.

“We don’t even know what we’re doing. We don’t have a clue how dangerous this is. I feel like we’re always one step away from losing our friendship and I think you were right. All along, you were right that we shouldn’t risk it. We’re flying too close to the sun.” He blurted all of that quickly, pressed his chin hard against his chest, eyes lost in their gaze at the concrete curb.

After a long silence, just as a black car rolled in and slowed to a halt in front of us, Marco tore his gaze off of concrete and looked at me.

My ears rang and the airport spun around me. My heart descended as if something was tugging it down from my stomach. “Yeah,” I said airily. “I think you’re right.”

I would never challenge him. That was one of the things I'd sworn to myself I wouldn't do. I wouldn't invalidate his feelings and I would set him free the moment there was doubt.

"You do?" he asked. "I was afraid you..."

"No, totally. I get it. I think so, too." My words were slurred in speed with which I said them. John's chauffeur got out of the car and greeted us, but neither of us looked away from one another's eyes.

"Best friends forever," Marco said with a sad little smile. It was only a corner of his lips that quirked up.

"Forever," I echoed.

We hugged, though letting go felt like letting go of something I would never have again.

We should stop, he'd said. We can't keep doing this, he'd said.

And though this was always going to happen, I still didn't see it coming. Letting go of him was like letting go of hope. I hadn't known there had been hope in me, but I felt its absence.

We greeted the chauffeur who helped us with our luggage. Quietly, we sat behind, and waited for this journey to end. All I really needed was a shower and a bed. And some quiet time to myself. Would I get the quiet? Probably not. Not very soon, at least. Our friends were all at Highgate already. The semester was starting the very next day. We'd been foolish enough to forget about everything but how nice it was to be alone together.

Yet I needed to let Marco's words sink in.

I wondered how long he'd been thinking about it. He wasn't someone who did things in the spur of the moment. Well, aside from getting married. He wasn't rash. Instead, Marco thought. He thought until he knew every outcome there was, then he weighed them against each other.

Could we have done something differently? Could we have given us a chance had I not been so against it?

I'd had it coming.



The uproar in the common room, where every one of our friends who were still enrolled sat around and drank beers out of cans and played table soccer, greeted us. We'd only stopped by our room to drop the luggage off, then returned downstairs to find our friends.

Dayton jumped to his feet so fast that beer spilled out of his can and he chortled. "Crap," he yelled. "Here come the newlyweds."

"Soon to be newly-divorced," Marco said with a grin. There was something behind his smiling face. Something I felt to my core. A sense of loss, a poorly hidden sadness. I wore the very same face.

I glanced around the common room. It was a dark place with orange lights giving it warmth and several ceiling AC

units cooling it down. My friends were scattered around and wearing their most casual, most unremarkable clothes. “Now that I look at you,” I said, examining the beer cans. “You all look like you’re just about to film an orgy scene.”

Dayton laughed heartily while the rest seemed to cringe. The general rule of thumb was that we didn’t fool around. *Bros before bro-hoes*, the saying went.

“Or you’ve filmed one already,” I said, eyes narrow. If they could tease us, we might as well return some friendly fire.

“That is blasphemy,” London said, lifting a knowing index finger.

“And gross,” Hudson said, Tate on his lap.

Justin was playing table soccer topless with a beer can on the edge, sweat trickling down his bulky back. Tanner was playing against him, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt that revealed skin on the sides of his torso. They all looked like porn stars, I figured.

“Never mind,” I said instead. “What did we miss?”

“Your own wedding, apparently,” Elliot said, lifting one manicured eyebrow at me. “Marco says you woke up with your memory wiped out.”

I poked Marco between his ribs. “Marco talks too much.” He wiggled and laughed, then headed for the mini fridge. He grabbed two beers — of course he did — and gestured for me to join him on one of the smaller sofas in the room. Snacks in bowls occupied all the surface on the large, wooden table

between the scattered sofas and I pushed my hand into one, grabbing as many peanuts as I could hold.

“We got you all a little something,” I said over a mouthful, then winked at Marco to show them our present.

“But you’ll have to share it, guys,” he said as he rummaged through his backpack. “We couldn’t carry shit for everyone. Sorry.”

“Yeah, like you couldn’t just get extra luggage,” Dayton said.

“Oi!” Hudson exclaimed. Hudson was paying for half the tickets and all the extra fees.

Marco found our gift for our friends and threw it onto the table. Since it was only three sheets of paper, stapled together, it rested on one of the bowls.

Every eyebrow in the room fell flat as Dayton pushed through and lifted the paper. “You assholes,” he said, half-horrified and, to his credit, half-amused. As he read the listings we were charged for, his eyes nearly fell out. “Thirty-three-year-old Macallan?” he screeched.

Marco laughed out loud. “That one, I photographed.”

Dayton laughed, though tears pooling in his eyes could have easily been the tears of terror. “Seven pitchers of sangria, four buckets of gin and tonic, a small lake of beer and a river of dry red wine. What the fuck, guys?” He barked out his laughter and held his stomach, then threw the papers to London, who caught them promptly.

“You emptied the mini-fridge?” London asked, incredulous.

Gabriel took the papers from London and gaped. “Are plain bagels really this expensive?”

The stapled papers made a round and every one of our friends was aghast at something. “Do they really charge this much for loungers?” asked Tate. “You couldn’t put your royal asses down on the sand?”

“We had our asses in sand a lot, I’ll have you know,” I protested, devouring the salted peanuts and washing them down with beer. This was the longest I hadn’t thought about what Marco had told me at the airport. This was the longest I behaved like myself without pretending.

It even gave me hope that it was real; that I might move on as easily as that.

“They have very delicate asses, babe,” Hudson explained to Tate.

“Hey,” Marco said.

Hudson ignored him. “Don’t you know they’re also abstinent?”

“How very Victorian,” Tate said.

Hudson laughed out loud. “That’s what they’re saying, at least.” He shot us a grin that I met with narrow eyes and bared teeth.

“Oddly enough,” Tate said. “That, too, is very Victorian.”

“Just a heads up,” Marco said. “Someone is paying for our divorce, too.”

Hudson grunted. “I guess I can help.”

“Why you?” I asked, a little surprised. He and Tate had already covered a great deal of expenses. Tate had inherited his father’s immense wealth and had a tiny tendency to splurge on a select few things. Pranking his past arch enemies was one of them, it seemed. It was in contrast with his tiny living style home with only three bedrooms and a modest garden.

“Mom’s in town tomorrow. We’re having lunch. I’ll talk her into giving you a free consultation.” Hudson ran a hand through his hair. “It’s easier than hiring an attorney.”

“Doesn’t she specialize in inheritance law?” Marco asked. “I mean, we’ll all eventually need it, but not tomorrow, man.”

Hudson snorted. “She’s a lawyer. Doesn’t matter what she specializes in. She can give you advice about something as simple as a drunken marriage in Vegas.”

As we immersed ourselves in jokes, drinks, and laughter, I drifted away from all the hollowness within and kept my smiles broad. Marco did the same, but underneath the wax masks, we were both hurting.

We’d been close enough for too long that his pain was mine and the other way around. He’d given us up.

And I’d given us up, too.

We never should have gotten married. We had had a good thing going and getting married forced us to examine things

one too many times.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Annulment



WAKING UP IN MY own bed, in my own dorm room, six feet away from Stefan was like waking up in a new world. It looked eerily similar to the old world, the rules of which I knew well, but it wasn't the same. This world was populated with new rules and so many more unknowns that I feared keeping my eyes open and admitting to myself that things were no longer as they used to be.

I looked to my left and found Stefan tied in his bedsheets, wearing nothing but a pair of briefs that made me want to crawl into his bed and give him a wedgie, then spank him silly.

My heart tripped and sank. Those days were gone. I'd be smart to get used to it. I'd put an end to it before Stefan had a chance to do it. I'd done it before he needed to because it was time for me to grow up and face reality.

And despite all that, I couldn't help myself but blame this silly marriage of ours for cutting our fun time short. Had we

not gone there, neither of us would have been forced to examine the status quo. We would be here, fooling around once in a while, not really looking at it more than we had to.

I also couldn't help myself but harbor a little resentment toward Dayton for putting us up to it. Even if we did everything more than willingly. A little trace of it still coated my soul and I had to bite my lip. Dayton was a good friend and a great guy, but he could also be a selfish asshole when chasing fun. He could be nasty, too, though rarely to his friends. And I wondered if he was even aware of the damage this little game had caused.

I dressed and left Stefan sleeping. As I did so, I repeatedly reminded myself that nothing changed. We just wouldn't fuck around. That was all.

The week on Catalina Island made me face some feelings that I should not have had. It had alerted me to the danger that lay ahead. I didn't have a choice but to put a stop to it. Now was the best time. We were getting this thing annulled and maybe stopping it there meant I could forget about these feelings. Maybe I could move on and just be friends. Like we had always been. Just that.

I had cereal for breakfast and Stefan joined a little later, behaving like his usual self. His smiles didn't fool me. It didn't sit well with him, either, but he knew it was the only way forward.

The very first day of the new semester was basically just orientation. We went there at nine in the morning, listened to

the staff talk about the basics for two hours, then dispersed like a flock of meandering pigeons when a child ran into them.

“What are you up to today?” Stefan asked casually.

I loosened my red and gold tie and wondered if he knew he was gorgeous in the uniform. “I’ll join Hudson for lunch, like he offered.”

“Should I come?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s not necessary. Unless you really want to.”

Stefan thought about it for two seconds. “I think I’ll pass if you don’t need me. I can already see the confused glances when you explain how exactly we’d gotten married. I’d rather not.”

“I can take care of it,” I said. “It’s just for advice.”

Stefan and I stopped walking at the same time. I hadn’t really thought much about what life would be like after. We still shared the same room, the same friends. This wasn’t a breakup, yet it was still an annulment of a marriage. These two facts were *hard* to reconcile.

We stood there, looking at each other, as if we’d had an instinct to kiss goodbye, but knew full well we weren’t supposed to.

This wasn’t going to be an easy thing to get used to.

“What are you gonna do?” I asked, tucking my hands into my pockets.

Stefan sighed. “I owe my dad a phone call.”

I beamed despite myself. I was damn proud of him. He was growing up. “Good,” I said. It was a simple word, but it carried all I felt at that moment. All the pride and affection that filled me up poured into that one hearty word.

“And I’ll report to you later,” Stefan said with a cheeky grin.

That smile was so like the smiles he’d given me when flirting. All it lacked was a wiggle of his hips and I would have heart eyes flaring for him.

“Come here,” he said and spread his arms, then embraced me as I took a small, insecure step toward him. He held me for a long while, oddly, it didn’t feel like a goodbye. His embrace was always the most honest one. His arms were always the most comfortable ones.

After we parted ways, I headed off campus and down the hilly road toward the beaches. The summer’s last wave meant a lot of people were jogging in very little clothes. Plenty of swimmers were strolling and down the street that bordered the beaches wearing nothing more than swim shorts.

There were guys — plenty of them — who didn’t hesitate to give me a second glance, pulling their sunglasses down their noses to get a better look. I’d always been aware of my looks and the glances I got for them.

None sparked any interest. Not that the guys weren’t good looking. But it didn’t matter how good looking they were. The one I wanted the most was the one I was about to divorce.

Well, technically, rewrite into never having been married to me.

But it meant a great deal to me that Stefan, who would never marry anyone at all, spent a week as my husband. Even if this was the end, he'd still done it with *me*. Now, that was an achievement.

Mrs. Blackwood sat facing the ocean. Her hair, the same shade of brown as Hudson's, was fairly straight and minimally styled, but everything about the woman spoke of elegance and steely determination.

Hudson sat to her right. He was sprawling on the chair like a king of the restaurant, legs spread and one arm thrown lazily over the back of the chair. He was listening to something Mrs. Blackwood was saying, then laughed out loud. That was when he spotted me.

Hudson waved and his mother turned around, saw me, and smiled.

Much like all other oceanside restaurants and bars, this one was drilled into the cliff and hung over the rocks and ocean, supported by iron beams that held the wooden floor. I walked up to their table at the far edge with the clearest view of the ocean.

Mrs. Blackwood gave me her hand to shake. "Marco, it's so nice of you to join us."

After I shook her hand, I ran mine through my unruly hair. "I wish it was under better circumstances."

“Yes, Hudson tells me you’re married.” There was a hint of a smile on her lips, as if she meant to say, ‘The things you boys are up to.’

I was relieved that Hudson had already explained the situation. I understood why Stefan didn’t want to be here. It was awkward to have to retell how we’d done a silly thing in the heat of the moment and while intoxicated.

Mrs. Blackwood gestured at the waiter who rushed over and stood by the table by the time I sat down.

Hudson grinned at me, eyes sparkling either with the reflection of the light that was breaking against the waves or with the beer he’d already had.

We ordered and Mrs. Blackwood folded her hands on the table. “How are John and Liz?”

“Good,” I said, extra relieved to talk about my mom and dad a bit before we got down to business. The backpack in which I’d carried the marriage certificate was by my chair. “I just spent two weeks with them. I, er... I haven’t told them about... This. I will, when I’m ready. When it’s all over.”

Mrs. Blackwood nodded once. It would stay between us.

“God knows people assume Stefan and I are dating enough already,” I said with a strangled laugh.

“And you don’t want to give them more reason to assume,” Mrs. Blackwood finished for me, still seeming a little amused. “Hudson says you were both under the influence when you got to the chapel and hatched this plan of yours.”

I shrugged, laughing a little. “Dayton hatched the plan for us, really. We were just having a good time, attending a real wedding, when he was struck by the muse of chaos and mischief. Is there such a muse? She’s his patron saint if there is.” I stopped myself from rambling and shook my head. “But yes, we were a little drunk.” I shot a look to Hudson who owned it with his posture. I’d worried he wouldn’t want the details to reach his mom. He, too, had had a fair share of drinks that night.

“Hmm,” Mrs. Blackwood said, thinking.

“It was basically a joke,” I said. “Dayton would put together this elaborate honeymoon — just a week at a Caribbean resort, really — if we got married.”

Mrs. Blackwood thought a little more, then nodded firmly. “So, it was done under the influence of alcohol and everyone involved was aware that it was done as a joke. You’re not the first ones to wake up married in Vegas, dear.”

“Or the last,” Hudson said with a shrug.

“Precisely,” Mrs. Blackwood agreed. “This is all very straightforward, dear. Since the facts are simple in this case — neither of you really wanted to be married — annulment is the right way to go. That means, the marriage is invalidated. As far as the law is concerned, you will never have been married. Divorce is different in that it ends a valid marriage. However, it’s on you and Stefan to file the request and supply the court with proof that your marriage was not real.”

My heart twisted. We'd known all along that it wasn't real, but to put an effort into truly canceling it still hurt.

"In order to do that, however, you need to argue that the marriage is voidable. And with the fact that both of you were drunk at the time, we can argue there was a lack of understanding. The problem is that the standards for evidence are very high. That means that while you could do all of this on your own, it would be wiser to work with a lawyer." Mrs. Blackwood paused to give me a moment to think.

Getting a lawyer involved in any capacity beyond this casual chat over drinks and food was bound to alert my parents. I couldn't go behind their backs. Then again, I never wanted to lie to them. This only meant I would have to tell them sooner.

"I'm okay with that," I said.

"Good. Now, I can't take this case myself but I can refer you to a colleague in Nevada who has done her fair share of annulments and divorces. I've taken the liberty of reaching out to her already and asking about her availability." Mrs. Blackwood smiled and paused again.

"And?" I asked. The sooner this was done, the better. I just wanted to put the whole ordeal behind us and move on. It was a new world I was going to live in, but until this thing was done, I felt like I was in purgatory.

"Oh, she will make time for you if you choose to work with her," Mrs. Blackwood said.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You can think about this,” she said.

“No need. I’m in. We just need to get it done, right? No point in dragging it out.”

Mrs. Blackwood nodded. “I have to warn you, this will probably go on for two months.”

I winced. “That’s fine.”

“But we can start right away, dear,” she said. “If you could send me a photo of your marriage license so I can forward it to my colleague, she can draft a petition in a couple of days and be in touch with you.”

I smiled. “I came prepared.” I grabbed my backpack and rummaged through my notebooks until I found the certificate with overly decorative print on it and our signatures messily scrawled at the bottom. “You can take a photo here, right?” I placed the certificate on the table.

Mrs. Blackwood frowned as she picked it up, then lifted her eyebrows and bit her lip. “Uh-huh.” She tilted her head. “Hm.”

I leaned in to ask if there was a problem. *Oh God, I hope we didn’t sign something that would bind us forever.* “Is that not...?”

“Uh... I see,” Mrs. Blackwood said and bit her lip again.

Hudson frowned and straightened in his chair.

“Marco, do you have any other paperwork?” Mrs. Blackwood asked.

I narrowed my eyes in thought. “Not that I remember.” I hoped we hadn’t lost some crucial piece of paper. Anything was possible. “I don’t think we got anything else. Is there a problem with this?”

The corners of Mrs. Blackwood’s lips finally ticked up. “What about you, Hudson? Do you know if they got a marriage license?”

I frowned. She was holding the certificate. Unless that was something else. I wasn’t getting it.

“I…” Hudson scratched his neck and gave a guilty smile. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

Mrs. Blackwood shook her head at her son, then looked at me. “Marco, dear, this paper here isn’t a license. It’s not anything, really. It’s a souvenir certificate they sell in chapels like that.” She let her gaze linger on me, probably fully aware that I wasn’t following. “Did you sign anything else at all? Did you apply for the license online? Did you go to the Marriage License Bureau to pick it up?”

I scratched my head. “No. None of that happened.”

Mrs. Blackwood set the certificate on the table and leaned back in her chair, relieved and amused in equal measures. “You’re not officially married, dear.”

“B…but there were rings. We said vows. There was Elvis.”

Hudson laughed out loud at that. “Elvis really is what makes a marriage valid, isn’t he, Mom?”

Mrs. Blackwood shot Hudson a stern look and he widened his eyes, then stopped laughing. She turned her attention to me with a much kinder gaze. “What happened there was probably just a commitment ceremony. Perhaps something for tourists to experience without the actual, legally binding contract. But for marriage, you need to obtain a marriage license from the Bureau, first. It’s exactly as you said, Marco. It was a joke.”

Something stirred in me, though I couldn’t identify which emotion it was. “A joke,” I whispered. Yeah, but Stefan and I hadn’t been in on this joke. I looked at Hudson. “Did you know about this?”

Hudson straightened quickly. “No, man. I swear, I had no clue.”

Mrs. Blackwood saw the questions well up in my eyes and lips. She turned to Hudson. “Just exactly how drunk were you, Hudson? Your father and I give you a lot of leeway, Son, but it’s absolutely beyond me that you didn’t give this any thought at all. You know better, Hudson. You should, at least. Now how exactly you had no clue that getting married isn’t as simple as saying some words and exchanging the rings is beyond me. I can only assume you were well over the normal limit of...”

“Mom,” Hudson said and covered his face, sliding down in his chair. “Stop.” His voice turned squeaky.

Mrs. Blackwood paused, then softened a little as she turned to me. “This solves it, Marco. Why Elvis officiated without

your license, I don't understand, but everything else is just an act. Legally, you were never married.”

I pursed my lips and looked away. Nothing had been any different between Stefan and me. It had all been an illusion. An illusion that had cost us so fucking much. I'd broken up our flimsy arrangement because of this marriage. Because of a joke.

I held it together for a few more minutes as Mrs. Blackwood wrapped everything up and said she needed to meet with a client, then took her leave. Hudson was still blushing after the scolding and I was numb. I was utterly numb to everything. The crashing of the waves under the deck we sat on was just a dull murmur; the sunshine reflecting against the surface of the ocean seemed dim. I felt nothing.

Until I felt something.

And that something was the only emotion I could cling to. Everything I'd believed had been upended in the span of a few days. Everything I'd thought was real had just been a mirage. This one emotion, no matter how nasty it was, was all I could hold onto. And it was anger.

“You swear you didn't know,” I squeezed through my teeth.

Hudson shook his head. “I had no clue. I never thought about it that much.”

I nodded. “Dayton knew. He must have.” Why else would Elvis have agreed to officiate without our license? The only way this could have worked was if Dayton had talked Elvis

into doing it for fun. And considering how much Elvis had been slurping after Dayton, it wasn't any wonder that he'd agreed. "I bet the fucker didn't even have to pay Elvis."

"What?" Hudson quirked an eyebrow.

"Never mind," I huffed and got up. The world seemed dizzy, but maybe it was just me. Lightheaded, I walked down the street and up the hill, not fully aware of anything around me. It was like walking through the thickest fog in a new and strange land. My feet worked for me; I gave no input, no thought.

My brain was spinning in a different direction. Had none of this ridiculous business happened, Stefan and I would still be totally fine. I'd given him up for nothing. I'd fallen for him because of nothing.

On campus, I walked up to our dormitory and poked my head into our room. "It's done," I said dryly.

Stefan was at his desk, his back turned to me. He lifted his head and looked at me over his shoulder. "Already?"

"Yep."

"Are you sure? That doesn't sound..."

"We're not married," I said. "It's over."

Stefan pushed himself away from the desk and stood up, facing me. "You don't sound too happy."

"I'm fine," I said. "Everything is fine now."

I shut the door and walked away. I headed down the stairs and toward the common room. I needed a beer, but I secretly hoped to find Dayton there.

And just as I opened the door of the common room, Dayton lifted his gaze and met mine. “Marco,” he said and ran a hand through the mop of hair on top of his head. He was sitting on one of the sofas, tinkering with his phone.

“You asshole,” I said, struggling to keep any of this down. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew the marriage wasn’t real.”

Dayton blinked twice, then grinned. “I thought you’d be relieved to...”

“Relieved?” Maybe I should have been. This was saving me time and effort for the same exact result. Annuling our marriage meant invalidating it. It meant it had never happened. And it never happened, anyway. “It’s not about that,” I said and balled my fists.

Dayton’s grin seemed to be glued onto his face, but it wasn’t touching his eyes any longer. “Marco, I don’t...”

“You don’t? You don’t what? Know what to say? Good. Because I’m talking. I’m so fucking sick of everyone meddling, always calling us a couple, always pretending like we’re dating. We’re just friends, Dayton. There’s nothing between us. Less now than before because of a stupid joke that wasn’t even real. A prank, that’s what it was. You all collectively just pranked us.” I couldn’t stop talking. The dam was broken and everything was pouring out. “You got Elvis to marry us even if everyone knew it wasn’t real. You sent us to a

romantic heaven on Earth for a week — a week! — and let us think we were married. Did it *ever* occur to you how that would affect us? I bet you were laughing your ass off day in and day out for the whole week. Because that's what you do. It's all fun and games, all the time. You never think about the consequences."

"Bullshit," Dayton said. "That's not true."

"Not true? Don't give me that shit, Dayton," I said. "If you gave this any thought at all, you would have known it was a bad idea. You'd know that it could ruin everything we had. And that's exactly what happened."

"Marco, you're not making any sense," Dayton said, a bit more calmly. He glanced above my shoulder, then returned his eyes on me. "You just said there was nothing between you. I'll marry any of you in a heartbeat for a week abroad. Hell, man, I'll marry you all at once for the vacation you got."

"Yeah, but we weren't actually married, were we?" I shut my eyes and shook my head, then breathed slowly to calm myself. "It felt like we were married and that makes all the difference. It made us think. It made us question a good thing we had. If you never meddled, we'd go on doing what we always did and we would have been happy. Oh, but no. You had to get involved. You had to play matchmaker."

"What difference does it make? You said it yourself. You're just friends. Married or not."

"It makes all the difference, but you can't know that. You can't understand what it feels like when you never loved

anyone but yourself,” I blurted, shooting him daggers. I stopped abruptly. That had gone too far.

Dayton pursed his lips. “You don’t know shit, man. And this all sounds like you should be telling this to Stefan, not me. I’m sorry I fooled you. But all this other shit you’re unloading on me... That’s none of my business.”

“You made it your business when you shipped us off to a bride’s wet dream. You made it your business when you forced us to face more than either of us wanted.”

Dayton shook his head and glanced over my shoulder again, then looked right into my eyes as he stood up. “Why does it matter? Tell me that. You were going to annul it and now you don’t have to. Why does it matter that you thought you were married and now you know you aren’t?”

“Because I love him,” I yelled. “I love him and I thought, for a moment, that we might just... I don’t know. Stay married?” I heard how stupid that sounded only after I said it. “I love him, but a week of forced proximity and romance made us both think about our future. Or if there was a future at all. And if you never meddled, maybe I would never realize how much I love him. I would happily go on pretending. And now? Now I have to live with the fact that I’ve loved him for years and that I’ll never have him.”

“Did you hear that?” Dayton asked, voice softer, quieter.

I frowned. Of course I’d heard it. I had said it.

Dayton walked up to me and slapped a hand over my shoulder. “Buddy, you owe me a thank you. I’ll be happy with a fruit basket. Just... No mango. I fucking hate mango.” And he just walked away.

My heart hammered as I turned after him. His broad back swayed as he walked away. But in the wake of it all, Stefan stood wide eyed, right in front of me. His blue eyes shined with unshed tears that broke my heart.

Fuck... I shouldn’t have said anything. I should have let it go.

“You love me?” Stefan asked.

He blinked and tears rolled down his cheeks.

Only then did I realize that my cheeks were wet, too. My fingers trembled and my skin prickled and I couldn’t breathe.

I was fucked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Forever After



“BECAUSE I LOVE HIM,” Marco yelled at Dayton and the world trembled beneath me.

He spoke more. He said words that evaded my comprehension as I stood still right behind him. I’d followed him not to eavesdrop. I’d followed him because I had never seen him this way before. He’d never been so coolly angry as he had when he informed me our marriage was done for.

“Did you hear that?” Dayton asked, looking into my eyes, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Marco’s shoulders stiffened at Dayton’s question.

We both stood still as Dayton slapped Marco’s shoulder and teased him in his usual fashion.

Dayton pushed on past Marco, past me, without a second glance. He strolled down the hall as Marco turned around, his breath catching in his throat. I was choking up, too. “You love

me?” My voice cracked as tears rolled down my cheeks, tickling me on their descent.

“I...” Marco opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again to speak. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Stefan. You shouldn’t have followed me.”

“Was that true?” I asked, trying to demand an answer, but instead, losing my voice.

Marco frowned and chewed on his lip, then swallowed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it fucking matters,” I whispered quickly.

He shook his head harder. “It doesn’t. I’ll deal with it on my own. Please, just... Just don’t let anything change between us.”

“For once in your life, will you please tell me what *you* want without always thinking about everyone else? Just this once, be selfish. Just tell me. Please.” My heart hammered harder as I tried to keep myself steady. Truthfully, the three words he’d said had rocked my entire world and I wasn’t sure how to tread these new grounds.

“And risk losing you forever? Hell no,” Marco hissed, his frown deepening.

I wanted to shake it out of him. I wanted to grab the lapels of his suit jacket and shake him senseless until he finally demanded the affection and love he deserved without fearing I would reject him. “We crossed that bridge when we skinny dipped in that lake, two years ago. We kept crossing it every

time we were intimate with each other. Then we stood and watched that very same bridge burn when we got married. For the love of fuck, just tell me if you really love me.”

“We were never married,” he said instead.

I shook my head. “What?”

Marco shrugged casually. “It was all fake. We were dumb enough to fall for it. Drunk enough, maybe. But we were never legally married.”

I took a deep breath of air. It shouldn’t have mattered. Yet it mattered a great deal. Slowly, carefully, I took a step toward him, still unsure if I was about to tackle him to the ground and beg him to answer me. “We *were* married. Maybe not on paper, but you were my husband and it was glorious.”

Marco blinked fast, fresh tears shining in his eyes.

“It doesn’t matter if we don’t have a document to show for it. We believe it and that’s enough for me. That’s enough to make me hope, just a little, that maybe there are such things as happy marriages. With you, at least.” My voice kept dropping lower and quieter as I spoke and fought the tying knot in my throat.

“Do you really mean that?” Marco whispered.

“Do you really love me?” I asked again. “And not just as a friend, but the way everyone always assumes.”

Marco’s lips curved down as he thought about it. He kept his gaze on me, never wavering. “I’ve loved you since the day you asked me to sit with you, Stefan.”

My heart wrenched and throbbed.

“I didn’t realize it until a few days ago, I’ve been in love with you since forever. And I don’t expect you to change your mind just like that. I don’t expect anything, Stefan. All I want is for things to go back to normal.”

But things couldn’t go back to normal. Not now. Not after everything.

“I just want my friend back,” Marco said. “I thought I was fucked up in ways I couldn’t even comprehend. I thought I could never love someone and be so goddamn lucky that they love me back. Who’s ever won two lotteries in their lives? Not me, surely. I thought that once was all I would get. Once, when my folks adopted me and gave me a chance. It never crossed my mind that someone could fall for me the way I fell for them. And I won’t ever ask that of you, Stefan. I’ll be happy to just be your...”

I’d had enough.

I grabbed those gold rimmed lapels of his jacket, but I didn’t shake him. I pulled him in and silenced him with my lips slamming against his, our brows touching. Both our faces were wet with tears, though whether I was crying happy tears or sad tears, I couldn’t tell. My heart broke for Marco, but he also healed it with every word.

It had never crossed my mind that a relationship could go any other way than down the path of hatred. It hadn’t crossed my mind that there was a cure for the disease my parents’ marriage had gotten. The rot and mold that corrupted

everything that had once been beautiful had always felt familiar to me. I had always expected it in my heart, too.

But it wasn't here.

It wasn't even making a threat.

All there was, here and now, were Marco's lips on mine in a kiss we'd never shared quite this way. Kisses were intimate; kisses were personal. We'd never given each other just this much of ourselves, but I was willing to let him have all of me. And he was willing to surrender to me fully.

I clutched his jacket like all hell was breaking loose. I clutched it like he was about to run away and I couldn't bear it.

Marco sucked my lower lip between his teeth and held it there for a few intense moments that brought my nerves to flame. No longer could I just stand here and kiss him.

I let go of one side of his suit jacket, flailed with my free arm around and found the common room door, smashed it shut, and grabbed Marco again. I spun us around and moved us a pace forward, where I pinned Marco hard between the door and my body.

I pulled my head back for a moment to look at him. My best friend — my soulmate — was beautiful. Teary eyed and rosy cheeked, he gazed back at me in wonder. "I love you too, Marco," I said softly. "I'm such a fool for convincing myself I would never love. I never realized that I already loved you."

“It took a fake marriage for us to see that,” he whispered, heaving a breath of air into his heated body.

“There was nothing fake about it,” I said.

He quirked one eyebrow and I found his hand, twined our fingers, and brought it up.

“We never took the rings off,” I said.

“So, we’re married,” Marco said with a teasing smile.

“Baby, we’ve been married for six years,” I said and kissed him again, abruptly and unreservedly.

Everyone had always been right except us. Two dummies wandering through life, holding each other’s hands, holding onto each other, never realizing we’d been a couple all along. He’d always been the first to learn whatever new thing I had to say. And it was always mutual.

At long last, the mist lifted and I could see him for what he was. My boyfriend.

Marco fumbled behind him and found the knob, then turned the lock and smirked at me. “We won’t be the first ones to do it here,” he said in a husky voice that brought heat to my face.

With him, I’d do it anywhere.

I slid my hand down under his jacket and rested it on the side of his ribcage, feeling his body under his shirt. As I kissed him again, it dawned on me that I had never felt this free with him. There had always been this nagging thought, somewhere

in the back of my head, not to push it far into romance. I'd always felt something making me keep it strictly physical.

As I realized this, I relaxed and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Everything changed in that moment and I pushed into Marco, trapping him hard between the door and myself, wanting all of me to feel all of him. As I did, Marco cupped my ass in both his hands, sighing over my lips as he squeezed.

I thrust my hips forward, grinding my thickening cock against Marco's crotch, teasing him, driving him wild with lust, making him knead my ass and pull me in until not even an atom of air remained between us.

I reached for the lapels of his jacket, sliding them over his shoulders, and pulling back just long enough so that the jacket would fall off his body. Then, I reached for his shirt, unbuttoning it hastily with nimble fingers and revealing, inch by inch, the creamy, smooth skin of his body. His sculpted torso made my mouth water. "I fucking love you so much," I murmured as he undid my buttons in return.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Marco said. "Oh... I love you, too. I love you, I love you, I love you..." He leaned in and kissed my neck, making my skin prickle. We both rid ourselves of our shirts and grappled for control around the common room, bumping into things on our way to the sofa.

Marco hyperventilated as he tucked his fingers inside my pants and yanked them up, lifting me to the tips of my toes, peppering messy kisses everywhere his lips could reach; my

mouth, my nose, my cheeks, my chin, neck, chest. Everywhere.

I bumped against the back of the sofa with my ass, then grabbed it to steady myself. That very moment, Marco pushed into me and our torsos collided. His muscles tensed over mine and he slowly dragged himself to his knees, unbuttoning my pants and pulling them down together with my underwear.

My cock shot up as soon as Marco pulled the elastic band over it. It stiffened, fully upright, immovable, swollen and aching. My balls were tightening already. On his knees, Marco licked his lips and wrapped his fingers around the shaft, then sealed his lips around the tip.

The warm, wet inside of his mouth soothed the ache of my throbbing dick, but only a little. His wicked, sinful tongue circled the rim of the tip, tickling me everywhere at once. The sensation traveled to the middle of my chest, squeezing the breath out of me.

I tried inhaling only to choke up. A moan dragged through my strangled throat as Marco moved his hand away from my cock and swallowed me whole. His throat constricted around the tip and I nearly came that very instant.

Marco pulled his head back and shot me a hellishly handsome smile as my vision blurred and my cock pulsed like mad. He cupped my balls and sucked me in again, slowly, easing himself down my length, sealing me in the vacuum of his mouth.

I whimpered and every last shred of my being, glimmered and flexed. My hole pulsed as Marco's fingers slid along my taint and reached to feel its warmth.

Marco grabbed my hips and pulled his head back, shooting me a wet-lipped smile, then spun me around. I stepped out of my clothes and spread my legs, bending over the back of the sofa.

I folded my arms under my chest, resting against the sofa, and held my breath as Marco softly exhaled over the skin between my cheeks. His hands held me roughly, spreading my cheeks with force as he buried his face and pushed out his tongue. Shivers ran up my spine at the first contact.

He slurped and licked and sucked, pulling every trick known to man to make me burn hotter. Devouring me, pushing his tongue into me, and sucking me here and there, Marco moved his hand between my legs and closed it around my swollen cock. He held it there as I thrust my hips back and forth, pushing my ass against his face, sliding my cock through his fist, bringing myself dangerously close to my orgasm.

Marco felt me pulsing, teetering on the edge and released me. Slapping a cheek with his other hand, he moved his head back and breathed shallow breaths. "You're so fucking hot, Stefan. I can't... I can't believe we are..."

I sucked in a breath of air. "Better believe it," I whispered. "And you better take your clothes off while you're at it."

He stood slowly, then started undressing what was left of his clothes. “I don’t have...”

I bit my lip in amusement and pushed myself off the back of the sofa. By the time I turned around, Marco was naked and hard, his cock stiff and upright, and his molded chest rising and falling quickly. The creamy skin of his cheeks was a little rosy and I placed one hand on his face, then kissed his sexy lips.

“I’m sure London or one of the guys has a stash here,” I said over his lips and pushed him away playfully to seek the supplies we desperately needed. In the cabinet by the fridge, on my second attempt, I found a bowl of condoms and a half-full bottle of lube. “I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“What eyes can’t see, heart won’t miss,” Marco said.

I walked back to him, hips swinging back and forth, then pressed the condom against his chest. Marco bit his lip and took it, while I poured lube over my fingers and circled my hole with it. Jitters filled my chest at the gesture only because I knew what was coming. Marco. Always Marco.

I turned around for him, lifted my right leg over the back of the sofa, and leaned over it just like before.

“Look at that gorgeous ass,” he said, voice low and sexy.

“Don’t just look,” I said, breaths short in anticipation. “I’d hate it.”

“I would die,” Marco said, abruptly wrapping his arm under my armpits and around my chest. His torso pressed against my

back, cock sliding between my cheeks and resting there, throbbing once, then once again.

I held my breath and thrust my ass back to increase the pressure on him. It made my boyfriend growl. It made him reach for his cock and navigate it right against my hole, then slide in.

I relaxed my muscles and took him in, just an inch at best, before he pulled a little back. Once again, Marco pushed into me and I whimpered, clutching his arm that still held me. I pushed back, sliding nearly halfway down his length, hissing through my teeth until the last shred of pain dissolved into warmth and he was safely in.

Marco jerked back, then quickly in, getting me used to the motion within a heartbeat or two. Then, when I was ready for it, he shoved his thick cock deep into me, until the pressure against my prostate made my muscles flex.

“Yeah baby, just like that,” I whispered hurriedly and matched his motion, taking a bit more of him each time until Marco rushed in and impaled me all the way to his balls.

I dug my nails into the flesh of his arm and clenched my jaws, hissing as I thrust back and forth, making our bodies slam and slap against one another. My leg, resting along the back of the sofa, burned with pain from the position. I took that heat and made it mine; I took it, lived for it. All of the sweet, sweet pain and pleasure filled me and made my mind swim.

Beads of sweat gathered on my brow and rolled down my heated face.

Marco grabbed a fistful of my damp, tousled hair from the back of my head and yanked me up. I stood, feeling him slide against my prostate even harder.

My leg fell off the sofa as I straightened, my back pressing against Marco's chest. My breaths were quick and short like his thrusts into me. Marco's breathing matched mine.

"Harder," I whimpered, holding onto the iron grip of his arm around my chest. Marco added his other arm to it, holding me in place as he fucked me deep and hard.

Every muscle in my body clenched and I swallowed a cry, then bit down on my lip, shutting my eyes and letting my orgasm rip through me.

My hole pulsed around the base of Marco's cock, tightening hard enough for him to reach his climax, too. He rammed me hard for a minute longer as cum shot out of my dick. I only had a moment's warning to reach down and move my dick to a side, spraying the floor. Marco throbbed inside of me soon after, filling the condom with his cum.

When he pulled his cock out, thirst filled my mouth. Unquenchable.

I spun around and fell onto my knees just as Marco slipped the condom off.

Still stroking myself, easing the tension out of my softening length, I swallowed Marco, tasting the cum that coated his still

hard cock.

“Oh, baby,” he whispered. “That’s perfect. Yeah, just like that.”

I sucked him, letting his taste fill my mouth and memory. Salty and sweet, I lapped at him until he slowly softened in my mouth. And then, just to make my heart jitter harder, Marco lowered himself onto his knees and cupped my face with his hands. “You’re so beautiful, baby.” He placed his lips over mine before I could speak; before I could tell him how beautiful he was when he was glowing with heat after sex, when his face was a little red and his hair was messy.

Once we got dressed and cleaned the mess off the floor, Marco unlocked the door and brought us two light beers from the fridge. He crashed onto the sofa and I nestled my head in his lap. I looked up at him, gazing at his pretty chin and his perfect nose. The corners of his lips seemed to be stuck smiling; then again, mine probably looked the same.

“When do we celebrate our anniversary?” I mused.

“Today or our fake wedding day?” he asked, one eyebrow thoughtfully rising.

“Or the day we met,” I suggested. “I was never gonna be with anyone else.”

He chuckled and ran his fingers through my hair, caressing me the way I loved.

“I like that,” Marco said. “Six years and going strong.”

I laughed. Suddenly, the guy who had never wanted to be in a relationship found himself six years in. It was a cosmic joke, but a happy and kind one.

“Oh, did you call your dad at all?” Marco asked out of nowhere, my heart twisting at the words.

My guilt must have shown on my face, because Marco gave a soft smile and shook his head.

“Call him now, baby,” he said.

“I’m enjoying your lap, *baby*,” I said, ‘baby’ sounding right on my lips.

“My lap isn’t going anywhere,” he promised.

I picked up my phone and sat up. As I dialed Dad’s number, I took a sip of beer. After it rang a couple of times, Dad picked up.

“Stefan, buddy. What’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing, Dad. Just calling to check in. Are you alright?” I asked. I ogled Marco and shrugged. I never knew how to small-talk much.

“Alright? Of course I’m alright, Son. Are you?” he asked with a soft chuckle, as if simply checking in meant I was suffering from some great ailment.

I smiled to myself. “I was wondering if you had any news on our Romania trip.”

“Oh?” Dad was quiet for a little while. “Are you...? Are we...?”

“Why not?” I helped.

“Well then,” Dad said, cheerful already. “That’s right. Why shouldn’t we?” He laughed. “Oh, I know. Why don’t you, uh, ask Marco to join us? I’m sure you would like that. Wouldn’t you?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Ah...yeah. I think he would like that, too.” I lifted an eyebrow at Marco, who frowned for a moment, then got it. He just nodded solemnly and grinned at me. “That’s a great idea, Dad.”

“I thought so, too,” Dad said with a healthy note of pride. “It’ll be fun. We don’t even have to ski that much. I hear the hotels up in the mountains are gorgeous.”

My heart seemed to grow too large for my chest. “I’d like that.” And, after a moment, I added, “I’m sorry about the other week, Dad. I was on edge.”

“Oh, don’t sweat,” he said dismissively. “We’re family, Son.”

We were. A big one, at that.

After the call, I hurried to rest my head in Marco’s lap. It was, after all, my favorite place in the world.

Epilogue



THREE YEARS LATER

The flight was much easier on us when we were sober. And we were all sober. It was that kind of day.

Upon landing, two limos picked everyone up. Stefan took one and half our friends; I took the other, and the rest of our group.

“August is a good month,” Tate said as he settled into his seat in the limo. Over half a dozen of us sat around in leather seats. Bubbly champagne poured into glasses thanks to Justin’s efforts.

“You think so?” Hudson asked him, one hand holding a champagne glass, the other arm over Tate’s shoulders.

Tate blinked at him quickly, then smiled. “I think so.”

“Duly noted,” said Hudson, a confident smile emerging. My heart tittered at the thought of another wedding.

“I can’t believe you guys didn’t let me call Elvis to officiate,” Dayton said with a mock pout. He was sitting next to me.

I laughed at that and turned to face him. “And you really think it’s a good idea to have your one-night-stand officiate my wedding?”

Dayton widened his eyes. “Ah, right. There’s that. Not good at all.” He glanced at the pair of eyes that were on him, sitting next to him, as a hand patted his knee, chuckles filling the limo.

“Besides, if Elvis officiated, what would our matchmaker do?” I pointed out.

Dayton lifted a corner of his lips. He was, in effect, still the same over-confident, indulgent fuckboy, but he was a loyal, reformed fuckboy. And he was, in all honesty, the only person I could imagine officiating this wedding. He got ordained just so he could do this. And in secrecy, too. He got his permit and waited patiently for eight months until the real talk began, then just shrugged and said he had the power to officiate. The very next moment, I couldn’t picture anyone else.

Dayton was the person who’d pushed Stefan and me over the edge. He was the one who’d forced us to see what everyone else had already known.

My husband-to-be hopped out of the limo at the port at the same time I did. He was breathtakingly beautiful under the midday sun, wearing a blue suit jacket just like he had for our fake wedding. His hair was cropped short on the sides, longer

on top, and he wore his crooked smile like his life depended on it.

I stood at the dock, simply gazing at him for a long moment, all the while our friends got out of the two limos and gathered around us. The ship that would take us to Catalina Island was docked already and waiting.

Stefan stepped up to me. “Are you ready?”

My heart tripped. “More than ready.”

He gave a flirtatious smile and lifted his chin, asking for a kiss. He got more than he asked for when I pulled him in and pressed my lips hard against his. Wolf whistles filled my ears as our friends cheered us on.

Our group of well over a dozen guys was, in actuality, the last to arrive. It wasn't a large crowd of people we invited. Family members were at the resort already, as well as two of our friends who'd traveled half the world to attend.

The ship took us to the island, but slowed down when the dolphins joined our path and made a little show for everyone on board.

At the resort's dock, aside from a few members of the staff waiting for the new arrivals, stood two young men who we'd last seen some months earlier, when one of our own was given the title of a duke of a kingdom far away.

Joshua Sterling and His Highness, Prince Mateo Garcia De Leon, stood solemnly as a gust of wind ruffled the blond locks of Joshua's hair. “I can't believe it,” Joshua said as soon as my

feet touched the wooden dock. “It feels like yesterday that I watched you two get married in Vegas.”

He spread his arms for a good, long hug, then patted my back and moved onto Stefan.

“Congratulations,” Mateo said with a smile and a blush he’d always worn to some extent. He shook my hand first, then pulled me in for a hug, too.

“Congratulations are in order for you, too, aren’t they?” I asked. “Two more months? Three?”

“Two and a half,” Mateo said nervously. His crowning was just around the corner. “You better be there.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I promised.

As the crowd gathered and mingled, I found Stefan and threw an arm over his shoulders. I hadn’t been nervous until now, but the closer we were to the event of the day, the shallower my breaths grew. It wasn’t fear, exactly. It was purely my awareness that this was a big deal.

“Are you okay?” Stefan whispered into my ear.

“I am now,” I said and tightened my hold on him. He soothed me by simply being there.

He examined my face for a moment longer as our friends chattered around us, catching up on everything. It wasn’t often that we were all in the same place. Once or twice a year, we would all be lucky enough that our schedules aligned and we would reunite.

“To this day,” Stefan said quietly. “You take my breath away.”

I leaned in and let my head touch his. In the nine years I have known him, proximity to Stefan had always been the single most effective remedy for my overactive nerves. Feeling him against me calmed even the worst of anxieties.

I lowered my arm and held him around the waist as we slowly moved along the dock and the resort crew unloaded everyone’s luggage. Our friends followed as Stefan and I headed toward the heart of the resort, where our families waited.

When Mom spotted me, she jumped off her chair and rushed down the stone path toward us, followed closely by my dad. He wore a proud smile where Mom was crying tears of joy that smudged the little makeup she tended to wear.

“My boy,” Mom said as she wrapped her arms around me. “My baby.” The next moment, she pulled Stefan into the same hug and wouldn’t let go for a long while. “My baby is all grown up.”

I choked up at the sight of her, but Dad’s secretive smile amused me.

When it was his turn, he hugged us both in turn, then wrapped an arm around Mom in support. “I knew something was up since the day I called you here.” He liked to retell that story to everyone who would listen.

Just after that, we walked ahead to greet Stefan's strategically separated parents. He clutched my hand abruptly and gasped before I realized that, somehow, both his parents and their current partners sat around the same table. "Shit," Stefan said.

"Hold on," I said. "It doesn't look that bad."

We took the few remaining steps as tension heightened and, true enough, the two people who were least likely to get along were smiling politely.

"What the hell is going on?" Stefan asked, all but diplomatically.

His parents looked at each other and smiled, then Mr. Ortega got up and hugged Stefan. "This is your day, Son. We wouldn't dream of making a scene. Isn't that right?" He looked over his shoulder at Stefan's mom, who wiped her teary eyes and joined in the hug. I got a good shoulder rub and a handshake, too.

And when all the meeting and greeting was done, I hopped off to the reception desk to grab our key. There were still some hours until the ceremony and I really needed a moment of silence with Stefan, to just let this entire experience slowly sink in.

When Stefan met me in front of the reception house, I dangled the key in front of him with a grin. He lit up when he realized the number on it. Our lucky thirteen; the exact same bungalow we'd stayed in three years earlier.

Stefan took my hand as we strolled down a familiar path to a bungalow where all our dreams had sparked to life. “This is the place where I realized I would never stop loving you,” I said as I unlocked the door.

Stefan followed me inside. Instead of looking around, he waited for the door to close so he could pin me against it and kiss me until my face was sore. “I can’t believe we’re finally here.”

“Can’t you?” I asked. “I feel, against all odds, that this was the only destination we ever had for us.”

He smiled and kissed me again. “Destination? Nah. It’s just a really nice stop along the way. You and me, babe... We’re gonna go places.”

My smile stretched so wide that my muscles hurt.

I had been given a chance so many other people couldn’t dream of. When my folks took me in, made me their own, I had gotten a head start. But not all things were given to me and surely not on a silver platter. Stefan was someone worth fighting for to the last breath. And with him, facing challenges was always easy. With him, staring at a long path in our careers in our respective companies felt easier than it should.

So long as I had him to come home to, I could tackle anything.

“I love you, Stefan,” I said. “My best friend forever, the love of my life.” We had our vows ready; serious ones, at that. But I had a few private words for him, too. “You’re the salt to

my pepper,” I said and we both grinned. “You’re the Bert to my Ernie. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you and all the assholes who really are our friends. The same ones that got us married the first time around.”

Stefan threw his arms around my neck and held me there, his deep blue gaze on my lips.

“Every minute I get to spend with you is a minute I become a better person,” I admitted. Standing up for myself, for us, only ever happened because he gave me courage. And I, in turn, gave him the stability in life that had been wrecked with insecurities.

“You’re mine, mister,” Stefan said. “Now and forever.”

I leaned in and kissed him deeply, gently. Not long from now, our forever would start. A few hours to spend with our friends, to get ready, to light the torches down the beach that would mark our path into our happily ever after. A few hours until we were properly married.

I kissed him again and again, my heart melting away with heat that filled me to the brim.

Forever couldn’t come soon enough.

THE END

Frat Brats of Santa Barbara

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The Bedroom Coach Contract

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The story of The Fuckboys continues in *The Bedroom Coach Contract*. If you like naughty virgins and bad boys, be ready for it.

Also, grab Alex and Franklyn's story, [*The Last Summer Vacation*](#). The perks include access to all my exclusive content, a free monthly magazine, and discount alerts. You can join my mailing list by visiting www.haydenhallwrites.com

And finally, if you're looking for something else to read in the meantime, you should check out [*The Two Stars Collision*](#). It's a fake dating story with a ton of *Star Wars* references, opposites attract trope, and a grand finale to blow your mind. It's a complete standalone in my *College Boys* series.

Acknowledgments

Like any other book, *The Accidental Honeymoon Catastrophe* would never have seen the light of day without the immense help of everyone involved in its making. Every book I have ever written exists solely because there is you, the reader, who picked up the previous one. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading my stories. You're the reason I write.

I will forever be in debt to Sabrina Hutchinson for all the hard work on every single one of my books since exactly a year ago. You've done it again! Thank you for painstakingly weeding out the typos this messy author sprinkles around to keep things fun. And thank you for that delicious, steamy paragraph in chapter ten. Word for word, it's there for the betterment of the scene.

All my love to Xander, who has been away for a few days during my writing process. It just goes to show, I am utterly incapable of getting anything done without you around.

And finally, thank you to every person who has ever found me and decided to give me a shot. Thanks for following me

online and keeping in touch.

Hayden Hall