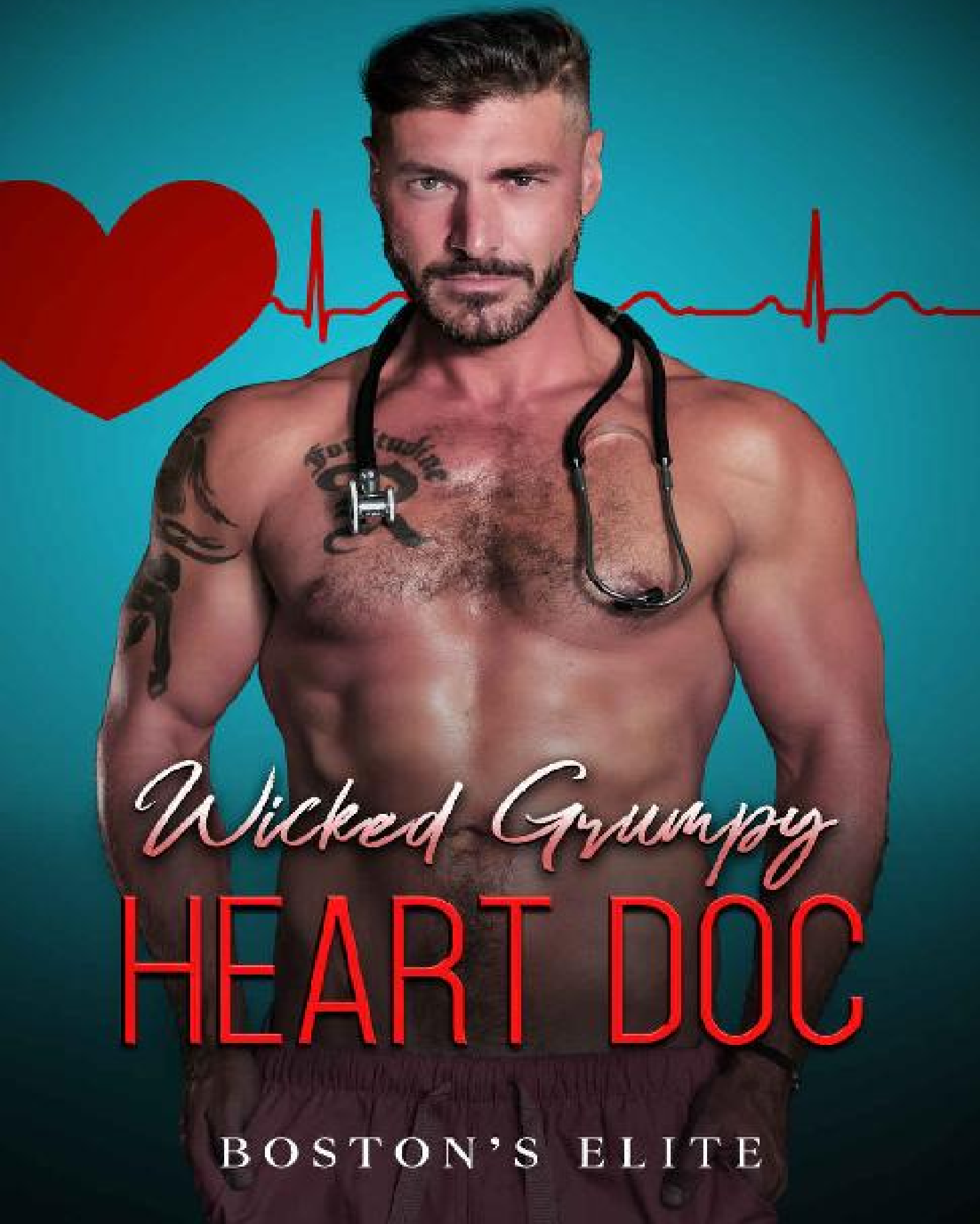


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TESS SUMMERS



*Wicked Grumpy*  
**HEART DOC**

BOSTON'S ELITE

*WICKED GRUMPY HEART DOC*

Boston's Elite

Tess Summers

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This book is for mature readers. It contains sexually explicit scenes and graphic language that may be considered offensive by some.

All sexually active characters in this work are eighteen years of age or older.

## *WICKED GRUMPY HEART DOC*

*Auras, aortas... potato, potahto?*

After an ugly divorce, Dr. Aiden Matthews was only interested in one-night stands. The last thing he wanted was a girlfriend, despite his daughters urging him to start dating. And he certainly wasn't going to ask out the spunky hippy chick they met on their hike, no matter how much his girls meddled.

Sure, Dakota had been hot.

And gorgeous.

And hadn't taken his crap—something he'd found oddly sexy. Lately it seemed everyone but his girls cowed to him the second he started to glower.

But not her.

And, he had to admit—begrudgingly, she'd made some solid points when they'd argued in the parking lot about... *everything*.

Still. They had nothing in common. He was rain clouds, and she was sunshine. She dealt with people's auras, and he dealt with their aortas.

They were not the same.

So why couldn't he stop thinking about her?

And what kind of cosmic shenanigans were at work when they ended up at the same Fourth of July party on Cape Cod, sleeping across the hall from one another?

The kind that had them waking up next to each other without any clothes on.

Fortunately, she wasn't interested in anything but casual, either.

But the more time they spend together, the more he realizes his heart could be in trouble—which is never a good thing, especially for a grumpy cardiologist.

*FREE BOOK!*

*THE PLAYBOY AND THE SWAT PRINCESS*

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*She's a badass SWAT rookie, and he's a playboy SWAT captain... who's taming who?*

*Maddie Monroe*

Three things you should not do when you're a rookie, and the only female on the SDPD SWAT Team... 1) Take your hazing personally, 2) Let them see you sweat, and 3) Fall for your captain.

*Especially*, when your captain is the biggest playboy on the entire police force.

I've managed to follow rules one and two with no problem, but the third one I'm having a little more trouble with. Every time he smiles that sinful smile or folds his muscular arms when explaining a new technique or walks through the station full of swagger... All I can think about is how I'd like to give him my V-card, giftwrapped with a big red bow on it, which is such a bad idea because out of Rules One, Two, and Three, breaking the third one is a sure-fire way

to get me kicked off the team and writing parking tickets for the rest of my career.

Apparently, my heart—and other body parts—didn't get the memo.

*Craig Baxter*

The first time I noticed Maddie Monroe, she was wet and covered in soapy suds as she washed SWAT's armored truck as part of her hazing ritual. I've been hard for her ever since.

I can't sleep with a subordinate—it would be career suicide, and I've worked too damn hard to get where I am today. Come to think of it, so has she, and she'd probably have a lot more to lose.

So, nope, not messing around with Maddie Monroe. There are plenty of women for me to choose from who don't work for me.

Apparently, my heart—and other body parts—didn't get the memo.

Can two hearts—and other body parts—overcome missed memos and find a way to be together without career-ending consequences?

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# *Wicked Grumpy Heart Doc*

## Boston's Elite

### Prologue

*Aiden*

His phone buzzed with an incoming call, *again*.

He glanced at the caller and silenced it, *again*.

He was behind on his reports and Dr. Preston, Boston General's chief of staff, had not-so-subtly suggested Aiden stay at the hospital tonight until he was caught up.

So that's what he was doing instead of heading to have drinks with the woman he'd been matched with on the hookup site that posed as a dating app. She was hot, and obviously horny, because she suggested he message her when he finished, and they'd try to meet up then.

Aiden had been planning on doing just that until his ex-wife's incessant calling put him in a foul mood.

Fouler than his usual grumpy one, anyway.

But that was what he liked about the app. He didn't have to pretend to be likeable. Being fuckable for the night would do. And that's about all he was good for these days.

Well, besides being one of the best cardiologists in the country. And being a dad. He was an awesome dad. His girls

and his patients were probably the only exceptions to who was on the receiving end of his otherwise grouchy demeanor.

**Susan: Why aren't you taking my calls?**

Because he didn't feel like dealing with her bullshit tonight. Undoubtedly, she needed money.

*Guess being drilled by your tennis coach as you're bent over our couch probably wasn't such a good idea after all, huh, Susie?*

That's how Aiden had found them eighteen months ago when he'd come home early from the hospital and walked into his living room. She'd actually run after him, naked, spouting, "It's not what it looks like!" as the guy's dick jutted out, still wet from her pussy.

Now she was trying to live on the dude's paltry salary—comparatively speaking, and her alimony. Aiden knew it was killing his high-maintenance former wife. That, and no longer having any control over him.

**Aiden: I'm working.**

He shouldn't have even bothered to respond and regretted it the instant another text came in.

**Susan: Maybe there's something wrong with the girls. Did you ever stop to consider that?**

He had, and there wasn't. The first thing he'd done when he silenced her initial call was text his two daughters, Brianna and Kailey, to make sure they were okay. That's how he knew her repeated calls had to be for money.

Still, he played along, if for no other reason than to see what she'd say.

**Aiden: Is there something wrong?**

**Susan: Yes!**

**Aiden: Really? Because I've already talked to them, and they seemed fine.**

The dots that showed she was replying started and stopped, started and stopped, and finally started again.

Yeah, that's what he thought. She was trying to manipulate him and didn't know how to respond once she got caught.

He put his phone on silent and threw it into his top desk drawer. She'd already taken up too much of his time and emotional energy. He wasn't giving her any more.

There were reports that needed to be finished. And desperate women to satisfy. Maybe he'd message that chick after all.

*Shit, what was her name?*

It didn't matter; it was in his messages. Besides, he'd more than likely forget it by tomorrow anyway.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Dakota*

She walked into the yoga studio and waved to Whitney who was already rolling out her yoga mat.

There was a glow about her friend that Dakota had never seen before. It suited her.

“Whatever—or whomever—you’ve been doing, keep doing,” she advised as she situated her purple foam mat next to Whitney’s. “Because you look positively radiant.”

Her friend’s cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink. For someone with the reputation as being a cutthroat attorney, when it came to her personal life, Whitney was vulnerable. Dakota had sensed that the first time she met her when they worked together on the Animal Rescue Foundation gala last year. But she also had a heart of gold, which is probably how she got roped into heading the silent auction this year, even though she worked eighty hours a week.

Dakota had no trouble with boundaries. Yes, she’d agreed to help with the gala, too, but there was no way she was taking on the responsibility of overseeing anything. There were too many other things vying for her attention: mainly her three-year-old grandson Asher, Barney, her pit bull she’d adopted from ARF a few years ago, and her massage therapy business. She had over twenty employees who depended on her for their livelihood, something she didn’t take lightly.

She didn’t take the role of grandma lightly, either. Having had her daughter Chloe when she was just sixteen, Dakota had

been so busy trying to keep a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs she'd missed out on a lot of things. She wasn't making that mistake with Asher.

"He's the head of the ER Department at Boston General," Whitney said while keeping her eyes trained in front of her to avoid Dakota's inquisitive look.

An image of her friend and a blond man, each holding a blond child's hand as they walked along the beach, flashed into Dakota's head. She'd always been naturally intuitive, but there had been a period in her life when she hadn't wanted to accept her visions and premonitions. But ignoring them didn't make them all go away—a lesson she'd learned the hard way.

"That's wonderful! How long have you been dating?"

"A little over a month. I'm not sure how serious it is."

Dakota didn't know how to break it to Whitney that he was *the one*. She suspected that knowledge might freak out the normally reserved attorney.

"Is he going to the gala?"

"I lost a bet with him, but he ended buying a table anyway and got the hospital to buy one, too."

She wondered what he would have done if he'd lost.

"He sounds like a good guy."

Whitney got a dreamy look in her eye. "He is."

"Well, I can't wait to meet him."

Dakota noticed her friend worriedly chewing her bottom lip. Finally, she murmured, "He, um, has a beach house on the Cape and wants to invite people for the Fourth." Whitney



turned her pleading eyes toward Dakota. “Would you be interested in coming?” She quickly added, “You’re welcome to bring someone, of course. It will be very casual and laid ba \_\_\_”

“I’d love to come. Thank you.”

Whitney blinked at her. “You would?”

“Yes, it sounds lovely. I can do yoga on the beach in the morning, enjoy the sun and the ocean, and meet your new beau. What’s his name?”

“Steven Ericson.”

“And meet Steven.”

“There will be other people, too. I think some single doctor friends of his are coming.”

Dakota felt a tingle in her spine at Whitney’s declaration. She wondered what that was about. As insightful as she was for others, things weren’t always so clear when it came to herself.

She tried not to ponder it during class and just be present, but the gnawing feeling in her gut telling her it was important she be at the Cape with her friend didn’t go away.

In fact, it only grew.

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

He glanced at his watch and saw it was noon already. No wonder his stomach was growling.

Walking his patient and his patient's wife out the door of the exam room, he directed them to reception and told Mia, his nursing assistant, "I'm going to grab some lunch in the cafeteria."

"Um, Dr. Matthews?" she called nervously after him.

He turned around with raised eyebrows. "Yes?"

Aiden really tried hard not to be impatient with his staff. He knew his reputation around the hospital these days was that he had turned into an asshole since his divorce. While he considered "asshole" to be a bit harsh, he also was self-reflective enough to know it was closer to reality than any bright and cheery words he could come up with.

"You, uh, you have some messages." She quickly thrust handwritten slips of paper at him. Before he could ask, she added, "I forwarded everything to your email, but these were marked urgent."

By the way she wouldn't meet his eye as she held her hand out, he already knew who they were from, but he glanced down for confirmation.

*Susan.* Just as he suspected.

Aiden let out a frustrated sigh. He'd silenced any calls and notifications from his ex, but she was nothing if not resourceful.

"How many times did she call?"

"Five."

*Fucking hell.*

“I’m sorry.”

“Um, if you talk to her, you might want to mention that other people listen to your messages for you.”

He could only imagine what the poor girl had heard. No wonder she couldn’t look him in the eye.

“There’s probably not a way to block her number, huh?”

“Calls are routed through the hospital’s main number, so probably not.”

“I apologize for any dirty laundry you had to listen to. I’m sure you’ve heard the gossip my divorce wasn’t exactly civil.”

“Can I just say, judging by her messages, you’re better off without her. She is a piece of work.”

That was an understatement.

But when Aiden had met Susan, he’d been a nerdy, shy med school student, and she was a beautiful, vivacious interior design major. He’d had no idea why someone so out of his league was interested in him, but she was. He married her during his second year of medical school.

It wasn’t until they were ten years into the marriage did it dawn on him he’d been her golden ticket. She was the poster child for pampered country-club wife, and he’d been happy to provide her with that life. If he was being honest with himself, it’d stroked his ego to have the wife everyone lusted after. Until he realized, men were doing more than just lusting after her, and he was the last to know about it.

Aiden offered a weak smile and waved the messages now in his hand. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty, right?” then turned on his heel and headed to the elevator.

On the ride down to the main floor where the cafeteria was located, he sent out a group text to his girls.

**Aiden: Just checking in to make sure you’re both okay.**

His oldest answered first.

**Kailey: We’re good. Getting ready to go visit Grammy and Grampy for the 4th.**

Susan’s parents lived on a lake in Wisconsin, and the girls loved spending time there in the summer.

**Aiden: That sounds like fun. Catch lots of fish! Did you pass your driver’s permit test?**

**Kailey: We will, and aced it. ☺**

Of course she did; she took after Aiden in that she was wicked book smart. Street smarts... well, she also took after him in that, not so much.

Brianna seemed to be the exact opposite.

Not that his youngest wasn’t smart when it came to school. She just didn’t give a damn. In that regard, she was a lot like her mother. He was convinced she only went to school to socialize. It’d gotten worse since she turned thirteen.

**Aiden: That’s my girl.**

**Brianna: Mom thinks you should buy her a car for her sixteenth birthday.**

It pissed him off that Susan said shit like that in front of them.

**Aiden: We've got plenty of time before we have to think about that.**

He knew he really didn't. Six months was going to fly by, and the next thing he'd know, his little girl would turn sixteen and he'd be turning forty-two. Where did the time go?

**Aiden: We still on for this weekend?**

**Kailey: Mom wants to leave on Saturday morning. She says it's going to take two days to get there. She was going to call and talk to you about it.**

**Aiden: You guys aren't flying?**

**Brianna: Mom's gotten cheap since the divorce, Dad.**

Yeah, she probably had. Aiden doubted her German tennis pro could keep her in the lifestyle she'd become accustomed to being a doctor's wife.

He suspected Bjorn's future in Aiden's old house was going to be short-lived. Susan would trade up soon enough.

**Aiden: Sorry, ladies. Road trips can be fun, though.**

**Brianna: Fun. Yeah, right. Two days in a car with Mom and Bjorn... it's going to be torture.**

**Aiden: You'll have your cell phones; you'll be fine. When I was a kid, car ride entertainment consisted of playing the license plate game or I Spy. Consider yourselves lucky.**

**Brianna: Did they even have license plates back then?**

**Aiden: Har har. You're pretty funny for someone who's going to want a working cell phone in a few days.**

**Brianna: I'm sorry, Daddy! You're young and handsome!**

She included a GIF of a male model with the caption: *David Gandy's got nothing on my dad!*

**Aiden: Nice save.**

**Aiden: I'd still like to see you before you go. I'll talk to your mother about you staying Thursday night and bringing you home Friday after dinner, if that works for you.**

**Kailey: That works for me!**

**Brianna: Me too!**

**Aiden: Let's plan on that, then. If something changes, I'll let you know. Love you both.**

**Brianna: Luv U2!**

**Kailey: Love you, too!**

He slid his phone into his pocket with a sigh. That meant he was going to have to call Susan back.

He decided to wait until after lunch to do so. Eating when he was irritated wasn't good for his digestion.

Not that he wasn't already pissed off. It seemed like he was perpetually annoyed.

After paying for his lunch, he carried his tray into the dining room and was headed toward a table in the corner by the window when he heard his name.

“Aiden!”

It was a reflex to look when his name was called, so now he couldn't pretend like he didn't hear whoever was beckoning him.

Fortunately, it was Steven Ericson and James Rudolf. Both were good guys who didn't constantly try to fix him up with someone, like some of the staff around the hospital. As if he couldn't get a date without someone's help.

He didn't have any problem getting the casual hookup, and he definitely wasn't looking for anything else. Some of his colleagues were under the impression he needed a love connection and would recommend the friend or sister, or someone their spouse knew, citing, “She'd be perfect for you.”

He wasn't sure what constituted someone being “perfect” for him. Grouchy and pissed off at the world? That sounded dreadful—like he knew he would be for anyone for more than a night.

“Gentlemen,” he said as he set his tray down on the table and slid into the booth next to James, across from Steven.

“We were just talking about you,” James said with a grin.

*Fuck.*

“Please don't tell me you know the perfect woman for me and want to set me up with her.”

Both men furrowed their brows, but Steven was the one who replied. “What? God no. I wouldn't set my worst enemy up with a grumpy bastard like you.”

“I can't even argue with you.”

“No, we were talking about who to invite to my place at the Cape for the Fourth. So far, we’ve got me and Whitney, my sister Hope and Yvette—her friend from California—James, Zach, and probably Zach’s flavor of the week, and maybe Whitney’s friend from the animal rescue fundraiser.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a full house.”

“There’s room for one more...” Steven said with raised eyebrows.

“I appreciate the invite, really. But I’m going to have to pass this time. Maybe next year.”

“Are you sure? We’re just going to be relaxing and drinking at the beach all day. Nothing planned other than hanging out.”

“Positive.”

“Well, if you change your mind, the invitation stands.”

He wouldn’t be changing his mind. Still, he replied, “Thanks. I appreciate that,” then took a bite of his sandwich.

As he chewed, he studied his friend on the other side of the booth.

Swallowing, he asked, “How long have you been dating this woman you’re seeing? What’s her name again?”

“Whitney. And a little over a month.”

Aiden lifted his chin toward Steven as he asked James, “Has he been smiling like this for the last month?”

“Pretty much,” James replied with a chuckle. “I’ve never seen him like this. And I’ve known him a long time.”



As much as he wanted to warn his friend to proceed with caution, he knew that would be a dick move. He wasn't going to rain on Steven's love parade. Besides, he knew if someone had tried to warn him about Susan when he was first besotted with her, he would have told them to fuck off and they'd ceased being friends.

Some lessons are only learned the hard way.

“What does she do?”

“She's an attorney,” James supplied. “Zach introduced them when she was opposing counsel.”

So, she had her own money—that was a check in the pro column.

“Zach didn't mind you asking out his rival?”

Steve's grin only grew. “I waited until the verdict came in. Kind of.”

“Kind of? What does that mean?”

James answered for Steve. “He kissed her at the bar after closing arguments and made a bet with her about the outcome.”

Steve shrugged. “I watched part of the trial, so I knew it was a sure thing. Luckily, she was too proud to admit defeat and took the bet.” He leaned back in the booth with a smug expression. “And the rest, as they say, is history.”

“She sounds great. I can't wait to meet her someday.”

“That could be arranged if you'd come for the Fourth.”

Aiden shook his head. “I can't.”

“If you have the girls that weekend, bring them along. I’ve got air mattresses, hammocks, and sleeping bags—we’ll make room.”

“That’s not it. They’re going to Wisconsin to see Susan’s parents.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

The problem was he didn’t want to be around people for that long a period of time, but how did he spin that without sounding like the antisocial prick he really was?

“I’ve just got a lot going on,” was the best he could come up with.

“If you change your mind...” Steven reiterated.

He appreciated his friend not pushing.

“I’ll let you know if I do.”

## CHAPTER TWO

*Aiden*

He pulled up to the address Brianna had sent him and took out his phone.

**Aiden: I'm here.**

**Brianna: Nicole's mom wants to know if you want to come in while I finish up.**

**Aiden: What are you finishing up?**

**Brianna: Nic's letting me borrow some clothes. Btw, her mom is single, too. Just come in and say hi, Dad. It's good manners. You want to set a good example, right?**

**Aiden: No, not really.**

**Brianna: DAD!**

He and Susan had already raised them to be polite. She didn't need him to model that behavior anymore. Which was probably a good thing, since he wasn't much of a role model these days.

And what did the woman being single have to do with anything?

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," he muttered his favorite line from Hamlet as he shut off the car.

He took his time exiting his Audi A8, and ambled up the walk, the whole time sensing a trap.

He rang the doorbell and a woman about his age answered. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, and judging by

her tight clothes, probably worked out every day. And her tits were way too perky for her age to be real.

She looked like every other woman he used to run into at the club, Susan included, back when he used to still go. Before his wife made a fool of him and he became the topic of gossip.

He fucking despised being fodder for the rumor mill.

“Hi!” she said brightly. “I’m Lydia, Nicole’s mom.”

He dutifully nodded in acknowledgment. “Aiden.”

She gestured to the living room. “Won’t you come in?”

That was the last thing he wanted to do. Still, since there was no way he could say no, he stepped over the threshold. But he wasn’t interested in returning her flirty smile when she gestured to the couch and asked, “Would you like to sit down?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

He pulled out his phone and barely glanced at her again as he fired off a text to Brianna to hurry.

Lydia twirled a strand of her hair. Aiden suspected she was a lot like his ex-wife in that men didn’t often turn her down for anything.

“Are you sure? I don’t know how much longer the girls are going to be. Would you like something to drink while you wait? A beer? Cocktail? Soda? Water?”

“I’m all set.”

“I’ve got a nice selection of wine...”

Aiden felt the scowl form on his face. “I’m driving. With my daughter in the car.”

“Oh, I—uh,” she stammered to come up with a response. He’d obviously embarrassed her.

He sighed, kicking himself. Normally he wouldn’t give a shit, but this was his daughter’s best friend’s mom; he needed to at least *try* to play nice. This was not a part of parenting he was versed in. Susan used to handle all the interactions with other parents, especially any hot moms. He suspected there was no way his ex would have allowed a woman who looked like Lydia—married or single—near him alone.

*I should’ve waited in the goddamn car.*

Fighting the urge to pinch between his eyebrows, he mustered up a polite smile.

“I’m sorry; it’s been a long day. Sometimes I leave my bedside manner at the hospital.”

That seemed to soothe her because her flirty smile returned.

“Brianna said you were a cardiologist at Boston General.”

He nodded.

“That must be stressful.”

“It can be.”

“I’m sure being a single dad doesn’t help the situation.”

“It’s taken some getting used to, but fortunately I have great kids, so that’s helped.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “Well, us single parents need to stick together. If you ever need *anything*—help with Brianna, or just someone to talk to and get drunk with because you’ve had a bad day, please call me.”

Yeah, no, he wouldn’t be doing that. Still, he nodded and said, “Thanks, I appreciate that.”

“Give me your phone,” she demanded, holding out her hand.

*Uhhhh, no.*

He hesitated, and she rolled her eyes. “So I can text myself. That way, you’ll have my number, and I’ll have yours.”

*Exactly, you’ll have mine.*

There was no graceful way to decline, so he handed it to her just as Brianna and Nicole came down the stairs. The two friends exchanged a knowing smile.

He was right—this had been a trap.

*Dammit.*

Aiden loved his little girl for worrying about him and wanting to set him up with someone. She and Kailey both had been lamenting about him being alone while their mom had Bjorn. He’d tried reassuring them he was fine alone, but they obviously weren’t convinced. Still, he was going to have a serious talk with Brianna about ambushing him like this.

Lydia handed him back his phone, and he heard a faint *ding* coming from somewhere in the other room.

“Ready, sweetheart?” he asked as he held his arm out to usher Brianna to the door.

“Yeah.”

But instead of moving to leave, the girls threw their arms around each other and hugged one another tightly, like one of them was going off to war instead of a house on a lake in Wisconsin for ten days. He saw a tear trickle down Bri’s cheek.

Even when he’d been a teenage boy, Aiden hadn’t understood teenage girl drama, but now, as a salty old man approaching forty-two, it was so out of his wheelhouse it wasn’t funny.

Nicole let out a small sob, and he glanced at Lydia to see if she had an opinion on the scene in front of them.

Her amused smile seemed to indicate she understood and was tolerant of it, but she agreed they were being over-the-top.

What was he supposed to do now? He got the feeling if he didn’t intervene, the two would stay latched to each other all night.

Fortunately, Lydia put her hand on Nicole’s shoulder and pulled them apart, saying, “All right you two. You’ll see each other in a few weeks, and I’m sure you’ll text each other all day, every day while Brianna is gone. It’s going to be fine.”

The woman was his hero. Maybe he would take her up on her offer.

But even as the thought entered his head, he recognized all the reasons he would not really be doing that, least of which was she reminded him too much of his ex-wife.

Aiden steered Brianna toward the door, pulling her in for a brief side hug around her shoulders before he opened the door and turned to Lydia and Nicole.

“It was nice meeting you, Lydia. Nicole, I’m sure I’ll see you soon. You ladies have a nice evening.”

“Thank you for having me over,” Brianna called to Lydia, then directed, “I’ll text you tonight,” toward her friend.

*See? I don’t need to model being polite. My kid’s got it down.*

Now he just needed to drop the hammer she never, ever try to play matchmaker again. The problem was, he knew she meant well, so he couldn’t come down too hard on her.

They were in his car and driving through traffic and he was looking for a way to broach the subject when she said, “Nicole’s mom is pretty great, don’t you think?”

“She seemed nice.”

“Do you think you’ll ask her out?”

He glanced at his thirteen-year-old in the passenger seat looking back at him with a hopeful smile.

“Not a chance, Bri Bug.”

“Why not?” she whined. “You’re single, she’s single. Why wouldn’t you ask her out?”

“Well, for starters, my standards when it comes to dating a woman are a little higher than ‘she’s single’. Secondly—”

Brianna cut him off. “Okay, well, she’s pretty and smart, and she’s always nice to me when I’m over there.”



“*Secondly*,” he spoke over her interruption. “Dating your mom’s friend would be a very bad idea.”

“Why? It’d be awesome! Nicole and I could be sisters if it worked out!”

“And, what if it didn’t? Did you even stop to consider that? What if one of us liked the other, but the feeling wasn’t mutual? Say, for example, I really liked Lydia, but she didn’t feel the same way. Then you wouldn’t want to go over there because you’d feel awkward being around the woman who broke my heart. And Nicole wouldn’t want to come over to our house because she’d worry that I’d try to pump her for information about her mom.”

“You would never do that. You don’t do even do that about Mom.”

“But Nicole doesn’t know that. Or maybe Lydia would *think* I was going to do that and wouldn’t allow her to come. Then your friendship would be strained.” He paused and glanced at her again as she processed the scenario he’d just painted.

“We didn’t think about it that way. Nicole just knows her mom would like a boyfriend, and Kailey and I think you need a girlfriend, so...”

“It’s not a good idea, Bug. Besides, you don’t think your old man can get his own dates?”

“Well, you haven’t so far, and it’s been over a year since your and Mom’s divorce was final.”

Eighteen months since the day he walked in on her. The sight of her naked ass in the air and Bjorn’s hard cock jutting

out at him was forever burned in his memory. He hadn't even yelled or decked the guy, just went upstairs and packed his shit, numb at her betrayal.

"I've gone on dates," he replied defensively.

"You have?"

Well, hookups—but those counted, dammit. Of course, he couldn't tell his teenage daughter that.

"Yeah, I've been on a handful over the last year."

"How come you didn't tell us?"

"Because there was nothing to tell. There were no second dates. I promise, the minute I'm seeing someone worthy of meeting you two, you'll be the first to know."

That seemed to placate her, either that or she was really hungry, because she changed the subject by asking, "Do you want to pick up a pizza?"

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The three of them sat around his new kitchen table, eating the pepperoni pie and talking about the girls' upcoming trip to Wisconsin.

"It won't be the same without you, Dad," Kailey said with a sad smile.

"What? You don't think Bjorn can fish?" he replied with a smirk. Enough time had passed that he could crack jokes about Susan's lover.

“I don’t think he can do much besides play tennis.”

*And nail your mom.*

“He hasn’t helped out since moving in?”

*Into my house.*

Aiden had let his ex-wife have it in the divorce in exchange for reduced alimony and child support. He’d agreed so the girls would not only have less disruption in their lives by not having to move, but so he never had to worry about them having a roof over their heads when they were with Susan. In the back of his mind, he’d known another man would move in someday. He just hadn’t thought it’d be the guy he’d caught fucking his wife in his living room.

“I mean, I guess, kind of. Mom hired the housecleaning service again once he moved in, so I suppose that’s contributing, since she originally said we couldn’t afford it anymore.”

That was how Aiden had contributed to the household when he’d lived there. He worked his ass off so he could afford to pay other people to do shit he either didn’t have the time or just hadn’t wanted to do. Not that he couldn’t change his own oil or mow his own lawn—he’d done those jobs enough through high school and college that he could do them in his sleep. But now, it just made more sense to hire them done so he could spend his precious free time with his family.

But he somehow doubted the tennis pro’s schedule was as hectic as a heart doctor’s. He guessed it depended on how many clients he had like Susan who needed “special service”.

He didn’t want to think about that shit anymore.

“What are we watching tonight?” he asked as he picked up their empty paper plates and disposed of them in the trash. Kailey put the remaining pizza in a plastic bag, then stuck it in the fridge while Brianna refilled their soda glasses and gathered snacks from the pantry.

They made their way into the family room and the girls went about moving the coffee table out of the way and pulling blankets and pillows from the cupboard of the wall unit that also housed the obnoxiously large flat screen and arranged them on the floor.

Once their little nest was all made up, the three of them got situated with Aiden in the middle, then Kailey scrolled through the Netflix options.

She stopped on one with vampires and Brianna shook her head. “Veto.”

They came upon a true-crime documentary and Aiden said, “How about—”

“Veto,” the girls said in unison, and Kailey continued scrolling.

She finally stopped on one, and Bri clapped her hands as she bounced up and down.

“Yes!”

He groaned, “Are you serious?”

“Yes, Dad! There’re seven seasons, so we’ll be able to watch every time we come over.”

Aiden liked the logic, but still. “Come on. You expect me to watch seven seasons of *Gilmore Girls* with you?”

Kailey chimed in. “Actually, there’s another shortened season they made about ten years later.”

He took a drink of his soda, then settled in between his two favorite girls, grumbling, “Do *not* tell anyone about this.”

## CHAPTER THREE

*Aiden*

He woke up with a slight kink in his neck and the TV screen asking if they were still watching.

Smiling as he looked down at his sleeping beauties, he whispered to the TV, “Obviously not,” then reached for the remote on the other side of Kailey and clicked it off.

“Come on, girls,” he murmured softly as he gently roused them. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Don’t wanna move,” Bri grumbled as she turned over. “Let me sleep here.”

“Me too.”

*Ah youth.*

He remembered sleeping on the floor without a care in the world. Those days were long gone. Give him a memory foam mattress and a thousand-thread count sheets, thank you very much.

“Good night,” he said as he tucked the blankets around them. “Don’t forget we’re going hiking tomorrow morning, so don’t plan on sleeping in late.”

“I remember. ‘Night, Dad,” Kailey mumbled with her eyes closed.

Brianna was out cold again.

He switched off the lamp in the corner and headed to bed, happy and content his daughters were under his roof, but wished it happened more. Especially after Brianna had rested

her head on his shoulder while they had been on their third episode of Lorelai and Rory, and said, “I’m glad you and Mom got divorced. You never would have done this with us when you were married.”

That had hit him square in the gut. Partly because he knew she was right. He’d let Susan handle the parenting while he made the money to provide for them. It was something he regretted and wished he could change, but he couldn’t. The only thing he could do going forward was try to be better at being present with them whenever he had the opportunity.

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### *Dakota*

Barney spun in circles when he saw her pull his leash from the hall closet.

She bent her knees and patted her thighs. “You ready, boy?” she asked in the urgent voice reserved for when she was talking to her happy pup. “Let’s go for a hike!”

Barney almost knocked her down as he raced to the door but had enough training to know once he reached it, he needed to sit still long enough for Dakota to put the lead on him. Finally ready, with his tail wagging furiously, he hopped into the passenger side of her Highlander.

They made their way to World’s End, the nature preserve not far from the city.

Barney barked excitedly when she pulled into the parking lot and put the hybrid SUV in park. The pup's excitement was contagious, and she couldn't help but laugh when he bound out once she opened the passenger door.

Unfortunately, Dakota didn't have a good grasp on his leash, and Barney, being quite the ladies' man, galloped straight toward two blonde teenagers who had just gotten out of an expensive looking white Audi about thirty yards away.

"Barney!" she yelled and sprinted off after him. She knew he just wanted to see if the girls would pet him, but also knew that a random pit bull charging toward them could be misinterpreted.

The two girls froze in their tracks as the dog approached with his entire butt wiggling.

"He's harmless! He loves people!" Dakota called out in reassurance as she approached. That's when she noticed the man come around from the driver's side, holding a can of pepper spray aimed directly at Barney.

"He better be," the guy snarled.

The dog must have sensed the man's animosity, because he immediately rolled onto his back and exposed his belly, his tail still wagging.

Dakota drew near, holding her side as she caught her breath and gestured to the submissive pup with her other hand.

"Obviously, he's ferocious," she huffed.

"Aw!" the girls said in unison and crouched down, prompting Barney to flip back over and belly crawl to them to get the attention he'd originally been seeking. His tail



furiously thumped the ground as they reached down to scratch his flattened ears.

“Well...” he groused. “You never know. And I’m not taking any chances with my girls.”

Dakota scrutinized him. He was exceptionally handsome; his dark brown hair with greying temples and lines around his blue eyes only made him more distinguished. But it was his aura that had her the most intrigued.

At first glance, it almost looked like a Valentine’s Day card with shades of pink, red, and orange. The love for his daughters was obvious. But there were also black and grey shadows around the vibrant colors; Dakota wondered what that was about. Why was he suffering? Angry? Grieving? Or was he sick?

He didn’t look sick, but she knew appearances could be deceiving. Yet, the overwhelming sense she got was he had pent-up anger and grief that needed to be healed.

Her shoulders softened as she glanced at the girls, now fully immersed in pit bull love. They obviously meant the world to him, and he just wanted to protect them.

With a warm smile, she said, “Of course. I wouldn’t either if they were my children. I’m sorry he got away from me and frightened you.”

He pulled his shoulders back. “I wasn’t frightened.”

Dakota tilted her head toward the can of pepper spray still in his hand. “You sure about that?”

“I was concerned. It’s not the same thing.”

“Okay.” She pressed her lips together to keep from smirking.

“Dad! Isn’t Barney the sweetest?” the younger of the two exclaimed.

“How do you know his name?”

“It’s on his tags.” She looked at Dakota standing next to her dad. “Is your name really Dakota?”

“Dakota Douglas. Nice to meet you.”

The older girl interjected, “I love your name! I’m Kailey, this is my sister Brianna.”

“Hi, Kailey and Brianna. Nice to meet you, too.”

“And you’ve met our dad, Dr. Aiden Matthews.”

It was adorable how his daughters threw in the *doctor* part.

Now she didn’t bother trying to disguise her smirk as she looked at the good doctor and held out her hand. “Pleasure to meet you, *Dr. Matthews.*”

He rolled his eyes as he broke out into a grin when he took her hand. His hand was soft, but his grip firm, and his smile made him even more handsome.

“Please call me Aiden, Ms. Douglas.”

“I will if you call me Dakota.”

He held her gaze while he slowly released her hand, as if he were reluctant to let go.

“Done. Dakota. That’s an interesting name.”

“My parents are hippies. My sister is Utah, and my brothers are Denver and Phoenix.”

“Very cool.”

“We’re an eclectic group.”

“I’m curious. What are your parents’ names?”

She laughed. “Tim and Christine.”

“Not very bohemian.”

“No, but they met at an anti-war rally in the early seventies when they were both at Berkley.”

“Okay, that’s pretty hippy-ish,” he conceded with a chuckle. “You said, *are* hippies. Are they still?”

“Well, they did sell out and move to the suburbs, but they compost, do yoga, and drive hybrids to try to make up for it. I think they’ll always be flower children at heart. I attended my first No Nukes demonstration when I was still in diapers, and they still go to rallies for causes they’re passionate about.”

“What about you?”

She cocked her head. “What about me?”

“Do you still go to protests, now that you’re an adult and have a choice?”

“Of course. How else do you effect change?”

He snorted. “You can’t be serious. You really think that makes a difference?”

“I think everything we do, big or small, makes a difference.”

A cocky grin slowly formed on his handsome face as he shook his head, like she amused him.

Dakota wanted to wipe it right off him.

*With my lips.*

*Whoa! Where did that come from?*

It had to be his pheromones. That could be the only explanation.

That also had to be why she was still standing there talking to him instead of leaving for her hike with Barney.

“What’s so funny?” she asked with her hand on her hip.

“Just people who think any of that makes a difference. At the end of the day, it all comes down to money. Who can afford the most successful bullshit campaign to make the public want to believe their point of view. Look at what the tobacco companies did for years.”

“Then people affected change.”

“No, the cost to care for sick people was what caused regulations and anti-smoking campaigns.”

“Isn’t it exhausting—going through life so cynically?”

“Don’t you get tired of being little Miss Sunshine all the time? Unrealistically optimistic?”

“Nope. I choose to be happy. You should try it. You’d be surprised what a little optimism can do.”

“Think happy thoughts and good things will happen?” he scoffed. “Yeah, I’ll suggest that to my patients when I have to

advise them to put their affairs in order because they have three months left to live.”

Her heart went out to him. She couldn't imagine having to deliver that type of news to someone once, let alone on a regular basis. No wonder he was cynical.

“Well, in my experience, mindset is everything. As the Henry Ford expression goes, ‘whether you can think you can or think you can't, you're right’.”

He stood staring at her, as if he was considering what she said.

“Okay, I'll admit there's some validity to that. But you can't wish away heart disease or cancer.”

“No, but there are things you can do to prevent or change them.”

“Sure, but thinking happy thoughts isn't one of them.”

“Isn't it, though? Don't anger and stress play a role?”

He scrutinized her further. “Are you a lawyer, Dakota Douglas?”

That made her chuckle. “Not even close. I own a massage therapy business.”

“Of course you do.”

She couldn't decide if he'd meant that to be an insult but chose to take it as a compliment.

Reaching into her joggers, she pulled out a business card and handed it to him. “You should come see me. We can work on clearing that negativity from your aura and helping you

relax. I personally don't take new clients anymore, but I'd make an exception for you."

"Negativity from my what?"

"Your aura—your energy field."

"Energy field... right." He glanced down at the card in his hand. "Three locations, huh? Business must be good."

"I can't complain."

Aiden glanced over at his daughters, and she followed his gaze. They were both smiling as they watched their exchange, but quickly glanced down at the happy dog when they noticed the two adults looking at them.

He cleared his throat as he pocketed her card. "I promised these girls a hike before I take them back to their mom, so I should get going."

"Yeah, Barney is going to get impatient pretty soon, too."

Neither of them moved, though.

Finally, he took a step toward Kailey and Brianna, then paused. "My negative aura and I enjoyed meeting you, Dakota."

"Likewise, Aiden."

She patted her legs and called, "Come on, Barney!"

Kailey and Brianna stopped petting him and stood, so he knew the attention had dried up and trotted toward Dakota.

She waved to the teenagers before picking up his lead. "It was great meeting you, ladies. Thank you for showering Barney with affection."

“We loved it!” Kailey responded with a broad smile.

Her sister’s grin was slyer when she suggested, “Maybe we’ll see you again here sometime.”

“Maybe.”

Dakota would leave that up to the Universe to decide.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Aiden*

“She seemed nice,” Kailey said as they watched Miss Sunshine and Rainbows start up the path with her dog.

“Yeah.”

He cast one last look before they headed to the trail at the opposite end of the parking lot.

*She definitely has a nice ass.*

Must be all that granola she probably ate.

He could only imagine what her house looked like. She probably had those hanging beads instead of doors, and crystals and incense everywhere. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if she had a crystal ball sitting on her coffee table.

“You two sure seemed to have a lot to talk about,” Bri giggled.

He snorted. “Yeah, because we have *so* much in common. She deals with people's auras, and I deal with their aortas. I mean, it's practically the same thing, right?”

But she wasn't some vapid flower child. She obviously had a good business head on her shoulders to have three massage studio locations. What he'd liked most about her, though, was she'd been spunky and not taken his shit. Right now, it seemed everyone cowed to him the second he started to glower. He'd found it oddly erotic she hadn't. And, he had to admit—begrudgingly, she'd made some solid points with her arguments.



Brianna rolled her eyes. “You’re kind of a snob, Dad.”

“I’m not a snob.”

“Yeah, you are,” Kailey interjected before leaning down to tie her shoe. She popped back up and added, “And a grumpy one at that.”

“Am not,” he grumbled as they headed to the trail.

“I thought you were going to pepper spray her or her dog,” Kailey mocked.

“I didn’t know if her dog was dangerous. I wasn’t going to take any chances. Can you imagine what your mother would do if I called to tell her that her daughters were attacked by a dog under my watch? Can you say, *court-supervised visitation*?”

“It wouldn’t have been your fault. How could you have prevented that?”

“I’m your parent; it’s my job to. Period. And that’s how a judge would see it, too.”

“Dad...” Kailey’s tone was wiser than it should be for her fifteen years. “You need to relax and stop assuming the worst. And not just about us. About *everything*.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Yes, you do,” Brianna chimed in. “When I wanted to go to the mall with my friends, you made me put the location app on my phone in case I got kidnapped.”

That hadn’t been the main reason he had her put the location tracker on her phone. He’d wanted to make sure she

didn't leave the mall without telling him and go get into trouble.

Which, when he paused to consider it, was unfounded and unfair. Neither of his girls had ever given him an ounce of strife—even after the divorce, when kids notoriously acted out.

“I just worry. I don't know what I'd do if anything were to happen to either of you.”

“We worry about you, too, Dad. We want you to be happy.”

Aiden wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders and pulled them into him for a side hug. “I've got the best daughters in the world; how could I not be happy?”

Kailey accepted the hug, but then shot him a reprimanding look, complete with pursed lips that made her resemble her mother. “You know what I mean.”

“Okay, I'll try to ease up.”

“You need a girlfriend,” Brianna chimed in.

“Is that what this is about? Because I'm not interested in Nicole's mom?”

“Or Dakota. Or anyone.”

“Girls, come on. I'm sure Lydia is great, but I'm not dating any of your friends' moms. And that woman Dakota? We couldn't be more opposite.”

Yet, he'd felt strangely at ease in just the few minutes they'd spent talking.

Kailey raised her eyebrows. “You know what they say, opposites attract.”

“Who says that?” he snarled. Of course, he’d heard the saying, but his daughter should not know it.

His oldest rolled her eyes. “Everyone, Dad.”

Brianna observed, “I liked her. She seemed really nice.”

“She was nice. But she’s also used the word *aura*, whatever the hell that means, so I’ll bet she doesn’t shave her legs, and sorry, that’s a dealbreaker.”

Kailey said, “Your aura is like your energy field.”

“What in god’s name are they teaching you at that school? How do you know this?”

“TikTok.”

“That’s it, you’re uninstalling that app from your phone.”

Both girls giggled, “Oh, Dad,” and tugged him toward the trailhead. Aiden was under no illusion he was in charge.

As they hiked, he thought about Dakota. His cock had stirred from the second she sassed him until she was out of sight.

Her jet-black hair had been pulled back in a high ponytail, her face void of any makeup, yet she’d still been stunning. Her joggers had hugged her tight body as had her form-fitting tank.

She shaved her armpits, he’d looked, so that probably bode well for her legs, too. His fingers had actually twitched, wanting to grab her and kiss her feisty mouth. Then she smiled, and fuck him, he wanted to do a lot more than kiss her.

But she was a hippy—her dog’s collar had turquoise on it for fuck’s sake, and he was as conservative as they came. Talk about oil and water. She probably made decisions based on her horoscope or some shit, while he relied on facts.

So while he could imagine being naked with her, that’s as far as it’d ever get. Not that it mattered. He’d never see her again anyway, so he didn’t have to worry about it.

Although, he did have her card...

His hand slid into his pocket to make sure he hadn’t lost it. But even if he had, he knew her name and the name of her business and had even noted their locations. One wasn’t far from the hospital.

Aiden pulled his hand from his pocket, chastising himself.

*It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to get a massage, and I sure as fuck am not going to ask her out on a date!*

He could only imagine taking her to one of the hospital fundraisers. She’d probably show up in a kaftan and a headband, decked out in turquoise jewelry.

But maybe the girls were right. Maybe he should think about dating someone and not just fucking women from the hookup site.

But the very idea of letting someone into his life like that a second time made him queasy. No way would he ever give a woman enough power over him again to rip his heart out of his chest and make him the laughingstock of their social circle.

Fuck, he hadn’t even wanted a social circle. Susan had been the one who’d insisted on that. But he still didn’t want to

be humiliated, regardless.

The only good thing to come from being married to his ex was his two girls. Since he had no desire to have any more children, he didn't see the need for another relationship.

He filed having a girlfriend under *not happening*. And his aura was just fine, thank you very much. That hippy chick could stick it.

*And by it, I mean my dick. In her mouth.*

He gave himself an internal shake.

*No!*

That would be a disaster. She'd probably want to mediate or something after sex. Or do yoga before.

Why was he still thinking about her?

Dammit, he was. Even while he talked and laughed with the girls on their hike and as he drove them to Susan's, Dakota was in the back of his mind. He couldn't figure out what about her had gotten under his skin.

She was nothing like any of the women he'd been hooking up with and was the polar opposite of his ex-wife.

The same woman who marched out of his old house and straight toward his car when he pulled in. He sighed when he saw Susan's arms folded across her chest, foot tapping, as she stood next to the driver's side door while they all got out. He was all too familiar with that posture.

She gave the girls a polite smile. "Did you have fun?"

"A blast!" Brianna spoke for both her and her sister as Aiden handed them their backpacks from his trunk.

“I’m glad. Go inside and get packed; we’re leaving in the morning. I just need to talk to your dad for a second.”

He hugged each of his daughters tight and kissed their hair, whispering, “Love you, kiddo,” as they told him goodbye.

This was the part of divorce that sucked ass the most. Leaving his kids.

On the other hand, he had learned to appreciate his precious time with them. When they’d lived under the same roof, before their family fractured, he’d taken his time with them for granted. As Bri had so wisely pointed out the night before when they watched *Gilmore Girls*.

Not anymore.

Now he just had to deal with a temperamental ex-wife. He wondered what he’d done now to piss her off and had half a mind to brush past her, get in his car, and drive away. He was in such a good mood after his time with his girls, he really didn’t want to spoil it. But as she stood there with a raised eyebrow, tapping her foot, he knew driving off would come back to bite him in the ass.

With a deep sigh, he leaned against the Audi’s driver’s door and waited.

“Lydia Bradford, Aiden? Really?”

He could feel his eyebrows scrunching together. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You’re so desperate you have to date your daughter’s best friend’s mom?”

Susan had a lot of nerve. He debated about continuing to let her think he was dating Lydia, since it obviously pissed her off, but then knew the truth would come out when she was in the car for two days with Brianna, and then he'd look petty.

But he kind of wanted to be petty at that moment.

*Nah, you're better than that.*

He stood up straight, so his six-foot-one-inch frame was at full-height as he glowered down at her.

“First of all, your right to an opinion about who I'm dating ended the second you fucked another man while we were still married. So, not that it's any of your business, no, I'm not dating Lydia. I just met the woman yesterday when I picked Bri up from Nicole's. You need better sources.”

This *should* be the point where she became contrite, but Aiden knew better. Now that he'd put her in her place, this was where she doubled down.

“Obviously something happened if Nicole is telling people at the club her mom is dating you.”

He shrugged as he opened his car door. “Don't know what to tell ya. Not my problem what a thirteen-year-old girl is telling people. Like I said,” he reiterated as he slid into the driver's seat, “you need better sources. An adult, maybe?”

He closed the door before she had a chance to reply and gave her a *fuck you* smile before putting the car into reverse.

Although he knew he'd loved her once—passionately, if he recalled correctly—as he shot another look at her glaring at him, it was now hard to remember what he ever saw in her in the first place.

At least she was a good mom, and he never had to worry that his kids weren't being taken care of. The girls even seemed to like Bjorn, once they got over blaming him for the divorce. Hopefully, they didn't get too attached, because unless the tennis pro actually started winning tournaments and making money, Aiden didn't think his odds were good for Susan keeping him around much longer. Then again, what did Aiden know? It shocked him they'd lasted this long.

With a final wave at the scowling woman, he drove off.

The thing about divorce that didn't suck?

Not having to stick around and listen to her tirade.

That part was pretty sweet.



## CHAPTER FIVE

*Dakota*

“Nana!”

Asher barged through her kitchen door and ran to her with outstretched arms. Chloe entered a few seconds later.

“There’s my guy!” Dakota exclaimed as she kneeled and scooped him up. She looked over at Chloe watching them and told her, “This will never get old,” as her grandson wrapped his arms around her neck and planted a kiss on her cheek.

The week after she found out she was going to be a grandma, she sold her condo and bought a house with a guest house.

Her original intent had been to let the kids live in the main house, and she’d live in the guest house, but then she meditated on it and realized that would be a mistake. It would take away Chloe and Todd’s sense of accomplishment they’d get when they could buy their own place.

In the meantime, they could live cheaply in her guest house while they saved for a down payment, and she could be available to help with her grandson while still maintaining some boundaries.

Today, Dakota was the one asking for help.

She set Asher down and told him, “Thank you for taking care of Barney while I’m gone. You are doing me such a big favor, and I really appreciate you helping your mom and dad with him until I get back.”

“Barney is my friend,” the three-year-old declared authoritatively. “Mom said he can sleep in my room with me.”

She glanced at Chloe. “You guys are welcome to stay here. I know you’re already cramped enough without adding a pit bull to the mix.”

Her daughter shook her head. “It’s easier at our place. All of Ash’s stuff is there.”

“I need to get a toddler bed for his room here. Probably some new T-O-Y-S that are more age appropri—”

“Mom,” Chloe interrupted. “You don’t need to do anything. You already do too much for us as it is.”

It was the least she could do, considering how the two of them had started out. At sixteen, Dakota couldn’t even afford a crib for her daughter; the best she’d been able to do was a playpen she’d found at Goodwill.

Fortunately, twenty-three years had made a world of difference financially, so Dakota was more than happy to try to make up for her shortcomings early on.

But what they may have lacked in monetary goods all those years ago, Dakota had tried to compensate for by ensuring her daughter knew she was loved. Something that wasn’t always easy to do when she was working two jobs and trying to finish high school, then eventually massage therapy school.

While she’d been too proud to accept when her parents tried to give her money, she did take them up on their offer to help with daycare. Knowing Chloe was safe, happy, and well taken care of had been more important than her pride.

She waved her hand dismissively. “I don’t do that much.”

Chloe cocked her head with pursed lips and Dakota ruffled Asher’s hair, her voice going up an octave as she innocently widened her eyes.

“Wh-at? It’s true. I think you guys help me as much as I help you.”

Her daughter rolled her eyes with a soft smile. “Not even close.” She reached for Dakota’s hand. “Seriously, Mom. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

Dakota squeezed Chloe’s hand back. “Luckily, you’ll never have to find out. You’re stuck with me forever, kid.”

“I love you. You are the best mom ever.”

She pulled the younger girl in for a tight hug. “Aw, I love you, too. And *you* are a terrific mom.”

“I learned from the best.” They broke apart, and Chloe grabbed a grape from the bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter and popped it in her mouth. “Are you still planning on leaving in the morning?”

“That’s the plan. I’ll feed Barney before I go. Do you want me to bring him over?”

“No, we’ll come get him after we’ve had breakfast. And you’re going to the Cape?”

Dakota nodded. “I’ll leave the address on the counter.”

Chloe popped another grape into her mouth with a smirk. “Are there going to be any hot guys there?”

Dakota narrowed her eyes as she tried to picture it. “I think there will be. I’m getting there will be a few, actually.”

“Annnnd are you getting that any of them are single?”

She stared at the counter and saw an image of ringless fingers. Then a picture of Aiden, the guy she’d met in the parking lot at World’s End, flashed into her mind, so that confused her.

“I don’t know? I think so?”

“You know, you’re always saying I should ask the Universe for what I want. Maybe you should ask the Universe for a hot guy who’s nice and has a good job.”

“Why would I do that?” Dakota teased. “Then I’d have to feed him.”

“Well, that’s only after you fu—”

Dakota put her hands over her grandson’s ears. “Chloe Christine!”

Her daughter tried to alter course mid-sentence. “Yooou’ve dated a while.”

“I’m not interested in dating. I’m too busy for that.”

“Come on, Mom. Everybody needs companionship.”

She could get “companionship” without committing to dating. But obviously, she wasn’t going to tell her twenty-three-year-old daughter that about her mother.

“I’ve got my friends, my family, my business... I have a very fulfilling life I’m grateful for.”

“Don’t you want someone special? You’re always taking care of everyone else—don’t you want someone who will take care of you?”

“No.”

A long time ago, when Dakota was just starting to understand her visions, she'd gone to a mystic who told her men would only disappoint her. After a few attempts, she realized the woman was right, so she accepted she'd be single for the rest of her life.

Although, she had to admit, she wouldn't mind some hot, sweaty sex, minus the relationship stuff. Maybe she would try to manifest that.

“Well, I want that for you, so Universe bring my mom a great guy who treats her right, makes his own money, and gives her mind-blowing Os.”

“I like Cheerios!” Asher chimed in.

“We all do, son,” Chloe told him while smirking at Dakota. “But there's a special kind for grownups that Nana likes, so I'm putting it out into the Cosmos that she finds a nice boyfriend who will bring her some.”

“Can't she just go to ALDI's and get her own?”

Dakota pressed her lips together to keep from laughing out loud and noticed Chloe doing the same.

“Yeah, Chloe. Can't I just go to ALDI's?”

“No, they don't carry that cereal.”

“Look, I love you for caring about me—”

“I just want you to have what Todd and I have.”

“And I appreciate that; I do. But I don't think that's what the Universe has in store for me.”

“Well, we’ll find out, won’t we? I put it out there.” Chloe crossed her arms defiantly in front of her chest. “And I’m not taking it back.”

She smiled at her sassy daughter, who reminded her so much of herself at that age.

“I guess we’ll see whether the Universe agrees with you.”

Dakota kind of hoped so. She was overdue for some mind-blowing orgasms.

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### *Aiden*

It was dark out, and he was still sitting in his office at the hospital. He’d finished the last of his reports an hour ago but couldn’t muster the energy or desire to go home to his empty house.

The girls had made it to Wisconsin and were having a good time with their grandparents. They’d already sent him a dozen photos of themselves at the lake. Aiden had always enjoyed spending time there with them. He’d taught them to swim and fish at that lake.

He smiled, thinking back to the first time Kailey had caught a bluegill. How proud she’d been, and then how she’d screamed bloody murder when it had slipped out of her hands and flopped around on the dock. And how Brianna, fearless as ever, had picked it up by its tail and thrown it back in the lake.

Back when his family was still intact.

His phone chimed with an incoming text. He picked it up, thinking it was one of the girls sending him more pictures, but it wasn't either of them.

**Steven: The forecast is calling for sunny skies and perfect temperatures at the Cape. Just sayin'...**

It was tempting. Aiden wasn't scheduled for the entire holiday weekend. He didn't think he had enough projects around his new place to keep him busy the whole time.

While he'd thought he wanted to be left alone, the idea wasn't holding as much appeal now.

Maybe he'd get a massage?

The second he thought it, he shook his head. He doubted Dakota would even be working that weekend, anyway. Normal people enjoyed time off for the holiday. Although he could make an argument she wasn't normal.

Why was he still thinking about her?

**Steven: Seriously though, I'd love for you to come.**

**Aiden: What should I bring?**

**Steven: Your swimsuit and your sexy self.**

His friend followed his message with an obnoxious GIF of an old man in a speedo.

**Aiden: I hope you have plenty of alcohol because I'm going to need it if I'm going to get through the weekend hanging out with your dumb ass.**

**Steven: I used a cart at the liquor store if that tells you anything.**

**Aiden: Damn. It tells me you might have a problem, dude.**

**Steven: Yeah, my problem is all my friends are lushes.**

**Steven: So does this mean you're in?**

**Aiden: I'm in. Text me your address.**

**Steven: Awesome. See you tomorrow! Whit and I are going down tonight, so you can come anytime. Just not too early.**

**Aiden: I'll be there around noon. Thanks again for the invite.**

He stood up, checked his desk drawers one more time to make sure he hadn't left anything important, then flipped the light switch and locked the door.

At least he had something to do when he got home—pack for his trip.

Now he just needed to stop thinking about that hippy chick who was not his type.

Not at all.



## CHAPTER SIX

*Dakota*

She could smell the ocean when she turned onto the long, circular driveway of the beach house.

As she pulled up to the front door and saw the wraparound porch, a vision of Whitney, a blond man, and a blond toddler sitting on the porch swing popped in her head. More images—the three of them playing in the surf, snuggling in bed—reading a book, dancing around the kitchen, appeared almost like a movie reel in her mind as she walked through the door and Whitney introduced her to Steven.

Whitney was glowing. As Dakota considered her, she knew it was more than just the honeymoon phase of a new relationship. Her friend was pregnant.

“You two are going to have beautiful babies,” she declared, and Whitney started coughing, like she was choking, while Steven gently patted her back.

Finally, Whitney eeked out, “I’m not having kids. Ever.”

*So, she doesn’t know yet.*

Dakota had learned a long time ago that unless specifically asked, she needed to keep her mouth shut about things she’d been shown intuitively.

She observed the couple, and the reel of them as a family with a child kept playing. It was obvious Whitney needed to ease into the idea of being a mother, but looking at Steven, there was no doubt he’d welcome the news and be a wonderful father.

She smiled as she reached for her friend's hand. "Everyone forges their own path. Whatever you decide, it will be for the best."

Steven's posture stiffened, and he reached for the handle of her suitcase. "Let me show you to the guestroom."

She could tell he was unhappy with Whitney's response. Dakota wanted to tell him to be patient, but she'd probably said enough already.

Still, she couldn't resist squeezing Whitney's hand one more time before the two left her in the guest room to get situated.

"Thank you for having me."

"Of course. We're glad you could make it."

Once the door was closed, she sat down on the bed and took a deep breath. A strange sense washed over her; something she couldn't quite place. It wasn't ominous, it felt more hopeful than foreboding.

She wanted to attribute the feeling to what she knew would soon transpire between Whitney and Steven, but her gut told her that wasn't it.

It was something different. More personal.

What it could be, though, she had no idea.

But as she walked down the hall, she noticed a black duffel bag in the entry that hadn't been there when she'd arrived. And she sensed it had something to do with this feeling.

She thought back to her daughter's demand to the Universe and mumbled out loud, "Chloe Christine, you little brat," before heading outside.

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### *Aiden*

The female voice from his GPS announced, "You have arrived."

He took in the classic Cape Cod-style house—appropriate, given the setting, and the Atlantic Ocean in the background.

He and Susan had talked about buying a summer house once they paid off their primary residence. Instead of a summer house though, Aiden purchased his current house, leaving Susan with the mortgage-free home. His life was not like anything he'd planned.

Take this weekend, for instance. He should be at a lake in Wisconsin with his family. Instead, some German guy was there in his place—fishing with his girls and fucking his wife—while Aiden was spending his holiday with people from work and sleeping alone, probably on a lumpy pull-out couch mattress in Steven's office.

He knew he needed to check his attitude before he went inside. Steven had been kind enough to include him, and if he ever wanted to be asked back, he couldn't be an asshole all weekend.

He let out a long breath before he got out of the car and gave himself a quick pep talk.

*I'm lucky I have people who care enough about me to extend an invitation. I'm going to have fun this weekend.*

There. Happy thoughts—aura fixed.

He laughed at his own joke, then his mind went to the hot hippy chick who'd said he had a negative aura.

*Well, not everything can be fixed with happy thoughts.*

Besides, he didn't even know what an aura was, so he obviously didn't believe in that shit.

After grabbing his duffel from the trunk, he walked up the steps to the porch and before he even rang the bell, James opened the door—a bottle of Sam Adams in hand.

“Hey, dude! Glad you changed your mind! Let's get you a beer.” He motioned with his head toward the beach. “Everyone's out back.”

Aiden held up his bag. “Where should I put this?”

James furrowed his brows. “I'm not sure where Steve is putting you.” He gestured to a spot next to a decorative bench in the front entry. “I'd just set it there for now until you know where you're sleeping.”

“Where are you sleeping?”

“In a hammock on the patio.”

Aiden made a face. He was way too old for that shit.

James noticed his grimace and laughed. “I'm pretty sure you're getting a bed. I volunteered for the patio. Since Hope

and her friend are sleeping out there, it's safer if I'm there, too."

"I'm sure Hope's friend is wildly unattractive, so that played no part in your decision," Aiden drawled.

"Oh, she's hot, and it absolutely was a major factor."

He laughed at his friend's forthrightness.

They walked into the gourmet kitchen, and James reached inside the fridge. Pausing, he asked, "Miller Lite, Blue Moon, Sam Adams. Pacifico, or Summer Shandy?"

"That's quite the selection."

"You should know by now that Steve doesn't half-ass anything."

That was true. It's why he was a top-notch ER director.

"Shandy."

James pulled the beer from the fridge, grabbed a bottle opener on the counter to open it, tossed the bottle cap in the garbage, and handed Aiden the beer before they stepped onto the patio.

The view was amazing.

Hope saw him and squealed, "Aiden!"

It made him want to turn around and go home. Still, he pulled together a polite smile. "Hi, Hope. Good to see you."

She tugged a cute, brown-haired girl to her side and hugged her around her shoulders. "This is my best friend Yvette. She lives in San Diego, but we're trying to talk her into moving here."

“God, why would anyone trade San Diego for Massachusetts?”

“Uh...” James swept his hand toward the ocean.

“You know there’s this thing called the Pacific. And I’ll bet it’s a lot more pleasant there in January than it is here.”

Hope put her hand on her hip. “In case I wasn’t clear, Aiden. I’m trying to talk her *into* moving here, not *out of* it. You’re not helping.”

His shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry.” He offered an apologetic smile to the women. “Boston is a great place to live. We have lots of history and culture, not to mention kick-ass sports teams. And Hope is here, so obviously there’s no contest.”

Steve’s little sister stared at him for a beat, then dropped her hand from her hip. “That’s better.”

James surveyed the small group gathered on the patio. “I think you know everyone else who’s staying this weekend, except Whitney’s friend who just got here, and Zach’s date, Barbie. We haven’t met Whitney’s friend, but Barbie... While she’s great to look at, her conversational skills consist of giggling and bouncing while she does it.”

“Your brother hasn’t changed, I see.”

“He says he wants to date someone he can get serious with, then he goes to the strip club and has a change of heart.”

“Has he always dated strippers?”

“No, he used to date women who didn’t take their clothes off for a living. One in particular—Bridget—he was pretty

serious about. Brought her home to meet the family and everything. My mom loved her; we all thought he was going to propose. Then the next thing we knew, they'd broken up, she was dating Miles Cunningham, and he started dating strippers."

Aiden choked on his beer. "Miles Cunningham's Bridget is Zach's ex?"

Miles Cunningham was one of the best cardiothoracic surgeons in the world. He's who Aiden would pick to operate on his own mother, should, God forbid, the need ever arise. Miles's girlfriend was the typical girl-next-door type, and Miles was totally besotted with her. Aiden couldn't picture her with Zach.

"Yeah, I don't think Zach ever got over her..."

"So, he only dates women he has no chance of getting serious with," Aiden supplied.

He understood that all too well.

Just then, Steven's voice came from the doorway. "Hey, you made it."

"I did." Aiden made a point of looking around. "This place is great. I can see why you'd want to spend as much time here as you could."

"Thanks. I really love it."

Aiden looked past him at a gorgeous blue-eyed woman with reddish-brown hair.

"And this must be Whitney."

Steve's smile was sad when he turned to look at her. "Yes, this is Whitney. Whit, my friend Aiden."

She offered her hand with a polite smile. "Nice to meet you."

She was stunning, and, by all gossip accounts, brilliant. Aiden could understand why his friend was so taken with her.

Except there seemed to be a chill between the two. Neither seemed happy at the moment.

*They must have had a lover's spat.*

"Where am I sleeping tonight?"

"I thought I'd put you in my office on the pullout couch, if that's okay? Whitney's friend beat you by ten minutes and got the second guest room. Sorry."

"That's okay. It's what I figured. Better than a hammock," he replied with a smirk and glanced at James trying to flirt with Yvette.

"Here she is now."

He glanced at where Steve was looking. The French doors on the patio opened, and he almost dropped his beer when he saw who stepped onto the brick pavers.

*No fucking way.*

*How in the hell is hippy chick here?*

He had no idea, but there she was, looking hot as fuck in her black yoga pants and tan linen top with spaghetti straps. She wore makeup today, although it was subtle. Her jet-black hair was pulled back with a paisley headband in earth tones. He bit back his smirk when he noticed the turquoise in her



earrings and in the brown nylon choker around her slender neck.

Their eyes met and her face lit up with a smile, then she shook her head, like she was wondering the same thing about him being there.

Whitney motioned her over and made introductions of the small group on the patio.

Gesturing to the two pretty girls next to her, she said, “This is Steven’s sister, Hope, and her best friend from California, Yvette.” She then nodded toward him and James. “And these guys work with Steve. James Rudolf, and...”

“Aiden Matthews,” Dakota finished for her; her brown eyes locked with his as her mouth twitched with the same smile she’d given him a few minutes earlier when she came through the door.

It flattered him she remembered his name.

“You two know each other?” Whitney asked.

“We’ve met,” Aiden supplied with a smirk. “Her dog almost attacked my girls when we were on a hike at World’s End.”

“Barney?” Whitney asked incredulously, as her gaze darted back and forth between the two still holding each other’s stare.

Finally, Dakota broke eye contact and glanced at Whitney.

“Yes, he was so ferocious, I think he piddled on himself when he rolled onto his back and waited for Aiden’s daughters

to rub his belly,” Dakota replied, rolling her eyes.

Whitney laughed at the visual. “Now that sounds like the Barney I know.”

Aiden stepped closer to Dakota, his smirk morphing into a genuine smile. She was really there. Hopefully, for the entire weekend.

“It’s good to see you again.”

“You, too. I didn’t realize you worked in the ER.”

“I don’t. I’m a cardiologist.”

“Oh,” she cooed. “So, you fix broken hearts.”

“Only the physical ones,” he replied dismissively, then teased, “how’s my aura today?”

She narrowed her eyes and stared at a spot above his head. “Not as bright as when you were with your daughters. Your colors are much more muted and there’s more black and grey mixed in.”

He believed that. His life was much brighter when he was with his girls.

“What, you don’t think I’m excited to be at the beach this weekend?”

She considered him for a minute before shaking her head. “No, not really.”

Aiden leaned closer to murmur in her ear, “Would you believe me if I told you that seeing you walk through that door suddenly made it a lot more interesting?”

The corner of her mouth turned up. “I think I would.”

“Good, because it’s true.”

“What a coincidence...”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Dakota*

She knew better than to fight cosmic forces at work. It was more than a coincidence that the last time she saw Aiden, she'd said she'd let the Universe decide if they saw each other again. *And* her daughter had asked it to manifest a man for her, and a day later she and Aiden were spending the weekend at the same beach house?

Opposing it would be like thumbing her nose at the energy working on her behalf, and she wasn't about to do that. So instead, she was going to embrace it. There was obviously a reason they were being brought together. She might as well enjoy the discovery instead of fighting it. Hopefully, it included orgasms.

“So, Dr. Matthews,” she said as she looped her arm through his and guided him toward the sand. “What if it's not just a coincidence, but the Universe bringing us together?”

He tucked her arm closer to him as they reached the sand and murmured in his deep voice, “And why would the Universe want to do such a thing, Dakota Douglas?”

“I'm not sure. I guess that's something we'll have to explore this weekend.”

“I guess so. We should probably stay close to each other then. We wouldn't want to upset the ghosts.”

She stopped and pulled her arm out from his in order to face him properly.

“It’s not ghosts or voodoo. It’s energy. Laws of attraction.”

He took his time looking her up and down. “No argument here.”

Surely this had to be a mistake. Maybe he was supposed to be a conduit to something—or someone—else?

Yet she felt her nipples harden under his scrutiny. His soft, warm hand as he entwined their fingers together felt comfortable—almost familiar. His clean scent filled her senses, and she had a sudden urge to kiss him, just like she’d had the first time they’d met.

“You must have been thinking some awfully happy thoughts this week for us to meet again like this,” he teased as he nudged her shoulder with his as they walked along the sand.

“I always think happy thoughts. You should try it.”

“Oh, Sunshine, I’m thinking *very* happy thoughts right now.”

She didn’t say anything, and he squeezed her fingers. “I’m not imagining things, right? There’s something going on here between us.”

“No, you’re not imagining it.”

“I felt it the day we met. I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about you, and then you serendipitously walk through my friend’s door.”

Maybe it wasn’t Chloe who set this in motion. Maybe Aiden was the one who called her to him. Maybe he needed

her—but why?

“Why, Dr. Matthews, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you believe there’s something at play here that doesn’t involve money.”

“I’ve never been a big believer in fate, but even I have to admit, this is some pretty kismet shit. What do you think it means?”

“I have no idea. But I think I’m going to enjoy finding out.”

He stared at her for a beat, then replied, “Yeah, me too.”

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*Aiden*

“Hey! You guys! Are you hungry?” Steve called from the patio.

Aiden cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Be right there!” and they started toward the house.

Dakota asked, “Should we offer to make lunch?”

“For everyone?”

“Well, yeah. It’d be kind of rude to just make our own.”

He shrugged. “We had several ‘fend for yourself’ nights when I was growing up and my mom was working.”

“I get the impression Steven wouldn’t go for that.”

They approached the patio where their host was mingling with his guests while still throwing the ball for his and Whitney's dogs.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Dakota walked up to where Steve and Whitney stood. Both continued to seem stiff and uncomfortable around each other.

"Can we make lunch?"

Steven raised one eyebrow at Aiden with a smirk. "*We?*"

"Well, I'm not going to stand by and let her do it alone," Aiden groused indignantly.

Steve considered them for a minute. "You don't mind?"

"No, of course not, that's why I offered," Dakota replied. "What would you like us to make?"

"I was just planning on sandwiches and salad..."

"We'll do the prep and then people can make their own."

"That'd be great. The ingredients are in the pantry and refrigerator."

"We're on it."

Steven looked at Aiden suspiciously, like he was trying to decipher something when he said, "Thanks. I appreciate it."

They walked into the kitchen and Dakota immediately washed her hands and got to work, pulling salad ingredients from the refrigerator while instructing him to get the bread from the pantry.

He came out holding a bag of sub buns. "These?"

She looked over at him. “Perfect. Slice them down the middle, then in half.”

“In half? What if people are hungry—like I am?”

“Then you can make two. That way, if you don’t eat as much—like me—it’s not being wasted.”

That made sense.

“Okay.”

“And wash your hands.”

The side of his mouth hitched. “Yes, ma’am.”

Was it wrong that her bossiness made his cock stir? Not that he wanted her to be bossy in bed. On the contrary, it would make it that much sweeter when she submitted to him. But he liked her confidence—it was sexy as fuck.

He washed and dried his hands, then pulled a sub bun from the bag and grabbed a knife from the block on the counter as he stood next to her at the island.

Dakota glanced over at him.

“Um, are you going to use a cutting board?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Aiden opened a cupboard she pointed at and found a small stack of them. He pulled a plastic one out and set it on the counter, then picked the knife back up.

“Can I make a suggestion?”

He swept his hand in front of him.

“By all means...”



“A bread knife would probably work better.”

“Errr, I have no idea what a bread knife looks like.”

She opened the drawer on the other side of her and pulled out a knife with a long blade and slid it across the granite counter with a sheepish smile.

“I’ve found if you use the proper tool for the job, it makes it that much easier.”

“I subscribe to that theory.” He picked up the knife and lifted it in acknowledgement. “Thank you. I had no idea there was even such a thing as a bread knife.”

“Don’t spend a lot of time in the kitchen, huh?”

“My ex-wife forbade me from being in the kitchen for anything more than a bowl of cereal or to grab a drink from the refrigerator.”

She tossed the lettuce she’d washed and expertly chopped it in what seemed like record time into some weird device that looked like a colander and pressed a button to make it spin around.

“You don’t strike me as someone who takes orders without an argument.”

“I guess it depends on what the orders are,” he said with a slight grin as he sliced the bread. “I wasn’t too put out by not being allowed to cook anything except on the grill.”

Dakota lifted the colander out of the spinning thing, then emptied the remaining water into the sink.

He nodded toward the contraption. “That’s pretty nifty. I’ve seen them on infomercials and thought they were a scam.”

“No, they’re great. Every kitchen should have a salad spinner.”

“Good to know.”

She picked up the cucumber and put it under the running water. The way she ran her hand up and down the vegetable should not be erotic, but goddamn, it was.

Aiden lifted his eyes to meet hers and noticed the smirk. She was doing it on purpose.

“You’re pretty good at that,” he drawled.

“While I enjoy some things dirty, it’s important to clean your produce.”

Aiden swallowed hard and put the knife on the counter.

“What things do you like dirty?”

She pushed the faucet handle off with her elbow, pulled a sheet of paper towel from the holder, and dried the green gourd with as much care as she’d taken to wash it.

“I like running through dirty mud puddles in the rain.”

An image of her soaking wet, braless in a white-see-through top popped in his head. He’d been reduced to a sixteen-year-old horny kid around her.

She continued, “A good dirty joke, dirty dancing...” She paused as she situated the cucumber on the cutting board and sliced the end off. “And of course, dirty, sweaty sex.”

He was glad he’d had the foresight to set the knife down or he might have sliced a finger off at her proclamation. His image of her wet in a white top morphed to her naked with her skin glistening with sweat as he drove into her.

“Of course.” As he attempted to calm himself down, Aiden absent-mindedly tossed the buns he had successfully cut into a wire basket she’d lined with a towel. He tried to sound nonchalant as he asked, “So, do you have dirty, sweaty sex often?”

Dakota paused slicing the cucumber and looked at him.

“I’m not sure I can remember the last time I had clean, vanilla sex, let alone the dirty, sweaty kind.”

*I can help you with that.*

Her bluntness made him chuckle. “You don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

“I don’t see the point, although Mercury is in retrograde, so maybe I should be more careful.”

He closed his eyes and gave his head a small shake as he tried to make sense of her words. Weren’t they just talking about dirty sex? How did the conversation jump to planets?

“What?”

“I’m assuming you’re familiar with the planet Mercury. During certain times of the year, from the Earth’s perspective, it appears to be spinning backwards. Obviously, that’s just an optical illusion.”

“Obviously,” he drawled. “But what does that have to do with anything, let alone you speaking your mind?”

*Or dirty sex?*

“Well, Mercury rules communication and travel, so when it’s in retrograde, that’s when confusion, misunderstandings, and delays happen.”

“You don’t really believe in that stuff, do you?”

She popped a slice of cucumber in her mouth with a bright smile. “Of course I do.”

“Of course you do,” he muttered under his breath and picked the knife back up to resume slicing the rolls.

Had she just purposefully thrown a mystical wet blanket on their flirtation?

“I’m assuming you don’t.”

He cocked his head and looked over at her with raised brows. “You would be correct.”

His response didn’t dim her light at all.

“Oh, Aiden.” She reached over and brushed his hair at his temples as she studied his face. He stared back into her eyes. The innocent gesture was the most intimacy he’d shared with a woman in a long time. “We need to get you out from under this dark cloud so you can enjoy your life again.”

That made him bristle, and he felt the scowl form on his face. He didn’t know if he was offended because she had no idea what she was talking about and should keep her opinions to herself, or because she was right.

Out of the blue, she stood on her tiptoes and softly kissed his lips. His hand instinctively went to her hip, and he didn’t remove it, even when she dropped to flat feet and looked up at him.

“What was that for?”

“An apology. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t.”

She tilted her head. “Didn’t I?”

“No. I’m not upset. You just gave me something to think about, that’s all.”

“Besides being a fabulous salad maker, I’m also an excellent listener.”

“You’re a pretty good kisser, too,” he quipped. Although it’d only been a peck, she’d left him wanting to taste more of her. Everywhere. “Maybe we could do that again.”

A small smile escaped her lips. “I think that could be arranged.” But as he leaned down to do just that, she stepped out of his embrace and returned to the cutting board. “Later. We have lunch to make.”

“I don’t give a damn about lunch,” he growled in her ear as he put his hands on her hips and moved in behind her. He needed to touch her again.

“You will when hungry people come through that kitchen door and find there’s no food ready, and we’re in the middle of a make-out session.”

He sighed, knowing she was right, and took a step back.

She turned around to face him with a small smile.

“Look at it this way. The sooner we get everyone fed, the sooner we can send them on their way so we can clean up. And no one is going to interrupt us while we do that, since they run the risk of being put to work if they do.”

“Damn, girl, dare I say, that’s diabolically genius? Of course, we could also just slip away to another room.”

“Yeah, but then everyone’s going to talk.”

“I hate to break it to you, Sunshine, but they already are.”

“Perhaps. But we don’t need to confirm their suspicions.”

“Fair enough.”

He could wait to kiss her.

Maybe.

But when she looked over and smiled at him as she worked, he had his doubts.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Dakota*

She walked out to the patio and called to the group hanging out at the beach, “Lunch is ready!”

When she returned to the kitchen, Aiden was sitting at the table with a plate of salad and a sandwich in front of him, and another sandwich in hand.

She chuckled at the guilty look on his face as he took a bite.

“What? I’m hungry!” he protested around a mouthful of food.

Dakota picked up a plate. “I didn’t say anything,” she replied as she scooped salad onto it, then picked a dressing from the selection they’d put out before moving on to the sandwich choices.

She slid into the chair next to him just as people walked into the kitchen.

“This looks great!”

“You guys did all this?”

“Wow, thanks, guys!”

Steven looked over at them with a smile and mouthed, “Thanks.”

She winked at him in return as another image of him and Whitney and a baby popped into her head.

“They are going to have beautiful babies,” she murmured.

“You think it’s that serious?”

She glanced at the two. “Definitely.”

“Huh.”

“You don’t?”

“Well, I just thought they were fighting earlier.”

“I’m afraid I might have been the cause of that.”

“Did you insult their auras, too?” he said with a smirk as he took a bite of salad.

She set her fork down and turned to look at him straight on.

“I’m so sorry about that. I never meant to insult you.”

He squeezed her thigh subtly. “I’m not insulted. I’m just teasing you. Relax. Don’t get your chakras in a bunch.”

She chuckled at his attempt at a joke.

“Careful, Dr. Matthews. Someone might overhear and accuse you of having a sense of humor.”

He glanced at the group standing at the island talking and laughing while they made their lunches.

“Nah, they all know I’m a salty old bastard.”

The laugh lines around his eyes suggested otherwise.

“Why do I get the feeling your bark is worse than your bite?”

One of his eyebrows went up. “You want me to bite you so you can find out?”

“Hmm, the idea has its merits.”



That was obviously not the response he was expecting because he started to cough.

“Are you okay?” she asked with her hand on his back.

“Fine,” he sputtered out with watery eyes.

“Do you need the Heimlich?” James quipped as he pulled out a chair opposite them at the table but didn’t sit down as he eyed his friend.

“No.” Aiden took a drink of his beer, then set it back down while he swallowed hard. “I’m okay. It just went down the wrong pipe.”

That appeased his friend who then took a seat.

“That was cool of you guys to prep lunch. Thanks.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Hope said as she and Yvette took two more chairs around the table. “We’ll clean up.”

Dakota was about to say that wasn’t necessary, but Aiden subtly put his hand on her thigh and squeezed at the same time he told Hope, “That’d be great, thanks.”

The friends started talking about the fish market, and Aiden leaned closer, so his lips touched the shell of her ear. “Accept the help.”

“That’s hard for me.”

“I kind of had a feeling.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged as he picked up the second half of his sandwich. “It seemed difficult for you to even let me help with lunch.”

“Well, that’s just because you didn’t know what you were doing.”

He purposefully looked around the table at the group engrossed in their own conversation, then back at her. “They’re an educated bunch. I think they can figure out how to clean up.”

She sighed and sat back in her chair. “My daughter tells me I need to delegate more, and I know she’s right.” With a weak smile, she continued, “I’m a work in progress. Thank you for reminding me.”

“Oh, I have my own selfish reasons for that, but you’re welcome.”

“You do? Like what?”

“Well, for starters, I’m itching to see you in a bathing suit.”

“Oh, yeah?”

He was about to take a bite of his sandwich but paused to lean closer and add quietly, “So I can scope out where I’m going to nibble on you first.”

“If you need help, I can give you some ideas.”

He sputtered but managed not to choke when he swallowed.

“Are you trying to kill me, woman?”

Dakota felt the grin creep across her face as she speared her salad with her fork.

“Of course not. But just to be on the safe side—how’s your heart?”

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*Aiden*

He didn't know what to make of the little hippy dynamo. That didn't happen very often—he normally figured people out pretty fast and dismissed them just as quickly. But he'd known since the day they met in the parking lot at World's End there was something special about her—not to mention, she was sexy as fuck.

He'd had a semi since he recognized her when she stepped onto the patio.

Now she was standing before him in a brown macramé bikini that showcased her beautiful body, and things below the belt weren't getting any softer. On the contrary.

“Uh, I know I said I wanted to see you in your swimsuit, but I think that might have been a mistake.”

Her brows knitted together as she glanced down at herself. “Why?”

“Because I can hide a hard-on better in jeans than I can in swim trunks.”

That made her laugh, and she reached for his hand to guide him toward the surf.

“You're pretty charming for a salty old bastard.”

“And seeing you in that swimsuit makes me definitely want to bite your ass, which now that I'm thinking about it, is only making my cock harder.”

“It sounds like you need to get into the ocean,” she teased.

He scooped her up in his arms. “Good idea.”

Dakota shrieked, but her protests were weak, at best, so he didn't put her down until the water was waist high. But instead of standing on the bottom, she wrapped her arms around his neck and legs around his waist—lining his cock up perfectly with her center while her tits pressed against his chest. His hands instinctively cupped her ass to hold her in place.

“This isn't helping,” he snarled in her ear.

“Oh, was I supposed to be helping? My bad.”

Her mocha-colored eyes were shining as she stared back at him, and Aiden couldn't help but lean down and capture her mouth with his.

Her lips were soft and tasted like bubblegum, which he guessed was from her lip gloss. She wove her fingers into his hair as she returned the kiss and let out a soft whimper.

His tongue sought hers out, and they began to tangle. Just as he was about to angle his face to deepen the kiss, he felt the stares of his coworkers and slowly pulled away. He opened his eyes and glanced over to confirm they were indeed being watched.

“We have an audience,” he murmured as he looked down at her.

“I guess that means we need to behave.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But I probably shouldn’t move your bottoms to the side and fuck you right here.”

He could tell she liked that idea by the way her pupils dilated.

“No, that would be bad.”

And yet she subtly moved her hips so her pussy grinded on his cock, so he moved into deeper water.

One of his hands on her ass traveled a few inches south, and he dipped his ring finger under her bottoms and circled her entrance.

“You’re wet, Sunshine,” he observed as he pushed inside her.

Her eyes got wide, and she let out a tiny gasp, then closed them with a soft moan as he moved his finger in and out.

“And tight. When was the last time you were thoroughly fucked, baby?”

“I told you, it’s been a while.”

He was going to remedy that later. But right now, he wanted to watch her come undone by his hand.

But she put her hand on his arm to stop him, and he immediately pulled his hand away and adjusted her bottoms.

“I’m sorry. Am I moving too fast?”

“No, no, that’s not it. I mean, let’s be honest, I was encouraging you to move that fast.”

“Then what is it?”

“Um... how do I put this?” She bit her bottom lip as she appeared to be searching for words.

Aiden raised his eyebrows in encouragement for her to finish her thought.

Finally, she said, “It’s just... water—especially salt water— isn’t exactly conducive to lubrication.”

“Ah...” He nodded in understanding. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, not at all. But it was going to become uncomfortable, so I stopped you before it did.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for stopping,” she countered.

He pulled his head back with a frown. “Of course. I’m a salty asshole, but I would never want you to do something you were uncomfortable with.”

She wore a slight smirk as she reached behind his head and tugged his face closer, moving her hips so her center was once again pressed against his cock.

“It doesn’t mean we have to stop altogether. A little teasing makes for good foreplay.”

He didn’t give a fuck who was watching this time when he bent down to kiss her. Her lips now tasted salty from the ocean waves on her skin, and he swept his tongue along her bottom lip before enveloping her mouth with his.

She made a fucking whimper sound that turned his already-hard dick to steel. He could only imagine the noises she’d make when he had his face between her thighs.

The kiss deepened and then turned frantic as she pressed her bare skin against his while she rocked against his aching cock.

“Sunshine,” he murmured against her mouth. “I need to taste you and fuck you. Now.”

“Yes,” she moaned in agreement. “Let’s go inside.”

*Except. Fuck.*

He walked them to shallower water and reached behind his neck to loosen her grip on him. Her brows furrowed in confusion.

“I’m going to need a minute before I can get out of the water in front of everyone,” he explained with a self-deprecating chuckle.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Dakota*

She loved she had such an effect on the self-proclaimed salty old bastard. It made her feel beautiful. And powerful.

Standing a foot away from him in the ocean now, she giggled. “Just let me know when you’re ready to get out.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Oh, definitely. Wouldn’t you if the tables were somehow reversed?”

He didn’t even give it any consideration before he blurted out an indignant, “No!”

She pursed her lips. “I don’t believe you.”

He paused before conceding, “Okay, maybe my ego would be a little inflated.”

“Apparently, you have a penchant for inflated things.”

“And you have a proclivity for causing said inflation.”

She shrugged. “Sorry, not sorry.”

His eyes dragged from her face to her chest, then slowly back up. “Me neither.”

She swiped her tongue along her bottom lip as she returned his stare.

“Goddammit!” he grouched.

Dakota cocked her head in confusion.

“You need to go or I’m never going to be able to get out.”



She giggled all the way to the shore.

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*Aiden*

He'd been reduced to feeling like a sixteen-year-old whose dick got hard when the wind blew.

But fuck, his hippy was smokin' hot, and she'd basically given him the green light, now he just needed his dick to go down enough that it wasn't poking out of his board shorts like a weapon ready to knock bottles off the table next to his friends who sat on the shore drinking.

Dakota bent over, her ass pointed straight at him as she dried her legs, wasn't exactly helping the situation. He suspected that was her intent; she'd gotten a kick out of turning him into a schoolboy.

"This is ridiculous," he groused out loud and willed his hard-on to go down. The sooner he got out of the water, the sooner they could go inside and continue where they left off. He kept his eyes on his beautiful prize as he waded out of the ocean toward the group. Fuck, she was beautiful.

"Just in time!" James said as Aiden reached for a towel.

"In time for what?"

"Volleyball! We need you on our team."

He paused, running the terrycloth down his arms, and glanced over at the hot ray of sunshine before shaking his head.

“I don’t think so. Dakota is going to teach me how to meditate.” He barely contained his cheeky grin.

“Oh! Can we do it too? Please?”

*What the hell?* He hadn’t expected that.

Hope bounced on her toes while excitedly clapping her hands together in front of her chest when she turned to Dakota. “I’ve always wanted to try meditation! Yvette and I were going to try it in San Diego, but something always came up that prevented us from being able to go.”

“What about volleyball?”

“Pffft, we can do that later. Please, can you show us, Dakota? We can do it right here on the beach!”

A mischievous grin formed on her face, and she looked directly at Aiden. “That would be perfect.”

*Son of a bitch...*

Instead of getting laid, he was going to have to do some hocus pocus bullshit, and the worst part? He had no one to blame but himself and his big mouth.

## CHAPTER TEN

*Dakota*

She ended the meditation by inhaling the ocean air deeply and offering gratitude for their beautiful setting. She really loved the water; it always had a calming effect on her. Probably because she was a Pisces.

Yvette approached her as she shook her towel out. “That was great, Dakota. Thank you so much.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Hope walked up, rolling her shoulders. “Oh my God, I feel so relaxed; I hope we can do it again this weekend.”

“I’m always up for yoga or a mediation on the beach.”

Dakota glanced over at Aiden grumbling as he wiped the sand off his swim trunks. She had to press her lips together to keep from laughing.

The two ladies noticed where Dakota’s attention had gone, and Hope let out a chuckle.

“I don’t think he’s a fan of the sand,” Yvette observed.

“I get the feeling he was far more interested in the woman guiding the meditation than the meditation itself.” Hope’s eyes danced with mischief as she waited for a reaction.

Dakota simply smiled, but admitted to herself that the feeling was mutual.

Hope leaned in, lowering her voice as she continued, “I think inside that tough exterior is a big soft center just waiting for the right woman to uncover it.”

“I think you’re right.”

Dakota knew she wasn’t that woman—at least not long-term, and that made her a little sad. But maybe she could help crack his shell, so when the right one did come along, he’d be open to the possibilities. Maybe that was why the Universe had brought them together. So she could help him.

Or maybe it was so they could have fantastic sex.

Perhaps it was a little of both.

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*Aiden*

“What did you think?” she asked as she walked toward him.

“I think I like you better without the coverup.”

Although the sheer fabric hid nothing and only served as further enticement to finish what they’d started in the ocean.

“About the meditation.” Her patient smile suggested she knew he was purposefully playing dumb.

“Oh, that. It was... interesting.”

He’d never voluntarily do it again, and would never pay money to do it, but that seemed like the wrong response, so he stuck with, “It was different. I can say I’ve tried it.”

“Were you able to quiet your mind?”

Aiden huffed out a laugh while he skimmed a hand at her hip. “What do you think?”

“I think I picked the wrong time to have you try it. Give me another chance. Let’s do yoga at sunrise tomorrow morning.”

“Okay. On one condition.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“That we wake up in the same bed.”

Her face fell. “Oh.”

*Shit.* Was he being too presumptuous? He had to admit, he never stayed overnight with his “dates”. Maybe she also was averse to that.

“Why? What did you think I was going to say?”

“I honestly had no idea.”

“Then why do you seem disappointed?”

“I guess I just assumed there wasn’t going to be a lot of sleeping tonight.”

The look she gave him when their eyes locked felt like a challenge.

He pulled her closer and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Trust me, Sunshine. You’ll fall asleep with a smile. You might even sleep through sunrise.”

“Then I guess we should probably do yoga tonight by the light of the moon.”

Aiden felt his shoulders droop, and he let out a sigh as he pulled back. “Really?”

She patted his cheek with a smirk. “Relax, Dr. Matthews. I’m just teasing you. I’d say don’t get your chakras in a bunch,

but they already are.” With a wink, she added, “We’ll work on unblocking those, too.”

Aiden couldn’t figure this woman out.

He chuckled. “I’m going to be a new man by the time I leave on Sunday.”

She cocked her head, her face serious as she brushed the hair along his forehead with her fingertips. “Gosh, I hope not. I’m growing quite fond of the one in front of me.”

Her compliment took him by surprise, which made him feel vulnerable—something he avoided at all costs.

“Don’t grow too fond of me,” he warned. “I’m a good time, but not a long time.”

“You don’t have to worry about me falling in love with you, Aiden. We’ll enjoy our time together this weekend, but I have no interest in seeing you once we’re back in the city.”

*Why not?*

He gave himself an internal shake. That was good. The last thing he needed was *that* complication.

“Then we’re on the same page.”

Still, there was that niggling feeling in his gut that didn’t like the idea of this being a weekend-only thing.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Dakota*

“Do you want to go get some ice cream?” Aiden asked as he laid his folded-up towel along the back of an empty beach chair.

She hadn’t expected that.

“Um, sure?”

“Hope said they stopped for ice cream when they went to the fish market, and it sounded good.”

“I like ice cream,” she said with a smile. “Let me get changed.”

They walked hand-in-hand up to the house. Aiden’s coworkers smiled in approval when they passed the group.

Once inside, he reached down and picked up the black duffel in the entry—the one she’d gotten a feeling about when she saw it earlier.

“Give me twenty minutes,” she said as they stood in front of her guestroom door.

He gestured to an open door, opposite hers, that was set up like an office. “I’ll be right across the hall.”

Dakota made a point of looking over his shoulder at the couch.

“I think you’re too big for that sofa. Good thing you’re sleeping with me tonight, huh?”

With a smirk, he replied, “Why do you think I agreed to yoga at sunrise?”

“And here I thought it was because you were lusting after me.”

She heard his bag hit the floor with a *thud*, then he crowded her against the open door of the guestroom, pinning her hands above her head.

“I’ve been lusting after you since you sassed me in the parking lot at World’s End,” he growled before capturing her lips with his.

Although the kiss was urgent, his lips were soft and tasted like salt, and Dakota readily returned the kiss. He released her wrists, but she left her hands in place. A small whimper escaped her when he cupped her cheek with one hand while sliding the other around her neck. His grip was loose, but the message was clear—he was in control. She found it incredibly sexy.

When he pressed his erection against her center as he moved his lips to her neck, she wrapped her arms around his neck and arched against him.

“Maybe we can get ice cream tomorrow,” she whispered as she clung to the back of his head to hold him against her skin.

“Yeah, I have something better in mind for dessert right now,” he said as he lifted her ass. She dutifully wrapped her legs around him.

Aiden spun around, used the back of his heel to slam the door shut, and walked her to the bed, where he gently



deposited her on the comforter.

Without a word, he pulled her coverup over her head and quickly dispatched her bikini top, then tugged her swimsuit bottoms down her thighs and past her ankles. He paused to stare at her naked body, and she squirmed under his scrutiny until he finally murmured softly, “You are so fucking beautiful,” then dropped to his knees and pushed her legs farther apart to accommodate his broad shoulders.

Before Dakota could even respond, she felt his tongue swipe along her slit.

“Ohhhh,” she let out a long moan as she lifted her back off the mattress.

“You taste so much better than ice cream,” he teased as he lapped at her folds.

“You’re even better with your tongue than I imagined.”

He paused and looked up at her with an arrogant smirk.

“Oh yeah? How long have you been imagining that?”

Dakota wove her fingers in his hair and guided his mouth back to her pussy.

“You’re not the only one who’s been lusting since our first meeting.”

He dragged his tongue along her center, working his way up until he leisurely circled her clit.

“Good to know, Sunshine.”

He continued taking his time pleasuring her. His hot breath on her center, coupled with the slow, long strokes of his

tongue, were just enough stimulation that the tease was a delicious torture.

Dakota needed more, something she was convinced he knew when she felt his smile as she begged, “Aiden, please.”

He lifted his head with that crooked smile. “Please what, beautiful?”

“Please make me come.”

“Of course.”

He pressed a finger inside her as he continued his attention to her clit with his tongue and established a rhythm that soon had her orgasm creeping from her toes up her spine.

Her whole body went taut, and he growled, “Come for me, Sunshine.”

A shudder ran through her body, as if racing to comply with his demand, and she let out a long moan when the climax overtook her.

Aiden did not stop until she pushed his face away.

He chuckled as he stood up and pulled his t-shirt off his body, pausing to wipe his face with it before tossing it on the floor. He then turned and opened the door.

She sat up on her elbows to ask where he was going when she noticed him bend down and pick up his black bag that he'd left in the hall. Closing the door behind him, he set the duffel on the white leather bench at the foot of the bed, unzipped it, then reached inside and pulled out a little blue square foil package.

He untied the drawstring of his board shorts and dropped them to his ankles, his big, hard cock standing straight out at attention. When he drew the condom wrapper to his mouth, like he was going to open it with his teeth, Dakota stopped him.

“Wait, not yet.”

His face fell in disappointment, but he nodded and mumbled, “I’m sorry,” as he reached down for his shorts.

She obviously hadn’t communicated her desire properly and scrambled to her knees, reaching for his dick as she did.

“Not yet, because I want to suck your cock first.”

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*Aiden*

He felt his eyebrows shoot to his forehead. Other than in his fantasies, no woman had ever said that to him before.

“Are you sure?”

She drew his tip to her mouth. “Oh god, yes. You have a gorgeous cock, and it’s my turn to taste you.”

As she circled the head with her tongue, he closed his eyes and drew in a ragged breath.

When she sucked him deep, he murmured, “Fuuuuck,” while caressing her hair in encouragement.

“Just like that, baby.”

Dakota looked up at him with a smile, his cock still between her beautiful lips. She was in charge now and letting him know it. She never once looked away as she bobbed her head up and down.

The visual was too much for his Neanderthal brain, and he had to close his eyes, or he'd blow his load right then.

Her long "Mmmm," vibrated around his shaft, and he had to pull away. While it would be outstanding to come in her mouth, he really wanted the first time to be while he was inside her.

*"Now can I fuck you?"*

She laid back on her elbows and stated, "I think you better."

He smiled as he rolled the condom on, then flipped her over without preamble and moved between her thighs. Running his cock up and down against her entrance, he paused.

*"Oh, one thing, Sunshine."*

*"Hmm?"*

He pushed inside her heat with one thrust, pressing on her left shoulder to pin her to the bed as his other hand tugged on her hair. Her head tilted back, and he brought his lips to the shell of her ear to harshly whisper, "You're not in charge anymore."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Dakota*

Aiden had told her she wasn't in charge anymore.

That suited her just fine. While having him at her mercy had made her feel powerful, she was happy to give him control—both of the situation and her.

The man did not disappoint.

He manhandled her in ways she'd always fantasized about, but never actually experienced.

Yet, even as he had her pinned in place on her stomach, he paused to ask if she was okay.

She was more than okay.

Still, he said, "Red means stop, okay?"

"What does green mean?"

"Everything's good. Keep going."

"Then green. Oh my god, green!"

He rutted her like a wild animal as he held her down. His balls slapped her clit as he plunged in her hard and deep. His feral grunts as he took his pleasure from her body made her even wetter, and she ached for release.

Dakota reached under her hips in search of her clit. Something Aiden noticed because he wrapped an arm around her middle and hauled her onto all fours, slapping her hand away as he found her magic knot.

“My pussy,” he growled in her ear before resuming thrusting in her channel in tempo with his fingers sliding over her clit.

“Oh my god, Aiden! Yes!”

“You close, Sunshine?”

“Yes, please don’t stop!”

“I’m not stopping. Not until you’re coming all over my cock.”

She felt her body temperature rise as her belly tightened, and she met him thrust for thrust.

“I need you to come, baby,” he whispered urgently while he increased the pressure on her clit.

“I’m so close, Aiden. Please don’t stop.”

“I’m not stopping, Sunshine. Come on my cock. Let me feel that pretty pussy quiver.”

She fell over the edge with a long, “Ohhhhh.” Aiden sat up straighter, holding her hips, and after two thrusts, pushed in deep as he grunted through his release.

It was sexy as fuck.

He dropped his head to her back as he caught his breath and finally withdrew, escaping to the Jack-and-Jill bathroom before returning with a towel, which he used to tend to her.

After tossing the towel, he dropped onto the bed with a *thunk* and pulled her against him, murmuring, “You are a goddess.”

He made her feel like one.

With a contented sigh, she laid her head on his chest and melted into him, relishing the warmth of his body, yet appreciating his hard lines against her soft curves.

She knew in her relaxed state, if she didn't get up, she'd fall asleep. She drew circles on his arm that was around her waist as she murmured, "Do you think we should go out there?"

"Probably." Yet, he made no attempt to move, so neither did she.

"They've probably noticed we're gone."

"Probably."

"Do you think they know what we've been doing?"

He tugged her tighter against him with a contented sigh. "Yep."

"I'm sorry."

That made him open his eyes and look down at her. "Why?"

"I'm sure you don't want your colleagues gossiping about you."

"Sunshine, they've been gossiping about me for the last two years—ever since I filed for divorce. It'll be a nice change of pace for them to have something pleasant to wag their tongues about."

"Was it bad? Your divorce, I mean."

She felt his previously relaxed body tense and wished she hadn't asked that.

“Yeah. It got ugly. Fortunately, my attorney was better than hers.”

They lay in silence for a few minutes before he said, “What about you? Was your divorce bad?”

“I’ve never been married.”

“No?”

“Nope. I came close once, but it didn’t work out—thank God. I dodged a bullet with that one.”

“Living with someone is pretty much the same as being married when you breakup. Did it get ugly when you split?”

“I’ve never lived with a man other than my father. But no, when he decided to end things, there wasn’t much left to say.”

Over the years, she wondered if she should have made more of an effort to get married and have a father-figure in her daughter’s life, since Chloe’s dad had been such a loser and refused to have anything to do with them—at least, not until Chloe was five.

Around her fifth birthday, Craig had contacted her and said he wanted to get to know his daughter. When Dakota scoffed, he argued it was his right, and he’d already missed out on so much of his little girl’s life. It had almost seemed heartfelt, and finally, Dakota conceded. But when it came time to put the custody terms in writing, and he realized he was going to have to not only start paying child support, but five years’ worth of back support, he decided knowing his daughter wasn’t that important after all.

Good riddance.



In case he had another change of heart in the future, her parents' attorney had him sign over all parental rights in exchange for her not pursuing child support.

Thank God Dakota's dad had always been a wonderful presence and example of a man for Chloe.

Dakota hadn't gotten pregnant at sixteen because she had daddy issues. No, it was more because she was young and dumb than anything.

But that mistake changed her life infinitely for the better.

Aiden brought her back to reality.

"That sounds nice and drama-free. I wouldn't know anything about that."

That made her laugh out loud. "I have far too much going on to deal with drama."

"Yeah, well... so did I. Unfortunately, my ex-wife had more time on her hands."

"I'm so sorry. That had to be especially hard on your girls."

"I tried to shield them from as much as I could, but they're not stupid. They quickly figured out what was going on. Fortunately, we made a pact not to badmouth each other, and since my ex was the one who cheated, it was in her best interest to adhere to it."

"I think you did a good job. They seemed happy when I met them."

"Good auras?" he teased as his fingertips traced up and down her spine.

“Beautiful, vibrant ones. It’s how I knew you were a good man and are far more bark than bite. There’s no way your daughters would be so full of joy if you were such a curmudgeon.”

His hand stopped. “Can’t I be both?”

“I think you are both.”

“I definitely am.” His hand skimmed along her back once again. “And I think I just proved my bite is legit.”

“I don’t know about your bite, but that tongue and cock of yours are one hundred percent the real deal.”

He squeezed her tight. “Damn right they are.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Dakota*

She slipped out of bed after a brief nap and, sensing Aiden's exhaustion, let him sleep.

On her way to the beach, she ran into Whitney and could tell right away she needed to talk and steered her into the kitchen.

"I think I upset Steven with my 'no kids' declaration and now things are weird between us," Whitney lamented.

"He did seem surprised."

Whitney admitted during their heartfelt conversation she didn't think she was worthy of true happiness. Which was utter bullshit; Whitney was one of the kindest souls she knew. Dakota tried to help her friend see that the Universe only wanted good things for her—it had nothing to do with deservedness and more to do with what she had been willing to accept.

"So, knowing you can have everything you want," Dakota said, "you need to ask yourself, what do you want?"

The beautiful lawyer's response of "I want it all," was exactly what Dakota had wanted to hear.

"So go get it."

"I'm so glad you came this weekend," Whitney blurted out as she wrapped her arms around Dakota's shoulders.

"Me, too." An image of a naked Aiden, asleep in her bed, flashed into her head, and she smiled, repeating, "Me, too."

Whitney said she needed to get something from her bag, and Dakota made her way back to the sand.

When she appeared at the beach without Aiden, it was only natural that his friends ask where he was.

Her reply of, “He’s taking a nap,” was met with the knowing smiles she’d been expecting, but she hadn’t expected James to pipe in about Aiden working late the night before. Or why.

That got the group talking about what a great cardiologist he was, and Steven declared, “I’m saying this to all of you—if I’m ever in cardiac arrest, you better call Aiden, or there will be hell to pay.”

There was a consensus among the rest of the Boston General group that Aiden was who they wanted working on their heart, should the need ever arise.

“And he’s actually nice to his patients,” James added with a laugh.

“I think I’d pay money to see that,” Hope replied.

“He wasn’t always this grumpy, but his ex-wife did a number on him,” Steven said, then quickly glanced at Dakota as if maybe he shouldn’t have said that in front of her.

She felt the need to defend him. “I don’t think he’s been the least bit grumpy today.”

Zach grinned. “Yeah, thanks to you.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

Steve shook his head. “No, trust me. The minute he saw you, it was like his mood instantly lightened.”

“So, we hope you’re planning on sticking around a while,” Zach said with a smirk before taking a pull of beer.

Dakota simply smiled. There was no way she could answer that truthfully, especially since they all had a pretty good idea about what the two of them had been doing.

Admitting this was just a weekend fling, wouldn’t paint her in the best light. And she respected Whitney too much to put her in an awkward position of having her new boyfriend’s friends think poorly about the person she’d invited.

Besides, Dakota got the impression Aiden didn’t like anybody knowing his business. Although she couldn’t be responsible for his friends knowing about the two of them, since he hadn’t exactly tried to be discreet.

He could figure out how to explain why they weren’t still seeing each other after this weekend.

“Is anyone hungry?” Steven asked and was met with a chorus of “Me!” and “I am!”

“Steaks all right?”

The group agreed, and Steve and Whitney disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Hope to start the next round of gossip.

“I think she’s going to be my sister-in-law.”

Zach agreed. “Yeah, I think you’re right. We’ve been best friends since our freshman year in college, and I’ve never seen him so gaga over a woman. Not that I blame him—she’s great.”

That prompted his Barbie-doll date to gasp in offense.

It didn't faze Zach in the least. With an unapologetic shrug, he said, "It's true. She's freaking brilliant, not to mention gorgeous. If I would've thought I had a shot with her, I'd have asked her out years ago."

For all his bravado, Dakota sensed Zach was hurting—probably even more than Aiden. He just masked it differently.

Hope turned to Dakota. "What do you think? You're Whitney's friend. Is she as great as she seems?"

She replied without hesitation. "Even better. And I think you're right about her and Steven. They seem like a perfect match."

She didn't say anything about Whitney being pregnant, but it was Hope who said wistfully, "I can't wait for them to have kids. Can you imagine how perfect they're going to be?"

James laughed, "No doubt," while Yvette murmured her agreement. Zach, however, was noticeably more subdued and didn't reply.

Dakota's third eye told her Zach's sadness stemmed from him not having children. And she knew it was beyond his control.

But she also sensed happiness was right around the corner for him. And it was as close as next door.

As always, she kept her visions to herself.

"Let's see if Steve and Whitney need any help," Hope suggested.

As the group walked up the hill, Zach asked, "Should we wake Aiden up?"

“I can go check on him.”

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

He must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, he felt someone shaking his shoulder.

Slowly opening his eyes, he found Dakota standing next to the bed, fully dressed.

“Hey, sleepyhead. Dinner is almost ready.”

Aiden sat up with a start. “What time is it?”

“Almost six.”

“Damn.” He rubbed his eyes. “You wore me out, woman.”

That didn’t bode well for his promise to satisfy her all night.

“As much as I enjoyed what we did and would love to take credit for being the reason you slept so soundly, James told us you got called into work last night and were at the hospital until early this morning. He said you lost one of your patients.” She reached for his hand. “I’m so sorry, Aiden.”

Her fingers were soft and warm as they gripped his.

“The first time I lost a patient and had to tell his family, I was so pissed at Columbia for not preparing me better for the reality that I was going to have patients die. But, over the years, I’ve come to realize it doesn’t get any easier—even

when it's expected, I could never be fully prepared. Maybe the day I am is when it's time to retire."

"Your patients are lucky to have a doctor with so much compassion."

He met her gaze with a grin. "I prefer to think they're lucky to have such a skilled doctor."

"Well, that too. But I just assumed that was a given."

"How would you know that?"

"Well, aside from you just telling me how great you are?" she teased. "Your colleagues talk. They're a gossipy bunch. Apparently, you're the heart doc anyone working at Boston General wants for themselves or their loved ones if they're having cardiac problems."

That knowledge shouldn't stoke his ego. But it did.

"That's only because they know I'm a sucker for writing my services off."

She leaned over and planted a long kiss on his cheek, then whispered in his ear, "That's not it, and you know it."

Yeah, he did, but he was trying to be humble.

Her proximity, along with her alluring floral scent, had his cock stirring. He moved her hand so she could feel what she was doing to him.

"Either you come back to bed, or you better go so I can get dressed without distractions."

Her brown eyes twinkled, and for a moment, he thought she was going to agree to the former.



“I guess I didn’t wear you out too much.”

“I’m an old man, but don’t worry. There’s still plenty left in the tank, Sunshine.”

She took a step back with a sultry smile and looked him in the eye. “I can’t wait to empty your tank later.”

He was about to leap from under the covers and haul her back to bed when she opened the door, and Zach stuck his head in.

“Dinner’s ready. Get your ass up and come eat.”

Aiden scrubbed a hand down his face. “Yeah, be right there.”

Zach disappeared and Aiden shot Dakota a look.

“He just saved you from being molested.”

“I’d hardly call it saving,” she quipped over her shoulder as she walked out. “More like blocking.”

With that, she closed the door, leaving Aiden to shake his head with a chuckle.

*That woman is something else.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Dakota*

After dinner, she and Aiden helped Yvette and James clean up. She couldn't help but smile at the two, who were obviously smitten with each other.

James hung the towel he'd been drying dishes with on the oven handle and asked, "Should we go down and see what trouble Hope has gotten in?"

Yvette giggled her agreement, but Aiden said, "I'm going to put some jeans on first."

"Yeah, me too," Dakota quickly added.

"We'll see you down at the fire."

They escaped to her guest room, and Aiden wrapped his arms around her waist the second the door closed behind them. He murmured against her neck, "Think anyone will miss us if we skip it?"

"Mmm, so tempting."

She closed her eyes briefly to relish the feel of his lips on her skin while his hands skimmed along her stomach.

His hard cock pressed against her back. "Do you feel what you do to me?"

Dakota turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "The feeling is mutual." She wound a lock of hair at the back of his head around her finger. "Buuut..."

He sighed dramatically and briefly looked at the ceiling. "I hate butts."

She smirked at his declaration, and he fumbled, “Not all butts. I like your butt.” He grabbed her ass for clarification. “But I don’t want to *hear* your but.” It was his turn to smirk. “Now that I think about it, I don’t want to hear that butt either.”

She rolled her eyes. “The feeling is mutual. *But* as I was saying... we will be missed. And I’d rather not fuel the gossip fire. For both our sakes.”

But mostly for his. He had to work with these people, she didn’t.

“Sunshine, that fire is already stoked and burning bright.”

“Well then, let’s not add gasoline to it.”

He sighed again, kissed her forehead, then reluctantly removed his hands. “Fine. Let’s get changed.”

He took a pair of jeans from his bag as Dakota opened her suitcase and pulled out a pair along with a sweatshirt. Clothes in hand, she headed to the bathroom they were sharing with Zach and his plus one, Barbie.

“Don’t trust me?” he asked as he dropped his shorts.

She surveyed his gorgeous body as he stood at the side of the bed. His cock was semi-erect in his white boxer-briefs, his broad chest was emphasized under his blue t-shirt, and those strong muscular arms of his that, when he wrapped them around her, made her feel protected.

“No. I don’t trust myself.”

His grin grew broader. “That’s my girl.”

Dakota closed the bathroom door and leaned against it. He was being flippant—he didn't really mean she was *his* girl.

So why had his words unleashed a kaleidoscope of butterflies in her belly?

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*Aiden*

He begrudgingly let her lead him to the bonfire on the beach where everyone had gathered. While he liked these people, he would have much rather spent his time with just Dakota. He didn't even care if they were naked—although that would have been a bonus.

They'd just reached the group when Hope declared how cute Whitney and Steven were.

“Aren't they though?” Dakota agreed.

Steven looked over his sister's shoulder and the smile on his face immediately fell into a frown. Aiden glanced at what had caught his friend's attention.

Evan Lacroix.

He was a doctor in the ER with Steven. The two had been friends once but had a falling out recently. Rumor was it was because Steven had beaten him out for the director position, but Aiden knew it was something bigger than that. Their feud had started before Evan even applied for the job.

Next to Evan was his pregnant twin sister, Olivia. She was an Ob/Gyn at Boston General, and every time Aiden had

run into her, it seemed she was as nice as her brother was arrogant.

Not that Evan didn't have a reason to be arrogant. He was a damn good doctor. But so was his sister, and she managed to remain humble.

Hope seemed especially happy to see the two.

*Interesting.*

While part of him was curious about what was going on with that, he mostly didn't give a shit. He had someone far more interesting to worry about—the gorgeous ray of sunshine disguised in a grey Boston College sweatshirt and a pair of jeans that hugged her ass like he wanted to.

“How long do we have to stay down here?” he quietly asked as they moved toward the cooler of beverages.

“Until other people have left first,” she chastised as she opened the cooler and fished through the ice until she found the Blue Moon she wanted.

“Do you want one?”

“Yeah. I'll have the same.”

Evan and Hope joined them while everyone else sat around the fire.

Hope introduced Evan to Dakota, then laughed and said, “And of course you already know Aiden.”

“Hey, Aiden. Good to see you, man. How've you been?” Evan asked as he deposited the beer and sodas he'd brought with him into the cooler.

“Great. Busy, just like everyone else.”

The familiarity with which Evan handed Hope a beer without even asking her what she wanted struck him.

*Yeah, there is definitely something going on between them.*

Steve was going to flip the fuck out when he found out.

Aiden knew one thing for sure—he wasn't going to be the one to tell him.

“How are the girls?” Evan asked as he twisted the cap off his bottle and pocketed it.

“They're good. They're in Wisconsin this weekend, visiting Susan's parents at the lake.”

Evan paused with the bottle at his lips to ask, “Kailey's going to be a senior this year?”

“Fuck no. A sophomore. She just got her learner's permit. Don't age me like that yet.”

“What about you, Dakota?” Hope asked. “Do you have kids?”

In his head, he said *no* on her behalf. So, it took him aback when he heard her answer. “I do. A daughter. But I'm actually a grandma.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa,” he found himself saying. “Hold on. You're a *grandma*?”

“Yep,” she smiled brightly. “My grandson, Asher, is three.”

He wanted to ask, “how old are you?” but knew better. He'd seen her naked. She was no grandma.

“My daughter and son-in-law live in my guest house, so I get to see him all the time.”

“I bet you love that,” Hope replied.

Maybe her daughter was a teen mom.

Then she said. “I do. It was only supposed to be until they finished college, but they both graduated last year, so I’m hoping they just forgot.”

Doing the math in this head, he realized there was a broad span of what her age could be. He guessed by her lack of wrinkles and how hot her body was that it was on the lower side of the scale.

So, it was Dakota who’d been the teen mom.

Her sassiness made more sense. He bet she’d scrapped and scraped for everything she had accomplished as a single mom, making him like her even more.

He pulled her back against him while wrapping his arms around her middle, then kissed her temple. Hope and Evan exchanged a knowing smile, and Aiden didn’t even give a shit what they thought of his PDA.

Dakota looked back at him with quizzical brows. He couldn’t tell her what he was feeling, so he smirked before whispering in her ear, “You’re a GILF.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, then returned her attention to the conversation with his colleagues.

Aiden only half-listened; the flowery smell of her hair and the warmth of her body as he continued holding her were far more interesting.

When he finally got her alone, the first words out of her mouth were, “I guess that makes you a DILF.”

If she thought she was insulting him, she was sorely mistaken.

“Whenever and as often as you want, Sunshine,” he murmured as he planted his lips on hers.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Dakota*

“Come on, baby,” Aiden’s deep voice said softly in her ear. “We’re going to miss the sunrise.”

Waking up naked next to him, her body deliciously sore in all the right places, coupled with the idea of watching the sun come up over the ocean, brought a smile to her face.

“I’m up,” she croaked as she took a full-body stretch. “Just let me brush my teeth.”

Dakota came out of the bathroom and slipped on a bra, then quickly threw on the grey cotton pajama shorts set she’d brought.

He smiled when he read the saying written on her tank top in white letters.

“Good vibes only.”

“It’s the only way to be.”

Aiden quietly opened the bedroom door, as if cognizant they were the only two in the house who were probably awake, then reached for her hand.

As they walked through the house, he pulled a blanket from a basket by the couch in the family room, and they slipped out the back door leading to the ocean. The dawn’s light made it easy to maneuver their way to the beach.

They stood looking out at the Atlantic’s horizon where the sun would soon make its appearance. He wrapped the blanket around him, then pulled her back to his front to

envelop her in both his embrace and the blanket. The clean smell of his deodorant wafted to her nose.

“I was just teasing you about yoga, by the way,” she murmured as she rested the back of her head against his chest.

“I know. But I am glad we got up for this.”

“This is my favorite time of the day. Everything is peaceful and quiet, and it seems to hold so much promise.”

He kissed her temple.

“You really are sunshine and rainbows, aren’t you?”

She looked back at him with a smile.

“Why, that almost sounds like a compliment.”

His arms tightened around her as he whispered in her ear, “It is.”

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*Aiden*

After watching the sunrise, the two of them got dressed and strolled along the beach until they came to the local coffee shop.

There, they got their caffeine fix on the patio and ate pastries as they people-watched and chatted about their own lives.

She was as much of a hippy as he was a conservative curmudgeon. It was a good thing they’d agreed to this being a

weekend-only fling, because there was no way they'd work long term.

But being around her for the last twenty-four hours, he'd felt lighter than he had in years. She had this uncanny ability to see the good in everything.

When he'd first met her, he'd used it as evidence for his daughters, and maybe himself, why he'd never ask someone like her out. Now he just thought it was adorable.

It made him want to shield her from anything bad.

Which was silly. She was a grown woman who'd raised a daughter. Aiden had no doubt she'd seen and been through her share of crap. Yet, she still remained positive.

"I still think you should give meditation another try. Or at least yoga. Preferably both. Especially with your line of work."

He felt himself scowl defensively. "What does my job have to do with anything?"

"Everything!" she said with her chipper laugh. "It's stressful, right?"

"Well, sure."

"Meditation and yoga would help that. I think you would also benefit from singing bowls."

"I don't even wanna know what the hell those are."

"They're—"

He leaned over and kissed her lips to stop her from talking, then pulled away with a grin. "I just said I don't want to know."

She sighed as she scrutinized him with pursed lips. Finally, she said, “Do you ever have patients who come to you—let’s say they have a high-stress job that doesn’t leave them much time for exercise and they smoke and drink and are overweight. What do you recommend?”

“Obviously, reduce stress, lose weight, quit smoking, try to exercise more.”

“So, you tell them all the things that would help them with their heart disease, but they ignore your advice.”

“I know where you’re going with this...”

She ignored him and kept talking. “How do you feel when they leave your office?”

“Frustrated.”

“Because simple lifestyle changes would make a world of difference for them, right? Yet they won’t do them because either they don’t really believe the changes will help—regardless of what you tell them, or they don’t want to change.”

“Pretty much,” he conceded.

“So, what do you do?”

“The only thing I can do. Keep trying to get through to them.”

Dakota sat back in her chair. “Exactly.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes at her as he reflected on her point. He’d read studies on the benefits of yoga and had even recommended it to his patients. He had, however, never tried it himself.

“Fine. I’ll try yoga with you. But the second you start talking about auras and chakras—I’m out.”

“We’ll just start with postures—nothing else; I promise.”  
Then she softly added, “For now.”

“I heard that.”

She brought her coffee cup to her lips with a smile.  
“Good.”

He leaned forward. “You know what else helps reduce stress?”

Dakota raised her eyebrows. “What?”

“Orgasms.”

He expected her to scoff or roll her eyes. Instead, she met his gaze with a straight face and cockily replied, “I know.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Dakota*

“There you guys are!” Steven said when they walked through the French doors from the back patio.

“We were up early and didn’t want to wake anyone, so we went to the boardwalk for coffee,” Aiden explained. “Although I see Barbie is already at the beach.”

“She went down there the second she got up,” Zach said from a stool at the kitchen island. “You guys up for some volleyball?”

Steven looked over at Whitney before replying, “We’re, uh—going to go to the market for some supplies.”

Dakota furrowed her brows. The pantry and refrigerator had both been overflowing yesterday when she and Aiden had made lunch. What could they possibly need?

She glanced at Whitney staring at the floor and realized the two of them must need some time alone together. There was still trouble in paradise.

“I think I’m going to sit this one out,” Dakota announced. “I’ve got the latest A.L. Jackson novel calling my name.”

Aiden quickly agreed. “Me, too.”

“You’ve got a romance novel calling your name?” Zach asked with a smirk.

“Well, no. I just meant I’m going to sit this one out.”

Whitney cocked her head and pointed at Zach. “How do you know what A.L. Jackson writes?”

He shrugged. “I’ve dated women who read.”

Steven snorted and grumbled under his breath, “Does Barbie even know how to read?”

Based on some of her commentary last night, it was a legitimate question.

The snarky remark didn’t even bother Zach.

“I didn’t say they all did.” He looked pointedly at Aiden. “You can’t sit out, otherwise the teams will be uneven.”

Watch a shirtless Aiden play volleyball in the sand? Sign her up.

Dakota patted his arm. “I will happily put off reading to cheer you on.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay. Let’s go get changed.”

“There’s no rush. James, Hope, and Yvette haven’t even come back from Zoe’s yet.”

“That was really nice of your neighbor to let them stay in her guest rooms,” Dakota observed.

“I should probably go check on them,” Zach offered.

Dakota pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. Zach wasn’t fooling anyone. He and Zoe had been glued at the hip last night and completely ignored their much younger dates, who’d seemed to have hit it off as well. But at the end of the night, Zach left—albeit reluctantly—with Barbie, and Zoe went to her house next door with Rolando.

“We’ll meet you at the beach,” Aiden told him, then steered her toward the bedroom they were unofficially sharing.

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*Aiden*

He’d intended on changing into his swim trunks and heading down to the beach right away.

Honest.

Then he caught a glimpse of Dakota naked as she put her bikini on, and his cock decided it could wait.

“Have I told you today how fucking beautiful you are?” he growled in her ear as he moved behind her and planted his hands around her waist.

She immediately relaxed against him. Her bare skin felt like silk against his.

“I think you might have mentioned it.” There was a lilt in her voice. “But you can tell me again.”

“You”—he kissed the side of her neck as his hands roamed up her sides—“are so beautiful.”

Cupping her tits, he pressed his erection against her ass while he continued, “Whenever I’m with you, my cock gets so fucking hard.”

Dakota turned in his embrace and clasped her hands behind his neck.



“That is such a coincidence. Because every time I’m with you, my pussy gets wet.”

“What should we do about that?”

She reached inside his boxer briefs and stroked his erect cock.

“I have a few ideas.”

“Every one of them better involve me inside you, Sunshine.”

“Of course,” she said as she dropped to her knees and looked up at him with a devilish grin while tugging his underwear down his thighs.

She circled his tip with her tongue. “Inside my mouth counts, right?”

*Fuck yeah it did.*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Aiden*

After returning the favor and eating Dakota's pussy, all he wanted to do was fall asleep with her in his arms. The last damn thing he'd wanted to do was play beach volleyball. Yet there he was in the sand with Zach, Yvette, and Hope competing against Evan, James, Rolando, and Barbie.

It turned out Hope was a fantastic player—and highly competitive. And she *really* wanted to beat Evan, so she hadn't been pleased with Aiden when he missed a few easy returns.

The flirty smiles from Dakota, however, as she watched from the sidelines while drinking sangria with Zoe made him not care about Hope's ire.

They just needed to finish the damn game so he could go take a nap with his hippy chick before dinner. They were leaving tomorrow, so he wanted to spend as much time alone with her as he could. Especially since she'd made it clear she wasn't interested in dating him once they got back to Boston.

But... that had been before they'd spent so much time together. Maybe she'd changed her mind. He'd had.

He was going to talk to her about it tonight while they watched fireworks. He had been about to ask her when they were naked in bed earlier, but then she'd nudged him and said they needed to get to the beach, so he tabled it.

She threw her head back, laughing at something Zoe had said. The sound was music to his ears, and suddenly he wanted to be privy to what caused her laughter, so he could repeat it.

“Yo, Matthews! Stop flirting with your girlfriend and pay attention to the game!” Hope’s voice had a drill sergeant quality to it. “It’s your serve!”

“Whoo!” came the loud cheers from Zoe and Dakota.

“Go Aiden!”

“Show that ball who’s boss!”

“How many of those have you two had?” he called as he walked to the service line.

“Mind ya business!” Zoe responded with a giggle as she tapped her bright pink plastic glass against Dakota’s orange one, then took a sip.

Dakota raised her glass toward him in a toast. “Get an ace, babe!”

Aiden smiled at her use of a pet name and spun the ball backwards in both hands as he focused on his serve. He hadn’t given a shit about the outcome of the game until that moment. Now he wanted to show off.

He winked at her before tossing the ball high in the air in front of him and took two steps to jump and connect with it.

The opposing team obviously wasn’t expecting him to be any good because it caught them by surprise and were unable to return the ball. His team’s cheering section erupted in shouts.

“Whoo! Go Aiden!”

“Yessss! Good job, babe!”

“Where the hell did that come from?” Hope asked as she tossed him the ball.

He shrugged, and she barked, “Do it again!” before turning around and getting in position to play.

Aiden was able to rack up five more points before they lost the serve, but they ended up winning that game. In the end, though, they lost the match—two games to one. Something that did not sit well with Hope, to the delight of Evan. He made sure to talk loudly about it with James as they stood around the beer cooler. Then Aiden saw him whisper in Hope’s ear while he discreetly stroked her hip. She pulled away, shaking her head, and said something over her shoulder as she walked away from him. Evan paused for only a second before chasing after her. Not surprisingly, he didn’t bring winning up again the rest of the night.

Dakota approached Aiden with a drink in one hand and with her free hand, dragged her nails lightly down his stomach.

“Wow, you’re really good. I’m impressed.”

He planted a kiss on her forehead. “You’ve got your drunk goggles on, Sunshine.”

“Maybe. But you’ll be just as hot when I take them off.” She pressed her tits against his biceps. “Speaking of taking things off...”

He leaned down to whisper in her ear as he grazed her nipple over her swimsuit. “Do you need to get fucked, baby?”

“Maaaaybe.”

Her tipsy admission made his cock move.

“Lead the way.”

She grabbed his hand with a giggle and pulled him toward the house. They hadn't made it ten yards when someone called Dakota's name.

*Nooooo!* he groaned internally before they both turned around to see who it was.

“Hey, Whit.”

Whitney walked toward them, her bottom lip trembling.

“Hope said you and Zoe were drinking sangrias?”

Dakota glanced back at the beach chair she'd been sitting in, where Zach had now made himself at home and was chatting Zoe up.

Aiden squeezed her hand and murmured, “We've got all night, baby.”

She returned the squeeze and gave him a small smile, then turned to Whitney and said brightly, “Yes! Can I pour you one?”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Aiden*

A dejected Zach walked onto the patio not long after Aiden.

“Where’s your lady friend?” Hope asked him as she walked out of the French doors with a drink in her hand.

“She’s drinking sangrias with Dakota and Whitney on the beach.”

James snorted. “Not Zoe, you dumbass. Barbie. The girl you brought. You know, the one you’re sharing a bed with.”

“Oh. She and Rolando are solving world hunger and building sandcastles. Not necessarily in that order.”

“Dude, Steve told you not to bring a date this weekend,” James chastised in a way only a little brother could get away with.

Zach nodded to where the two twenty-somethings were building sandcastles.

“I’m glad I did. They can keep each other company while the grownups talk.”

Aiden liked Zach and was glad to see him interested in someone his own age and who wasn’t a stripper. Too bad that woman had also brought a date that weekend.

*Not my circus, not my monkeys, not my problem.*

“I think I’m going to grab a nap before dinner.”

Zach agreed. “That sounds like a good idea.”

Evan gave Hope a sly look but didn't say anything in front of Steven. Probably smart on his part. Especially since Steve seemed grumpy after he got back from lunch with Whitney.

Again, not his circus, monkeys, or problem.

"I'll see you guys later."

With any luck, a curvy, gorgeous, raven-haired hippy would wake him soon. Preferably with her body on his.

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*Dakota*

She'd said she'd pour Whitney a sangria, but realized as they walked to where Zoe was still seated in the sand that wasn't a good idea, given Whitney's unconfirmed pregnancy.

The problem was, how did Dakota get her to not drink alcohol without telling her why?

Zach's mama raised him right, because the minute the two appeared, he was out of his seat and said, "I'll go grab you another chair."

Dakota gestured for Whitney to sit down, then moved to the tiny plastic table between the chairs.

Fortunately, the sangria pitcher was empty, so she didn't have to do anything drastic, like "accidentally" spill it.

"You know what sounds really good?" Dakota asked. "Lemonade." She picked up the plastic pitcher before anyone

could disagree. “I’ll make some.”

Zoe jumped to her feet. “Don’t be silly. I’ve got it,” and took the container out of Dakota’s hands.

“Not spiked,” Dakota said softly, then turned to sit in the seat Zoe had just vacated.

“So, what’s troubling you, my friend?”

Whitney stared out into the ocean for a second before turning to her with furrowed brows.

“Do you really think I can have it all?”

She reached across the table and placed a hand on Whitney’s arm. “I have no doubt.”

“It’s just scary, you know? I’m so used to staying in my lane, because anytime I dared to want more, I’ve been put back in my place.”

“Sweet girl. The Universe wants you to have it all. You just need to be willing to accept you are worthy. And that means demanding it if it’s not coming.”

“That seems dangerous—making demands.”

“How else will the Universe know what to send you? The night before I came here, my daughter asked for a great guy to show up for me and give me mind-blowing orgasms.”

“Cue Aiden.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m so excited for you. Steven can’t say enough good things about him. Maybe we can double date when we get back to the city.”



Dakota wrinkled her nose. “We agreed this was just for the weekend.”

“Really?” Whitney tilted her head. “Why? You guys seem so good together.”

“I think I’m just supposed to help him heal from his divorce, so he’s ready for the woman he’s meant to be with.”

“And that’s not you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Saying it out loud made her sad.

A small smile escaped Whitney’s lips. “Maybe you should let yourself be open to the possibilities the Universe brings you.”

“Maybe.”

But Dakota knew love wasn’t what the Universe had in store for her. That had been proven more than once. So, she’d take one more night with the yummy cardiologist and be grateful.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Aiden*

He felt the bed dip and rolled over to pull Dakota into an embrace.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as she snuggled against him. Her skin felt cool against his and his cock hardened under his boxer briefs. “I thought I could slip into bed without waking you.”

Aiden kissed her hair and stroked her bare spine with his fingertips. “What a nice way to be woken up, though.”

He could get used to waking up next to her.

She laid with her head on his chest and let out a big sigh. “I’m sorry we got interrupted earlier.”

“It’s okay, Sunshine. Like I said, we’ve got all night. Your friend needed you.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Of course.”

She laid still in his arms, so he didn’t initiate anything. He could tell something was bothering her.

“What’s going on, baby? Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just thinking about my conversation with Whitney.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. Is it okay if we just lay here like this for a while?”

It was better than okay.

“Absolutely.”

The scent of her flowery shampoo wafted to his nose, and he willed himself not to breathe in too deeply, lest she think he was a weirdo for smelling her.

They lie there for a while, both quiet as her head rested on his chest while he skimmed his fingers up and down her back. He wondered what was troubling her but knew better than to think she would confide in him. They barely knew each other.

Her steady breathing let him know she'd fallen asleep, and Aiden nodded off again, too. Something about her soothed him. She fit so perfectly in his arms. He could have held her until morning—just held her, nothing sexual—and he would have been content.

*Auras versus aortas*, he reminded himself for what felt like the hundredth time that weekend. Yet, in that moment, he couldn't bring himself to care about how different they were.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Dakota*

She woke to the sound of her phone dinging with an incoming text.

**Whitney: James and Yvette are making dinner. Will you two be joining us?**

Dakota glanced at Aiden, who blinked back at her.

“What’s up?”

“Whitney was just asking if we were going to eat with everyone.”

“I’m hungry; what about you?”

“Starving.”

Her admission made him grin. “Tell her we’ll be right out.”

Minutes later, they walked into the kitchen where Yvette and James were busy preparing dinner.

“Did you lose a bet?” Aiden quipped as he took in James standing at the island, cutting up a watermelon.

Yvette was on the opposite side of the island, slicing apples.

“We volunteered,” Yvette said, then stole a glance at James, and they exchanged shy smiles.

It was adorable.

“Everybody’s out back,” James said before he wiped his hands on the towel and stirred something on the stove.

“Seems like everyone has made a love connection this weekend,” Dakota murmured as they walked toward the French doors leading to the patio.

He stopped and tilted his head with his eyebrows raised. “A *love* connection? Everyone?”

Dakota rolled her eyes and kept walking. “You know what I mean.”

Aiden hustled to catch up with her.

“Do you think we should”—he paused as if trying to find the right words—“when we get back to the city, what if we—”

Dakota held her breath at what she thought he was going to say next.

A volleyball landed at their feet, and Hope jogged up to retrieve it.

“Hey! Just the guy I was looking for! I’m trying to get a little practice before Evan gets here. Do you mind serving a few to me?”

Aiden glanced back at Dakota, and she nodded her encouragement. Anything to buy her a little more time before he asked her his question.

“You guys need the practice!” she teased, trying to keep the mood light.

His mouth tightened as he stared back at her, then he forced a smile before looking Hope’s way. “Yeah, sure. Come on.”

Dakota felt her shoulders sag with relief as he walked ahead of her toward the beach. If he asked to see her after this

weekend, she didn't know how to answer. She'd been warring with herself ever since Whitney suggested it earlier.

When she'd opened herself up to the possibility of this being more than a weekend fling, an image of Aiden, dressed in a suit, walking away through double doors while Dakota stood crying on the other side popped into her head.

That was her answer.

What was happening between them wasn't supposed to continue past the weekend. Anything else was just setting herself up for heartache. Happily ever after wasn't her fate.

She didn't love it, but she'd accepted it.

They were having fun because there was an expiration date and no expectations.

She knew for the right woman, Aiden could be more than just the good time he said he was. But he needed to get out from under the cloud of hurt and anger that was hanging over him. And maybe that's why the Universe had brought them together. She was confident this weekend had helped him—his aura had already brightened in just the last twenty-four hours.

The orgasms probably helped.

They'd go their separate ways tomorrow and that would be that.

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*Aiden*

He finished helping Hope practice, stealing glances at Dakota the entire time.

When he'd attempted to bring up seeing her when they got back to Boston, he'd felt her body stiffen before he could even get the words out.

He was no Casanova, but he knew that couldn't be good.

Now, she sat in a beach chair talking to Whitney and Steven and occasionally smiling at Aiden like nothing was wrong.

Maybe he'd imagined it?

But he knew he hadn't.

Aiden debated until it got dark about whether to bring it up again. He was still no closer to an answer when the first of the fireworks burst into the air and she brought a blanket over and snuggled against him.

It felt like that's where she belonged.

He took a breath and opened his mouth to suggest a date the following Friday when he felt her hand stroke his cock over his board shorts.

While Aiden wasn't a ladies' man, he did know a thing or two about timing, and now was not the time to ask her out. Something he sensed was deliberate on her part.

It didn't take long before he was at full mast.

His fingers skimmed her belly as the colorful explosions lit up the night sky. Not taking his gaze away from the fireworks, he dipped his hand beneath her waistband to explore her folds.

“You’re wet, baby,” he growled in her ear as he pushed a finger inside her.

She gasped in perfect time with a pyrotechnic boom, and he proceeded to finger fuck her right there under the blanket while she reached under his drawstring to stroke his cock.

They were like two horny teenagers.

Glancing around, he realized that nobody else was even paying attention to them. They were all focused on their companions and the fireworks.

He circled her clit with his thumb and fucked her faster after she smeared his precum along the head of his dick and increased the tempo and pressure.

The logical, practical side of him said they should go to her room to finish this, but the lust-addled part said, “Fuck that.” He wanted to feel her quiver, right there on the sand, as much as he wanted his release.

When he felt her body tense, he covered her mouth with his to muffle her cries as she came undone just as the grand finale started. Although she fumbled her strokes through her orgasm, she regained her rhythm and had him spurting before the last explosion burst into the sky.

By the time people were cheering their approval of the show, the inside of his shorts was a cold, gooey mess.

“Come on, baby,” he murmured as he stood and reached for her hand. “Before anyone notices.”

They were in the shower before the others even realized they were gone.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Aiden*

The morning light peeked through the blinds far sooner than he would have preferred. Their time together was coming to an end.

They'd missed the sunrise, so he didn't see the point in waking Dakota. He wanted to relish the few hours they had left with her in his embrace.

"Good morning." Her melodic voice cut through the quiet of the dawn.

"Hey, beautiful. How'd you sleep?"

She snuggled in closer to his side and sighed with her eyes closed, a smile on her face. "Great. How about you?"

He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so soundly. Or felt so relaxed. It must have been the lack of worry about being called into work.

He knew that was bullshit, but that was his story, and he was sticking to it.

"Not bad." He glanced at his wrist. "The sleep score on my fitness tracker says eighty-three."

"That's good." A wicked smile crept across her face when she looked up at him. "Considering how much energy you exerted before falling asleep."

He returned the grin. "You wore me out, baby."

Aiden wasn't twenty-two anymore, but he'd held his own, going two more rounds before finally crashing for the

night. When she confided she'd had a hysterectomy, they agreed to forego condoms since they'd both been tested.

“Sorry not sorry.”

“Oh hell no. Never be sorry for being a fucking goddess.”

“You were pretty incredible yourself.”

That prompted him to continue the conversation he'd attempted to have yesterday.

“Can I take you to dinner on Friday, and breakfast on Saturday?”

He felt her tense again before she softly whispered, “Aiden... you said yourself this was just for the weekend.”

“What if I changed my mind?”

Her hair brushed his chest as she shook her head. “I don't think that's a good idea. The Universe—”

He couldn't help feeling wounded and cut her off as he sat up straight, causing her to do the same.

“Don't hand me some bullshit about my aura being the wrong color or our chakras not aligning or some other cosmic crap. Us both being here was serendipity. How can you, of all people, ignore that?”

“I'm not ignoring it. I'm just not sure I think it means what you think it means.”

He reached for her hands. “We had a great time this weekend.”

“We did, but—”

“Why does there have to be a *but*?”

Aiden didn't like the desperation in his voice. If she didn't want to see him again, he should leave it the fuck alone. Instead, he was practically begging her to see they were good together. He didn't beg, dammit.

He studied her face, and it dawned on him.

"You're scared."

"Scared? Of what?"

He shrugged. "You tell me."

She glanced down at their intertwined hands.

"You said you were a good time, not a long time—remember?"

*Fuck.*

He had said that.

"What would a date hurt?"

"Don't you think we're too different?"

"To go out to dinner?" He quickly added, "And breakfast? I think we've proven the last few days that we're quite compatible."

She narrowed her eyes at him but remained quiet.

The corner of his mouth hitched. "I'm pretty sure that's what the Universe wants."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Fine then. We'll let the Universe decide. If we run into each other again, I'll go on a date with you."

He nodded his head solemnly and borrowed a line from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. "We have an accord."

Oh, they were running into each other again. He'd move heaven and hell to make sure that happened.

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*Dakota*

It was with a heavy heart that she zipped up her suitcase and set it on the floor.

“I think that might have been the fastest weekend of my whole life.”

Aiden slipped an arm around her waist. “It doesn't have to end, you know.”

She briefly rested her head against his chest. “It's time to get back to reality.”

“This could be our reality.”

“We have an agreement—I mean an accord, remember?” she teased.

“How could I forget? And you're not going to back out when the Universe brings us back together?”

“Dr. Matthews,” she gasped theatrically as she drew away and looked up at him. “I am a woman of my word. How dare you impugn my honor like that.”

He pulled her back against his chest to whisper against her hair, “Oh, Sunshine, I did a lot of things to your honor this weekend.”

That made her laugh out loud.

Then he added, “And I’m looking forward to doing it again.”

She was, too.

*I can do casual* she reminded herself as closed her eyes, content in his arms. Should they cross paths again, that is.

In her heart, she knew it was only a matter of time before they did.

That was of little consolation to the ache in her chest when she whispered, “I should probably get going.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I should, too. I’m on call tonight.”

Pulling the telescopic handle on her suitcase, he took the bag from her and picked up his duffle and walked out of the room, then dropped them by the bench at the door.

“Let’s say goodbye to everyone.”

They found Whitney and Steven in the kitchen, along with a crying Yvette and a frazzled Hope who was trying to console her friend.

Dakota cocked her head in an unspoken question.

“James just left,” Hope explained.

Yvette wiped her eyes while she attempted to laugh. “I didn’t think it would be this hard to say goodbye.”

Dakota felt Aiden’s stare but refused to look at him; instead, she patted Yvette’s biceps. “You’ll be together again before you know it.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course. The Universe has your back.”

Dakota didn't know if she was offering that to Yvette, Aiden, or herself.

Maybe all three,

She didn't add, "If it's for your higher good," because that would be a shitty thing to say to the woman who was grieving the absence of her new love.

They thanked Steven and Whitney, then said their goodbyes to the group. Aiden walked her to her SUV and stowed her luggage in the back. As he pulled her into a final embrace, she felt the tears sting her eyes.

"I had the best weekend I've had in a really, really long time," he murmured against her hair.

"Me, too."

He pulled away and planted a soft kiss on her lips before opening her car door for her.

She got in, but before closing the door, he bent down to kiss her chastely one more time, then reluctantly pulled away.

"I'll see you soon, Sunshine." With a wink, he added, "The Universe has my back." He closed her door, tapped her hood, and walked away, just as her tears began to fall.

Crying all the way back to Boston, she reminded herself she was simply a conduit for him to open up for a relationship. It wouldn't be with her. As the tears continued to fall, she could only imagine how upset she'd be if they'd been in a relationship and broke up—which would be inevitable. And that was exactly why if they saw each other again, they'd just have to keep it casual.

No problem.

But even as she thought it, she knew it would definitely be a problem.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Dakota*

“We’re almost sold out,” Whitney’s voice echoed off the cabinets in Dakota’s kitchen. She had her friend on speaker phone as she peeled and prepped potatoes for dinner with Chloe, Todd, and Asher.

“That’s great news!”

“After word got out that Boston General bought a table, Ranier Pharma purchased one, and it just snowballed from there.”

Dakota laughed as she scraped the diced potatoes from the cutting board into the pot of boiling water on the stove. “Ah, the FOMO effect.”

“Who would have thought my bet with Steven would be the best thing to happen to the Animal Rescue Foundation’s gala.”

“The Universe works in mysterious ways, but it has your back. Remember that.”

“So you keep saying.”

Just as she was about to launch into a litany of ways proving it did exactly that, Chloe walked in the back door with a grocery bag in each hand.

“Chloe’s here!” she announced her daughter’s presence, then gestured to her phone on the counter. “I’m talking to Whitney.”

“Hi, Chloe!”



“Hi, Whitney! How’s your sexy doctor?”

“He’s great. Did your mom tell you about the sexy doctor she met last weekend?”

“There’s nothing to tell!” Dakota shot back quickly, but Chloe eyebrows were already to her hairline as she sat at the island and unpacked the bags.

“Really?” Whitney continued. “Because you two seemed to be enjoying each other’s company.”

She glanced at her daughter again, whose eyebrows were still raised, and now her arms were crossed.

With a sigh, Dakota decided to come clean.

“We had a great time. But nothing’s going to happen.”

“*Why not?*” Chloe and Whitney cried in unison.

“Because we’re too different. You saw how reserved and stand-offish he is. We have nothing in common.”

“All I know is every time I looked over, you two were talking nonstop and were each wearing a goofy grin.”

Chloe smiled brightly at hearing that.

Dakota tried to be dismissive.

“I talk nonstop with everyone.”

“From what I understand, Aiden doesn’t. And you don’t wear a goofy grin when you do.”

Her daughter was now dancing in her seat.

Dakota set the peeler down on the counter and moved back to the cutting board with the new batch of freshly peeled potatoes.

“We’re oil and water.”

“Didn’t look that way last weekend.”

“You deserve to be happy, Mom.”

“Yes, we had a nice weekend together, but that’s all it was.”

“But—”

Dakota talked over Whitney’s protest. “We decided to leave it up to the Universe.”

“Oh, no problem,” Chloe said as she moved to put the contents from her bags into the refrigerator. “I asked for him once, and the Universe delivered. I’ll just ask again.”

“That’s not how it works,” Dakota replied defensively.

Chloe closed the refrigerator door with a thud. “That’s *exactly* how it works, and you know it.”

“Okay, that’s normally true. But it’s not how it works for me.”

“Well, there’s obviously a reason you were brought together.”

“Yep,” she said with a smug smile, thinking back to the countless orgasms he’d given her. “And that reason was fulfilled and now we go our separate ways.”

“Steven said he’s a really good guy,” Whitney interjected. “Excellent doctor, great dad...”

*Don’t forget amazing lover.*

“So, what’s the problem?” Chloe asked.

She shook her head. “It’s just not going to work. I’ve already seen that if I continue with Aiden, he’s going to break my heart.”

“Maybe the ride would be worth it.”

She fixed her daughter with a stern stare. Chloe only grinned in return.

“You think you’re so smart.”

“No, I was just thinking—WWMS—What Would Mom Say?”

“Yeah,” came Whitney’s voice through the speaker. “That’s exactly something you’d say.”

“Well, like I said, it’s now up to the Universe. We’ll see what happens.”

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*Aiden*

Kailey and Brianna flew out the front door of his old house when they saw him pull in the driveway. He threw the Audi in park but left it running when he jumped out to swoop them both into his arms for a group hug.

“There’s my girls!”

Susan was standing by the garage with a soft smile, her arms wrapped around her middle as she watched the exchange between Aiden and his daughters.

“I missed you!” he exclaimed as he took a step back while holding on to their shoulders. “Did you have a good time?”

“We did,” Kailey said.

“And the car ride?”

“Wasn’t as bad as I thought,” Brianna supplied.

Susan came closer.

“Girls, go grab your bags, I need to talk to your dad.”

“Yeah, she has news,” Brianna said with a smirk.

Aiden cocked his head. “Oh yeah?”

“Yep,” Kailey replied brusquely before walking toward the house without another word. Brianna shrugged and followed after her sister.

He watched until they rounded the corner of the garage.

“What was that all about?”

“Bjorn asked me to marry him,” Susan blurted out.

He glanced at her left ring finger that was now sporting a sparkly piece of jewelry.

“And, I’m guessing by the diamond on your hand, you said yes.”

“I did,” she replied softly.

Aiden knew there’d be a day when his ex-wife would remarry. Granted, he never would have imagined it’d be with Bjorn, but he obviously didn’t know her as well as he’d once believed.

However, he always thought he'd feel jealous when he learned the news. Oddly, he felt... nothing.

“Congratulations. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, Aiden. That means a lot. Kailey isn’t taking it as well as I’d hoped.”

That didn’t surprise him. While both girls had adjusted to the divorce and splitting their time between their two parents, Kailey seemed to have had a harder time.

“I’ll talk to her.”

Susan’s shoulders visibly sagged. “Would you? I know she’s still mad at me for...” She didn’t finish her thought.

*Breaking up our family?*

He gave himself an internal shake. Maybe she’d done them all a favor. He hadn’t been able to see it that way before, but now...

His mind flashed to the beautiful, calm hippy chick with the smoking hot body.

Perhaps there was a reason for everything after all.

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“So, your mom and Bjorn are getting married,” he stated matter-of-factly when he pulled out of the neighborhood.

“I guess so,” his oldest mused as she stared out the passenger window.

“The way he asked was pretty romantic,” Brianna chimed in from the backseat.

Kailey turned to fix her little sister with a death glare. “Dad doesn’t need the details. I’m sure it’s painful enough without them.”

“Whoa. Hold on a second,” he interjected. “Is that what you think? Is that why you’re upset? Because you think my feelings are hurt?”

Tears filled her eyes as she nodded her head.

Aiden pulled into the nearest strip mall and took his seatbelt off after he put the car in park, then turned to face his oldest head on.

Grabbing both her hands, he soothed, “Oh, Kay Cat. Don’t. I’m happy for your mom. She and I weren’t good for each other. Bjorn is good for her.”

“She does smile a lot more than she used to,” Brianna added from the backseat.

“Exactly. She’s happy, and I’m glad. I couldn’t make her happy.”

“But what about you?” Kailey’s bottom lip trembled.

“What about me?”

“You’re all alone.”

Aiden reached across the console to pull her in for a hug. “Oh, sweetheart. I’m not alone. I’ve got my two girls and a job I love.”

“That’s not enough, Dad.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone,” Brianna chimed in.

He kissed Kailey’s forehead. “I’m going to be fine. I promise. Besides...” He tugged the seatbelt and clicked it in place with a smug smile. “Guess who was at the Cape this weekend.”

“Who?” Brianna demanded.

“Dakota,” he said as he pulled back onto the road.

“Shut the front door!”

“Did she have Barney with her?”

“That was kind of my reaction, too, when she walked onto the patio. And, no Barney.”

“I don’t understand. How did she end up at Dr. Ericson’s?”

“She’s friends with Steven’s girlfriend.”

“Wow. That’s a pretty weird coincidence, don’t you think? Were you nice to her?”

*Oh, I was very nice to her.*

He didn’t say it out loud, but his smile must have given him away because both girls squealed.

“That’s awesome, Dad. Are you going to see her again?” Brianna asked.

“I’d like to.”

Kailey narrowed her eyes at him.

“I thought you said you were too different? You deal with aortas and she deals with auras.”

“She said my aura was brighter when I was with you two, so I figured she was on to something.”

“My dad dating Dakota... I never would have imagined it.”

“Oh, I did,” Brianna interjected. “Remember how he just stood there in the parking lot at World’s End, staring at her like an idiot without saying anything?”

“I did not.”

Kailey took her sister’s side. “You kind of did.”

“Whatever. No, I didn’t.”

“So, when are you going out again?”

“This is the hippy shit I’m not a fan of. She”—he took his hands off the steering wheel to make air quotes—“*left it up to the Universe.*”

“What does that even mean?” his youngest inquired.

“I guess if we run into each other, she’ll take it as a sign we should have dinner.”

Brianna wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, I’m not a fan of that either.”

“I guess we better make sure you run into her again, then,” Kailey said with a conspiratorial grin.

“Way ahead of you, Kay Cat, but I like the way you think. Why do you think I said to bring your hiking boots? We’re going to World’s End this weekend.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Dakota*

She pulled into the parking lot of World's End.

The only reason she'd taken Barney there was because it was their favorite trail. That's it. There was no ulterior motive. If Aiden happened to be there, it would be a happy coincidence. But that's not why she was there.

Nope. Not at all.

It was early in the evening and the lot was full of people getting a walk in after work, so it took her a minute to scrutinize every vehicle. Disappointment washed over her when she didn't see Aiden's white Audi.

If he'd been there, that would have definitely been a sign she couldn't ignore.

But he wasn't, so that was that.

"Come on, Barney," she said in a far more chipper voice than she felt. Fortunately, her pit bull was too excited to hit the trails to notice.

As she and her pup hiked through nature, she found herself daydreaming about what dating Aiden might look like. What would Chloe think about him? How would he be with Asher?

His two daughters were in their prime teenage years. They might not like the idea of their dad seeing someone who wasn't their mom. So, maybe they'd only be together when he

didn't have them. That might make for some lonely holidays and weekends.

"It doesn't matter. I have my family and career and don't have time for that anyway."

Still, Dakota had to admit, they'd had a great time together over the Fourth. Spending another weekend with him wouldn't be terrible. Far from it. If the Universe wanted them together, it just meant there was unfinished business with getting Aiden ready for the next great love of his life.

*I could keep things casual*, she reminded herself for what felt like the umpteenth time. Then the devil on her shoulder whispered, *maybe*.

She shook her head, trying to release the thought from her brain. There was no maybe about it—that's all it could be.

Maybe the Universe wouldn't even bring them together again and she was worrying about nothing.

They got back to her Highlander, but instead of jumping in the SUV, she pulled Barney's water bowl and a bottle of water from her backpack. As she gave him another drink, she surveyed the parking lot again, but still no Audi.

Barney took a quick drink, then looked up at her like he was confused why they weren't leaving.

"Just didn't want you to be thirsty, boy," she said out loud when she reached down to pick up his dish.

*I've reached a point that I'm lying to my dog now?*

Maybe it was to herself.

“We’ll come back again, soon,” she promised as she opened up the passenger door to let him in, then walked to the driver’s side.

With one last look around, she got in and drove away.

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*Aiden*

“I think we should get ice cream after this,” Brianna declared as they hiked their favorite trail at World’s End.

“We need to eat lunch first.”

He wanted to be the fun dad, but he was too responsible for that.

“I’m sorry she wasn’t here,” Kailey murmured from behind him.

He turned to look at her with a smile.

“It’s okay. I’m getting some exercise and spending time with my favorite girls. It’s still a great morning.”

“Maybe she’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Maybe.”

Or maybe he should schedule that massage.

He knew she wouldn’t count that as the Universe’s sign because it wasn’t serendipity bringing them together, but it’d still be good to see her.

“Have you texted her?”

“No. I didn’t think she’d want to hear from me.”

Both girls looked at him like he had lobsters growing out of his ears.

“You didn’t even text to tell her you had a good time?”

“No. I was trying to be respectful!”

Kailey’s sigh was reminiscent of the sighs Susan used to give him. “Oh, Dad,” she patted his arm condescendingly. “It’s a good thing you’re handsome.”

“And rich,” his youngest added.

“I got the impression she didn’t care about that.”

“About what? The handsome part or the rich part?”

“Both. She’s got her own money, and I think she’s much more interested in my aura than my looks.”

Kailey turned to Brianna. “We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Brianna nodded wisely. “Maybe you could start by texting her.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to say.”

Kailey shrugged. “Ask her to dinner.”

“I already told you—”

Brianna interjected, “Tell her you had a good time with her at the Cape and that you miss her. When she responds, go from there.”

“*If* she responds...”

Kailey nodded toward the phone in his pocket. “Only one way to find out.”

“I’m not texting her right now in front of you!”

“Okay, but just make sure you do it after you drop us off. You’ve already waited too long.”

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Aiden sat in bed staring at his phone.

The girls were right—it’d been too long, almost a week. He couldn’t text her now.

Yet, he found himself opening the texting app and scrolling through his contacts until he came to hers. He’d put her in as Sunshine.

**Aiden: Hey. The girls and I went on a hike at World’s End this morning, and I thought about you. Was secretly hoping to run into you and Barney.**

The dots to show she was responding started and after what felt like an eternity...

**Sunshine: Hi! How funny. I was there this evening with him.**

He let out a groan. They’d debated about going in the evening, but the girls reasoned that since it’d been in the morning when they ran into her before, they should go after breakfast.

**Aiden: You can't hold the fact that I have two teenagers who needed to go to their mom's tonight against me. Being there on the same day should count for something.**

She just sent back a smiley face. He decided to press his luck.

**Aiden: The girls also scolded me for waiting so long to text you to tell you again that I had a great weekend. In my defense, I wasn't sure how my text would be received.**

The three dots started and stopped several times until his phone dinged.

**Sunshine: It's nice to hear from you.**

That was good, right?

**Aiden: How has your week been?**

*I haven't stopped thinking about you.*

He knew better than to add that, even though it was true.

**Sunshine: I've been busy, which is good. Keeps me from doing something I shouldn't.**

**Aiden: Like what?**

**Sunshine: Faking a heart attack or something. ☺**

His heart skipped a beat at her admission.

**Aiden: No need to do that. Say the word and I'll be at your door.**

**PS—that includes right now.**

**Sunshine: As tempting as that sounds... We have an 'accord'.**

He laughed out loud. She was never going to let him forget calling it that.

And he was perfectly fine with it.

**Aiden: I read somewhere that accords are meant to be modified. JS**

**Sunshine: JS? Lol Tell me you text with teenagers without telling me you text with teenagers.**

**Aiden: Full disclosure—I text with my girls A LOT, but I think I got that from Zach.**

**Sunshine: Well, he's as close to a teenager as a grown man can get, so that makes sense.**

There was a lull, and he didn't know what to say next—especially since she didn't take his 'accords are meant to be modified' bait. He wanted to keep their conversation going, but he also didn't want to come off as desperate.

**Aiden: Thanks for responding tonight.**

**Sunshine: Of course. Anytime. Who knows, maybe we'll run into each other on a hike someday. Just don't pepper spray my dog.**

**Aiden: I would never. Barney is obviously a perfect gentleman.**

**Sunshine: I seem to attract gentlemen.**

**Aiden: If you're talking about me, I'm flattered. But make no mistake, I want to do very ungentlemanly things with you.**

The dots started and stopped again, and he worried he'd gone too far.

His fears were confirmed when she simply responded,

**Sunshine: Goodnight, Aiden. I enjoyed chatting with you.**

Well, at least she didn't tell him to fuck off. He'd take it.

Now, whenever he wasn't at the hospital, he needed to stake out World's End like it was his second job. He was going to be in such great shape.

The girls were going to either love it or hate it.

Aiden suspected if it meant a possible love connection for him, they'd be on board.

Fuck serendipity. He was creating his own fate.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Aiden*

Spending his free time at World's End had sounded great in theory, but reality was a different story.

Work had been busier than ever. He went home to sleep and shower, and then he was back at the hospital, unless it was his night with the girls. And when Kailey and Brianna stayed with him, it was usually dusk by the time he was able to pick them up.

He ran into Hope in the hall of the hospital, and she spilled the beans that Whitney was pregnant. He didn't hesitate to head to the ER to congratulate Steven. The fact he was going to ask about Dakota didn't negate the good wishes he had for his friend.

Aiden found Steven in his office.

"I hear congratulations are in order, Big Daddy."

Steve looked up from his paperwork, grinning ear to ear.

"I still can't believe it. I'm going to be a fucking dad! I should be scared shitless, but I'm too damn excited."

"You're going to be great."

"I'm going to be coming to you for all kinds of advice—especially if it's a girl."

"I don't how much help I'll be, but I'll do my best. Susan was really the caregiver, especially when they were little."

Steve shook his head. "I don't believe that. I've seen you with your girls. They adore you."

“I’m lucky they do.”

“Have you thought about having any more?”

“More kids?”

“Yeah.”

“Hell no. I’m too old for that shit.”

“But what if you meet someone, and she wants kids with you?”

“The only woman I’m interested in already has a grandchild, so I’m not worried about that.”

Plus, she’d had a hysterectomy, but that was none of Steve’s business.

His friend’s grin was back.

“I knew you liked her.”

“Fuck yes, I like her. Too bad she won’t go on a date with me in Boston.”

“She won’t?”

“No. She’s leaving it up to the Universe or some shit. So, any chance you’re going to be having a baby shower or engagement party where I can ‘accidentally on purpose’ run into her again?”

Steven scratched his chin as he thought about it.

“No showers in the works yet, but she’s helping Whitney with the Animal Rescue Foundation fundraiser, so I’m assuming she’s going to be there. I bought a table and happen to have an open seat still available.”

“I don’t care when it is, I will pay any amount of money for that ticket.”

His friend laughed. “It’s next Friday and you don’t have to pay me anything. Just spend a lot at the silent auction. Whitney is in charge of that and if it goes well, that will make her happy.”

“Done.”

“I hope everything works out for you two. I think last weekend was the first time I’d seen you smile in forever.”

He had smiled a lot at the Cape, so much he’d found his cheeks hurt.

“Yeah, me too. We’ll see what happens next Friday.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*Dakota*

She was in her office, thinking far more about a heart doctor than she should, when her phone rang—startling her. The only people who actually called her anymore were telemarketers, her parents, and Asher—since he didn't know how to spell yet to text.

She glanced at the screen, and it wasn't a number she knew. But as she went to reject the call, something told her to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dakota?”

She didn't recognize the woman's voice, so she tentatively replied, “Yes?”

“Hi, my name is Gwen. I'm a friend of Whitney's.”

Dakota could tell by the woman's tone something was wrong, and a feeling of immense sadness for her friend washed over her. She understood the purpose of the call.

“Whitney lost the baby.”

“Yeah, she did,” her friend confirmed. “She's not doing very well, and she's stressing about the gala. It's only three days away—”

“Just tell me what you need.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*Dakota*

She was already rethinking the red high heels as she walked backstage where the shelter dogs were. Even as she got ready for the gala, she'd questioned if they were a good idea. But they matched her dress too perfectly to not wear them.

What she should have done was bring a pair of tennis shoes to put on when she'd helped Whitney's friend, Gwen, set up the silent auction items. Instead, she'd kicked them off, and they'd been hard to slip back on when it came time to mingle with the guests.

"I need a gentle dog," she told Xandra, one of the employees from ARF who actually got paid.

The twenty-something with a streak of blue in her hair glanced at the clipboard in her hand.

"You're in luck. We have you matched with Phoebe." The girl pointed to a blonde cocker spaniel in a crate a few feet away. "She's perfect on a leash."

"Thank you."

The pup's stubby tail wiggled furiously when she noticed Dakota unhook the leash from the wire crate and lean down to open the latch.

Like a polite, little lady, she sat perfectly still while Dakota hooked the lead to her collar, then trotted alongside her so there was slack in the nylon tether when they walked into the ballroom. It was a far cry from Barney's tugging with excitement whenever they went for a walk.

She thought about all the walks she'd taken the pit bull on that week at World's End, especially once she'd texted with Aiden, and he'd told her he'd been, too.

They'd never run into each other again.

And while she'd been disappointed, she thought maybe it was just the Universe's way of looking out for her.

She and Phoebe approached two men in tuxedos near the bar. One was a silver fox, and he smiled broadly when he looked down at her cocker spaniel companion.

"She looks just like the dog I had growing up," he said as he bent down and affectionately scratched Phoebe behind the ears.

"She's available for adoption."

"I work a hundred hours a week. I have no business owning a dog."

"I completely understand. Maybe you'd be interested in sponsoring her adoption then?" She handed him a tri-fold pamphlet.

He glanced down at the glossy brochure in his hand. "Maybe."

The other man smiled at her and an image of him and her sister popped in her head. Along with Phoebe.

*That's weird.*

Dakota knew from experience that sometimes she needed to give her visions time before they made sense. But she suspected Phoebe might have found her new owner.

She wished the men good luck on their silent auction bids and walked along the tables in the ballroom that were starting to fill with guests.

Approaching a table with familiar faces, her breath caught in her throat when she noticed a certain sexy doctor who'd rocked her world only a few shorts weeks ago.

In a fucking tuxedo.

*Not fair, Universe. Not fair.*

Dakota knew the second he noticed her—his face lit up with his perfect smile, and the grey around his aura gave way to a rainbow of red, green, orange and yellow. She loved that he was as happy to see her as she was him.

He stood when she approached, murmuring, “Well, well, look what the Universe has delivered.”

She felt the butterflies take flight in her stomach as he embraced her in a warm hug.

Closing her eyes briefly, she breathed in the scent of his sandalwood cologne and felt her body release tension she hadn't even realized she'd been holding.

Some massage therapist she was.

“You look stunning, Sunshine,” he whispered in her ear.

“Thank you. So do you.”

He ran his hand up and down her back, and she basked in the contentment she felt with his touch. Then he gave her a lingering kiss where her ear met her cheek, before reluctantly releasing her, but reached for her hand, as if he needed to keep touching her.

She knew the feeling.

“I’m assuming you have to work right now, but save me a dance later?”

She smiled softly at him and nodded. “Of course.”

He pulled her closer and held her hip when he growled in her ear. “Save them *all* for me.”

“Bossy much?”

He didn’t seem to be the least bit apologetic.

“Damn right.”

That should not make her toes curl—but it did.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said with a wink and a smirk, then turned to the rest of the table. Many of them had been at the Cape. Except instead of Yvette, James was with a woman who appeared to be about Chloe’s age. She was spilling out of her dress with her very large, very fake, very tan boobs. Meanwhile, Hope threw daggers at him with her glare.

“Everyone, this is Phoebe. She’s available for adoption.”

Dakota listed off the pup’s many attributes and the group listened politely, but no one seemed interested. They all cited they worked too much, or they already had pets at home.

“Well, you can always sponsor her or another dog.”

“Of course, we will,” Hope said. “Anything to support you and Whitney.”

“Thank you. I’m sure she’ll appreciate that, too.”

“Please tell her we’re thinking about her if you see her.”



Dakota wondered why Hope couldn't tell Whitney that herself, but opted not to ask, instead replied, "I will."

She turned and found Aiden staring at her. She gave him another wink, then headed to the next table. All through her spiel, she could feel his eyes on her, and she found that it made her feel warm and tingly.

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

Dakota in a bikini? A goddamn knockout.

Dakota in a red dress and heels with her hair pinned up while sparkling red and white jewelry circled her slender neck and dangled from her ears? Breathtaking.

What he'd most prefer, however, was Dakota naked underneath him. Maybe while wearing the heels and jewels.

Her in his arms as they moved around the dance floor was an acceptable alternative. For now.

"How've you been?" she asked as they swayed to the music.

*Lonely.*

*Missing you.*

He looked down at her pretty face and went with, "Work has been busier than I'd like, especially with the girls on summer break. How about you?"

“I’m probably not as busy as you, but business is good. I need to hire another therapist for the Beacon Hill location.”

“That’s great, Sunshine. I’ve thought about coming in to see you, since you said you’d take me as a client and all.”

“Do you get massages regularly?”

“Never have.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Oh, Aiden.”

“Don’t tell me, let me guess... it would help my aura.”

“Well, probably that too. But it would also help your physical well-being.”

“You know what else would help my physical well-being?”

The corner of her mouth turned up, like she knew what he was going to say.

“Waking up with you in my arms tomorrow.” Before she could argue, he added, “The Universe has spoken, and we had an accord.”

He fully expected to have to make his case, so he was shocked when she said, “We did, didn’t we?” then rested her head on his shoulder.

This seemed too easy, which immediately made him suspicious. Nothing with Susan had ever been easy unless she had an ulterior motive.

“You aren’t going to argue?”

“Of course not. We said we’d let the Universe decide, and it did.”

His heart skipped a beat. Was it really that simple with her?

Part of him felt like he should come clean that he knew she was going to be there and that's why he came. But he reasoned, she had to know they'd run into each other at things like this when she made that decree of letting the Universe decide.

“Can we leave right now?”

He was kidding, but if she said yes, he wouldn't hesitate to put her over his shoulder and carry her out of there.

Her giggle was music to his ears, even if her words were something of a wet blanket.

“I'm probably going to be pretty late. I took over some of Whitney's duties.”

“Say no more.”

He'd heard through the grapevine that Whitney had lost the baby. He'd been down to the ER a few times to see how Steven was doing but he hadn't been there. Evan Lacroix, of all people, had been covering his shifts.

Steve showed up tonight and had tried to keep a smile on his face—even with bags under his eyes and sunken cheeks, but it faltered every time he looked in Whitney's direction.

Aiden didn't realize the two had broken up until Steven excused himself to go look at the silent auction items, and Zach spilled the tea.

“I hope those two can work it out,” Zach had said wistfully as he watched their friend walk toward the silent

auction area. “They were perfect together.”

“I think they’ll figure it out, they just need time,” Hope said optimistically. “It was a devastating blow for both of them.”

“Yeah, but she shouldn’t have—”

Hope cut him off. “Maybe not. But everyone grieves differently.”

She directed a glare at Zach as she said it.

“But still...”

The conversation was bordering on gossip, something Aiden abhorred—having been the main topic of it himself two years ago.

He’d excused himself to go find the bar but, on the way, ran into Dakota, and she no longer had the dog. Not one to pass up on an opportunity, he grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the dance floor where six or seven other couples were dancing.

Any excuse to hold her in his arms.

Now she was telling him she’d be at the event late, after agreeing to go home with him.

“Maybe we should get together another night,” she suggested.

Oh, they would—in addition to tonight. He’d taken the weekend off, hoping for exactly this scenario.

“No, I don’t mind waiting for you. Anything I can do to help?”

“Just bid on some items. Whitney’s really worried the auction isn’t going to be successful because she wasn’t able to give it her full attention.”

“I can tell you right now, there’s no way Steve would allow that to happen.”

“I know. He’s a good man.”

“He is, indeed.”

Steven was a good dude. He’d been a friend throughout Aiden’s divorce—checking in on him, asking him—and his girls when the occasion was kid-appropriate—to parties and events, and just all-around being there if Aiden needed to talk.

He hoped Steve knew it was a two-way street. Aiden would have to make sure of it when he went back to their table.

“How’s Whitney doing?”

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to her yet, but I think she’ll come out okay. I worry about her though; under that tough exterior, she’s tender.” She twirled a lock of his hair around her finger. “Kind of like someone else I know.”

“I hope you’re not implying I’m a pussy.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Dr. Matthews.”

He spun her around, then pulled her tight against him to whisper in her ear. “But I am looking forward to *your* pussy sitting on my face later.”

Her sharp intake of breath was exactly the reaction he was hoping for.

Then, in typical Dakota fashion, she turned the tables on him.

“As I suck your cock?”

“Fuuuuuck,” he groaned under his breath as the visual of her doing just that hit his caveman brain and made all the blood in it go elsewhere. He had to remind himself that thousands of years of evolution made dragging her out of there by her hair socially unacceptable.

“You’re this close to me finding a supply closet and bending you over, Sunshine,” he warned.

She kissed his cheek with a wicked grin.

“As delightful as being fucked in a supply closet sounds, I’m afraid I need to get back to work after this song.”

He pulled her against his hips, so his erection was pressing against her stomach.

“Do you feel what you do to me?”

“Oh, sweet man. That’s just the tip of the iceberg of what I’m going to do to you later.”

He couldn’t disguise the smile as it crept along his face.

“You’re a vixen. Plain and simple. You have all these people fooled into thinking you’re some laid-back hippy chick, when really, you’re nothing but a temptress.”

“Well, I’m not a temptress with anyone but you.”

“Good. You need to keep it that way.”

“So bossy.”

“Sweetheart, we’ve already established that. You probably should just get used to it. Especially when we’re naked.”

She bit her bottom lip with a seductive smile, and he was expecting her to say something to put him in his place. Instead, she just kissed him on the cheek again and breathed, “Can’t wait,” as the song ended.

Neither could he.

He squeezed her hip and slowly released his hold on her.

“I’ll check back soon,” she promised and walked away.

He stood there like a love-sick fool and watched her go, admiring the slit of her dress revealing her thigh and the way the fabric molded over her gorgeous ass.

“Close your mouth,” he heard a deep voice say as someone clutched his shoulder.

He looked over to find Zach taking a pull from a fresh drink with a shit-eating grin.

“Your date too young to drink?” Aiden teased.

“No, smartass. She’s powdering her nose.”

“What happened with Zoe? You two seemed to hit it off at the Cape.”

“We did. I’m James’s wingman tonight.”

“I thought he and Yvette....?”

Zach shook his head. “Long story. You don’t want to know.”

No, he probably didn’t.

“So, you and Dakota...” Zach nodded in the direction she’d disappeared. “I’m happy for you, man. She seems to be the perfect amount of sunshine to your grumpiness.”

“I’m not *that* grumpy.”

“Dude, at the Cape was the first time in two years I’d seen you smile. You’d been walking around with a perma-sowl on your face ever since you left Susan.”

“So I’ve been told—on more than occasion.”

“The minute Dakota approached our table tonight, you lit up. You should keep her around. She’s good for you.”

He was working on it.

Still, he simply murmured, “We’ll see what happens.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*Dakota*

Aiden waited patiently at a table near the silent auction area with his jacket draped over a chair. Most of the partygoers had left and all that remained were volunteers and members of the ARF staff.

His bow tie was undone and the top two buttons on his shirt were open while his sleeves were cuffed to his elbows, revealing an expensive-looking watch. He was the poster boy for sexy as fuck.

“Are you sure I can’t help?”

“I have a system,” she replied. “No offense, but I think you helping would only slow me down at this point.”

Dakota walked to where he was seated and dropped a kiss on his forehead. “I’m almost done, I promise. Thank you for waiting. You didn’t have to.”

His hand snaked through the slit in her dress and up the back of her thigh as he looked up at her with a grin.

“You’re worth the wait, Sunshine.”

His touch set her lady parts on fire as she remembered all the dirty things he’d promised he was going to do to her. And having spent the weekend with him earlier that month, she knew he would deliver.

With one hand on his back between his shoulder blades, she traced the hair above his ear with the other, relishing the feel of his hand on her thigh.

Still, she admonished, “Behave, or we’ll never get out of here.”

“Fine,” he grouched and slowly withdrew his hand.

She instantly missed the warmth of his palm, but that only spurred her on to finish quickly so they could leave.

“Did Phoebe get adopted?” he asked as she finished inventorying the remaining items.

“She did! By Liam McDonald. I think he’s—”

“The CEO of Boston General,” Aiden supplied. “My boss.”

Dakota laughed. “I was going to say a good match for my sister, which is why I made arrangements she be the one to do a home inspection and deliver Phoebe.”

Aiden chuckled. “I didn’t realize you had matchmaker on your resume.”

“I don’t. I just kept getting they’re connected. I didn’t realize he was the hospital’s CEO.”

“Does that change things?”

She felt into the new knowledge for a second, then shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I keep seeing the two of them with Phoebe. Although, I kept seeing Whitney and Steven with a child, so I’m not sure I trust anything the spirit guides are showing me right now.”

“Did you just say, *spirit guides*?”

“Yep.”

She looked at him dead-on with a raised eyebrow and hand on her hip, as if challenging him to say something about it.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Do you have a comment about it?”

“Sunshine, I was married for over sixteen years. I learned a long time ago when to keep my mouth shut.”

She bristled at the reminder that he’d been married. Which was stupid. Of course, he’d been married. He had two teenage girls. Why should that make her jealous?

But there was no denying the pang of the green-eyed monster in the pit of her stomach. Maybe that’s why she didn’t let it drop. She was consciously or subconsciously trying to pick a fight.

“No, please, share with the class. What do you think about that?”

He got up from his chair and slowly approached her, like she was a wounded animal and he needed to be cautious. When he finally stood in front of her, he softly stroked her hip with his fingertips.

“I don’t understand spirit guides, or auras, or chakras, or any of that. I’m a guy who likes facts; things that can be proven, so it’s hard for me, but it’s obviously a part of who you are, so, I respect it.”

*Goddammit. Good answer.*

He continued, “Just like I hope you respect the way my mind works.”

“Of course, I respect you. I think you’re brilliant. And I understand my gift might be hard for you to comprehend because it’s not rooted in something you can scientifically prove. But I appreciate that you aren’t disregarding it simply because you don’t understand it.”

“I would never—”

Dakota cocked her head. “Mmm, you sure about that? I seem to recall you being pretty dismissive of me the first time we met.”

He laughed out loud. “That’s only because you insulted my aura, and even though I still have no idea that is, I was offended.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you. I just wanted to help you get out from under the dark cloud that seems to be following you.”

“You probably need to spend more time with me, then. Your sunshine will burn it away.”

“Hopefully we can clear away more of it tonight.”

That’s all she could afford to give him. She knew anything more would put her heart in jeopardy.

He shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m going to need the whole weekend, sweetheart.”

“I have plans tomorrow and Sunday.”

“Cancel them. It’s what the Universe wants. Why else would it have brought us back together?”

She narrowed her eyes and pointed a finger at him.

“You can’t keep citing the Cosmos as a reason to get what you want when you don’t even believe in it.”

He shrugged. “I believe in serendipity. It’s the only explanation for us continuing to run into each other.”

“Maybe in the beginning. But I think having friends in common is now the more realistic reason.”

“Doesn’t matter. A deal’s a deal.”

“But I never said—”

Aiden cut her off. “How about this. We spend the night together tonight, and we’ll wait to see if there’s a sign we should spend tomorrow night together, too. I think that’s reasonable.”

Dakota hesitated to answer, and he taunted, “You believe in signs, don’t you?”

Her brow furrowed deeper. “Why do I get the feeling you’re up to something?”

His eyes widened like she’d scandalized him. Holding up his middle three fingers and pressing his thumb against his pinky finger, he pledged, “Scout’s honor, I have nothing nefarious planned. I just know the Universe has my back.”

“You can’t—”

“Maybe you’re making me a believer, Sunshine.”

She snorted. “I doubt that.”

“Stranger things have happened...”

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*Aiden*

He figured since he'd never been a Boy Scout, he couldn't be struck down for invoking Scout's Honor when he said he had nothing dishonest planned.

Technically, he didn't—yet. But he planned on coming up with something to convince her to spend the weekend with him, he was just waiting for the right time.

A sign, if you will.

Hehe. The irony was not lost on him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*Dakota*

“So,” Aiden asked with a wicked grin as they approached her Highlander in the almost-deserted parking lot. “Your place or mine?”

She grinned in spite of herself at his cheesy line.

“Probably yours. But I need to run to my house to change and grab my toothbrush.”

“Why do you need to change? I wanna see you in those jewels and heels and nothing else.”

His blatant desire for her made her feel sexy. Still, she protested, “I need a toothbrush.”

“I have an extra toothbrush.”

“For all your overnight visitors?”

Dakota didn't know why the idea that he had other overnight visitors made her jealous. She imagined he made them all feel sexy and special.

“For the record, the only ‘visitors’ I've ever had in my home—overnight or otherwise—are Kailey and Brianna, and their friends on occasion. The girls used to forget to bring their toothbrushes a lot in the beginning, even though I told them to just leave one at my house, so I bought them in bulk.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling at his admission. Not about his daughters, but that he hadn't brought another woman to his house.

“I need something to wear in the morning. I’m not doing the walk of shame.”

“Walk of shame? Pffft. Try, stride of pride.”

That made her roll her eyes, even as she broke into a grin.

“Still, I don’t need my grandson seeing me come home tomorrow morning wearing tonight’s outfit. His little three-year old mind would have too many questions.”

“First of all, you’re not going home in the morning. But I respect you won’t want to wear an evening gown to breakfast, although I would be happy to make you pancakes while you wear nothing but my shirt.”

She pictured herself sitting around his kitchen in nothing but his tuxedo shirt, and it gave her a warm feeling in her stomach.

“I’ll follow you home and wait for you,” he continued.

“That’s not necessary. Just send me your address and I’ll —”

He cut her off. “Sunshine, I’m not letting you drive alone at night.”

Dakota felt her eyebrows shoot to her forehead. “*Letting me?*”

“You know what I mean. It’s not safe.”

“I’ve been driving alone at night for the last twenty-three years, Aiden.”

“That’s great. Fortunately, I’m with you tonight so you don’t have to.”



She could dig her heels in and insist she could drive alone, but his concern was sweet, so she relented.

“Fine. Get in, I’ll drive you to your car.”

He opened the driver’s door and waited for her to slide behind the wheel before closing it and going around to the passenger side.

“I’m at the back of the lot,” he motioned in the direction he wanted her to drive.

“No valet tonight?”

“I had valet, then you told me you were going to be late, so I had them move my car into the lot, so they weren’t waiting for me.”

It was those kinds of things that put her heart in danger. For all his alleged bluster—although she’d only seen it once, when they first met—he was a thoughtful dad and a considerate human being.

Not to mention an amazing lover.

*Keeping it casual*, she reminded herself for the hundredth time.

Which meant there would be no “sign from the Universe” suggesting they spend the entire weekend together.

Period.

End of story.

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*Aiden*

Dakota's Nantucket Cape house was far more traditional than he'd been expecting. And the separate guesthouse that was a mini-replica of the main house on the other side of her three-car garage, complete with matching gables, made it almost estate-worthy.

She pulled into the garage, and he parked behind her on the cement just outside so she could shut the garage door if she wanted to.

Getting out of her car, she motioned that she'd just be a minute, like he should wait in the car.

Yeah, like that was gonna happen.

He got out and took quick strides to close the distance between them to follow her inside.

"Oh!" she said in surprise when she found him behind her as she opened the door leading to the house, his hand on her hip.

He ran his thumb along her hipbone over the satiny material. "Do you mind me coming in? That way you won't feel like you have to rush. Unless you think Barney won't like it."

"Barney's staying at my daughter's tonight, and even if he was here, he loves company. But, no, I don't mind. I just didn't think you'd want to come in."

Miss a chance to see another facet of her? Not a chance.

"I'd love to see your place."

They walked down a hallway, and he caught sight of large laundry room on his left before they reached the main part of the house.

Aiden glanced around her modern kitchen. Her ivory-colored cabinets looked custom made, as did the island in the center that would easily seat eight people. The gleaming white quartz countertops matched the window casings and baseboards, which were a stark contrast to the moss-green walls. Not colors he would have picked, but they worked. Her space was stylish but inviting, and nothing like he'd envisioned—there wasn't a crystal or dreamcatcher in sight.

“This is beautiful, Sunshine.”

She tucked her hair that had fallen out of her updo behind her ear with a shy smile.

“Thanks. My realtor showed me it because of the guest house, but it was really the kitchen island that sold me.”

He could picture her at the stove with her family sitting around the island. An image of him and his girls seated alongside them popped in his head, making him give himself an internal shake.

*Whoa, buddy. Slow the fuck down.*

It was one thing to talk about Dakota with Kailey and Brianna, it'd be entirely different to have them spend time with her. Especially not along with her family.

He needed to get that shit out of his head—STAT. She was talking about spirit guides earlier, for fuck's sake.

“Let's see about this island.”

Aiden walked to where she stood next to the island, put his hands on her hips and lifted her onto its counter. The slit in the thigh of her dress made it easy to slip between her legs, and he found it was the perfect height for his cock to press against her pussy.

Pressing his forehead against hers, he traced the backs of his fingertips down her bare arm as he whispered, “Yeah, I’m sold, too.”

She giggled as she wrapped her hands around the back of his neck and moved her lips against his.

He tightened his grip on her waist and had just angled his face to deepen the kiss when he heard, “Hey, Mom, is everything—oh, shit! Sorry!”

They broke apart like two teenagers caught making out. In the doorway stood a younger version of Dakota, eyes wide. She was dressed in a mint-green baby Yoda nightgown that came to her mid-thigh and her hair was piled on top of her head.

“Hey, Chloe,” Dakota said as she awkwardly slipped off the counter while trying to sound casual, like she sat on her island everyday while in an evening dress. “Is everything all right?”

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I heard you pull in, but when I called, you didn’t answer, so I got a little worried.” The younger girl wrinkled her nose sheepishly. “I should have put two and two together when I saw the Audi in the driveway.”

Dakota ignored Chloe’s last comment, and instead made introductions.

“Chloe, this is Aiden. Aiden, my daughter, Chloe.”

Her daughter’s face lit up, and she stepped forward with her hand sticking out. “Oh, the sexy doctor! Nice to meet you.”

Aiden felt the corner of his mouth turn up, and he cast a sideways look at Dakota as he took Chloe’s hand. “Sexy doctor?”

“That’s how Whitney described you,” Dakota quickly replied.

He slowly nodded his head, then turned his attention to Chloe. “Nice to meet you, too.”

“Anyway, the reason I was calling... Todd and I decided not to go to the concert tomorrow. We’re going to take Asher to the beach instead, so you don’t need to watch him.”

“Oh, okay. Are you sure?”

Chloe’s gaze moved between Aiden and Dakota while looking like the cat that ate the canary as she backed up toward the door. “Positive. I’ll just get out of your hair. Carry on, pretend I wasn’t even here.”

And with that, she escaped out the kitchen door without another word.

“Well, Sunshine,” Aiden said as he turned to Dakota with a wicked grin. “If that isn’t a sign you’re supposed to spend the weekend with me, I don’t know what is.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*Dakota*

She'd just pulled her arms out of the evening gown when he sauntered into her walk-in closet and sat down on the beige fabric stool like he owned the place.

“You need any help?”

“No, I've got it,” she said as she shimmied the fabric past her hips.

Standing in just her red bra and matching panties, she bent over to pick the dress up where it had pooled at her feet and felt his hands wrap around her waist. The next thing she knew, she was sitting on his lap.

Instinctively, her arms wove around his neck as he pressed a chaste kiss against her lips.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he murmured against her mouth.”

“So are you. Handsome, I mean.”

He was still in his tuxedo pants and white shirt, but he'd lost the bow tie on the drive to her house.

“There's something I'm curious about,” she mused as she played with his hair.

“Oh? What's that?”

“Where did you learn to tie a bowtie? Is that something you go to YouTube for, or did they teach you that in school?”

Dakota felt the vibration of his chuckle against her side.

“When I first started wearing bow ties that were no longer clip-ons, my ex-wife would tie them for me. But Steven taught me how to do it myself one night when we were getting dressed in the hospital locker room for a fundraiser. Otherwise, I was prepared to use YouTube.” He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes when he looked at her. “Why?”

She shrugged. “Just curious. I didn’t know if you came from money and had been tying them since elementary school.”

He chuckled again. “No, I grew up as middle-class as they come. My mom was a secretary and my dad was a plumber, so there weren’t a lot of important events from my childhood that required more than a collared shirt and a pair of dress slacks. What about you?”

“Same. My parents owned a few drycleaners in town, so while I never wanted for anything, it rarely was the best quality. Which was probably a good thing I wasn’t used to that because after I had Chloe, *everything* I owned came from the thrift shop.”

His hold on her tightened, and he kissed her shoulder, then asked, “Your parents didn’t help you?”

“They took care of her when I was at school or work. But I wouldn’t take money from them, although they offered. Especially when they saw the dump I moved into. But I decided if I was going to have a baby, I needed to act like a grownup.”

“And Chloe’s dad?”

“Not in the picture.”

“So you did it all on your own,” he murmured, his lips still on her shoulder.

“Not all on my own. I really don’t know what I would have done without my family. My mom and siblings doted on Chloe, so I never had to worry about her safety or happiness. And my dad was her male role model; I’m so fortunate he taught her how a man should treat a woman. She married a good man.” She decided to be cheeky and tease him. “Plus, I had my spirit guides. So, I knew everything would work out in the end.”

That part was a lie. When she turned twelve, she’d tried to close that part of herself off. It made her different from everyone else and all she’d desperately wanted to do at that age was fit in.

When she got pregnant, Craig promised her that he’d be there for her and the baby. Almost from the start, she had a continuing vision of him abandoning them but chose to chalk it up to being afraid. And when he really did, she went into survival mode. She was too broken at that point to get anything from the Universe.

That was until she was working at her first job after finishing school and a woman came in for a massage. The minute Dakota touched her, she felt a jolt, and the woman—face still in the cradle—told her to stop denying her gift.

That’s all she said, but the entire hour working on the woman had been life changing. She opened herself back up to receiving from the Cosmos, and it was like her world went from black and white to color.



Aiden brought her back to the present when he nipped her shoulder with his teeth and dragged his hand up her belly to cup her boob.

“And what are the spirit guides telling you about me?”

*He’s the one.*

She heard it as clear as day in her head, then another vision of him walking away in a suit, leaving her crying popped in her mind.

*Mixed messages much, Universe?*

“They’re saying to keep it casual.”

He kissed her shoulders again while murmuring, “That’s good advice.”

She needed to remember that so they were on the same page.

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*Aiden*

He’d told her keeping it casual was a good idea, but that was fucking bullshit. All he wanted to do was consume her. And not just sexually—although that was on tonight’s agenda.

He wanted all of her—her time, her attention, her calming effect on him, her laughter, her moans. It was a strange feeling. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d felt like this before; not even with the frantic young love he’d had with Susan in the beginning.

It made no sense; he and Dakota couldn't be more opposite. But he'd taken a weekend off when he didn't have the girls just to spend time with her. Aiden was normally the one covering other people's shifts, not the one requesting them off. He'd been looking forward to tonight's event ever since he found out about it, even though he'd had to wear a tux. He'd chuckled when he decided to take the whole weekend off without even knowing if she'd be available, saying—only in his head, of course—that the Universe had his back; she'd be available.

And now she was.

He didn't know what kind of cosmic fuckery was at work, but she was in her underwear, on his lap, with her schedule suddenly cleared. There was no way he was going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Running his fingers up and down her spine, he murmured low in her ear, "You have two choices, Sunshine. Hurry up and get changed and pack a bag so we can go back to my place where I can have my way with you all weekend."

A side of her mouth hitched as she pulled away to look at him. "And what's my other choice?"

Aiden matched her smirk as he tugged her close again and let his hand slide between her thighs. "I eat your pussy while you sit on this bench, then you take your time getting changed and packing a bag so we can go back to my place where I can have my way with you all weekend."

"How about C?"

He stilled his hand that was now tracing where the fabric of her panties met her thighs. He should have been expecting she'd have another option. She always had a way of turning the tables on him.

“What’s C?”

She moved to straddle him, wrapping her arms around his neck as she looked him in the eye.

“What if I suck your cock on this bench while you finger my pussy?”

His semi sprang to life. This woman had his fucking number, no doubt about it, but he was determined to have the last word.

He moved her underwear to the side and ran a finger down her wet seam.

“How about D. You sit on my face so I can fuck you with my tongue while you suck my cock?”

Her quick intake of breath made him feel smug, but he anticipated she'd try to regain the upper hand. So, when she pressed her tits against him and breathed, “Yes. I like that option,” he wanted to beat his chest.

Instead, he lifted her when he stood, and she dutifully wrapped her legs around his middle as he carried her out of the closet. Pulling back the thick white and sea-foam green comforter on her perfectly made bed, he deposited her on the mattress. The distressed white furniture and green and blue color scheme gave the room a beach feel.

Again, not something he would have chosen, but he felt comfortable there, nonetheless.

“You know what I like most about your bed—other than you’re in it?” he asked as he unbuttoned his shirt.

She fell back on her elbows and watched him pull his shirt off. “No, what?”

“You don’t have a million goddamn throw pillows.”

That made her throw her head back laughing.

“I tried having them but found it was just one more thing in the morning and at night to deal with. And, since I don’t have visitors in my bedroom, I decided I didn’t want to go through the hassle every time I made or unmade my bed.”

Her admission she didn’t have visitors in her bedroom made him happier than it should. He liked that he was an exception.

He moved to lie next to her and she tutted.

“Lose the pants, Doc.”

Aiden loved that she wasn’t afraid to tell him what she wanted. She was perfect for him in so many ways, and yet... *auras versus aortas.*

She was right—they needed to keep it casual.

Starting Monday.

This weekend, he was going to enjoy every minute with her, just like he’d done at the Cape over the Fourth. And he was going to start with eating her delicious pussy.

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## *Dakota*

She lustfully watched as he shucked his pants and underwear. His thick cock jutted out on display as he crawled onto the bed next to her and pulled her into an embrace.

Being in his arms made her feel safe. Content. With a satisfied breath, she rested her head on his chest.

“That was an awfully big sigh,” he observed.

“Don’t worry—it was a good sigh.” Dakota lifted her head to look at him. “I was just thinking, I’m glad we ran into each other again.”

“You mean, you’re glad the Universe wants us together,” he replied with a smirk.

“Yes, for something casual.” She didn’t know if she was reminding him or herself.

He held her chin in place as he stared into her eyes. “Let’s enjoy the weekend together without worrying about timelines or labels, okay?” Then he nipped her lips with his.

She nodded her head and whispered, “I can do that.”

“Good.” He adjusted the pillow behind his head with one hand and patted her ass with the other. “Now get up here and sit on my face while you suck my cock.”

His demanding tone made her immediately want to comply, but her bratty nature just wouldn’t let her. Besides, she wanted to see what he’d do if she didn’t heed his command.

Instead, she laid her head on his stomach to examine his cock as she stroked it.

“Sunshine...” he warned.

She ignored him and kept stroking, murmuring, “You have a nice cock.”

“Thanks?” he responded as a question.

“It’s big, but not too big. And it’s nice and straight with the perfect girth.”

His chortle made her cheek vibrate against his stomach.

“I’m glad you approve. Now get up here and sit on my goddamn face before I turn you over my knee.”

Dakota had never been spanked before. The idea had merit. But at the same time, she wanted him to lick her pussy, so she finally moved to obey his demand.

He gripped her waist when she hovered above him and pulled her down onto him.

“Oh my god, I’m going to smother you,” she gasped and tried to move but he held her tight as his tongue began to explore her folds.

“What a way to go,” he murmured.

She let out a low moan, then dropped forward to grasp his cock and direct it to her mouth.

Running her tongue along the crown before taking him deep, she moaned again while his cock hit the back of her throat.

“Fuuuuuck, Sunshine.”

She loved having that effect on him. It made her feel powerful. And bold.

She took him deep again, then slurped off, leaving his shaft nice and slippery. As she stroked him, she pushed back against his face.

“Mmm, yes, just like that. Lick my pussy.”

*Who are you?*

The things that came out of her mouth when she was in bed with him surprised even her.

But there was something about Aiden that made her wanton, while still feeling safe.

It was such a dichotomy. One she hadn't experienced before. She'd had lovers over the years, but none who made her feel sexy *and* protected like Aiden did.

This could be a problem.

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*Aiden*

Holy fuck, Dakota Douglas's pussy might be his new favorite dessert.

He'd almost had himself convinced that he'd fabricated how good the sex had been at the Cape.

As she took him deep in her mouth and hummed around his cock, he realized—he hadn't.

“Your pussy tastes so good, baby. Your little clit is so hard.” He rubbed circles around her pearl to emphasize his words.

She pulled his cock from her lips and stroked it as she dropped her head and pushed back against his mouth.

“That’s because you know exactly how to touch it.”

His tongue lapped at her clit at the same time he slid a finger inside her. His ego loved it when she let out a long moan while her rhythm on his cock faltered.

“Oh my god, Aiden, yes! Just like that.”

“Are you going to come for me, Sunshine?”

Her whimpered response of, “Mm hmm,” spurred him to double down on his efforts.

“Come on my tongue, baby. Let me taste you.”

He felt her body flush, then she began to quiver as she called out his name while the flood of her nectar fell on his lips. The taste was fucking delicious. Like he said, his new favorite dessert.

His cock was still in her hand, but she was no longer stroking him as she lay in a heap on his torso catching her breath with her glistening pussy on full display.

He ran a finger along her seam. “I want to fuck you, baby.”

With her eyes still closed, a smile formed on her face, and she moved forward onto her hands and knees on the bed, wiggling her ass at him.

“Are we still okay not using a condom? I haven’t been with anyone since we were together.”

“I haven’t either.”



That was exactly what Aiden wanted to hear, and he wasted no time entering her heat swift and hard. They both moaned in unison as he filled her balls deep.

“Fuuuuck, you feel so good, Sunshine,” he groaned as he thrust in and out, his balls slapping her clit.

She dropped her forehead onto her arms, pushing her ass higher in the air. The temptation was too much, and he landed a loud *smack!* to her right cheek.

Her quick gasp followed by, “Mmm, yes,” spurred him to deliver five more blows in time with his thrusts.

“You like that, baby?”

“God, yes.”

He reached under her to rub her little knot.

“Can you come again for me?”

Rubbing her clit harder, he growled in her ear, “Come on my cock this time. I want to feel your cunt milk my dick as I fill you with my seed.”

“Oh. My. God. You are so filthy. I love it! Yes! Fill me with your cum!”

His beautiful hippy’s dirty side made him like her even more.

“I need you to come for me first, baby.”

He increased the pace and pressure on her clit and felt her body tense.

“Are you my dirty girl?”

“Yessss,” she hissed with her eyes closed.

“Say it. Say you’re my dirty girl.”

He moved his fingers faster and demanded again, “Say it!”

Her body erupted in spasms as she cried out, “I’m yooooour dirrrrrty girrrrrl.”

He couldn’t help but growl as he pounded into her pussy.

*Fuck yeah, you are.*

Seconds later, with her pussy gripping his dick tight, his spine went rigid, and he let out a roar as his orgasm tore through him.

He dropped his forehead on her back and planted kisses on her skin as he wrapped his arms around her middle.

“Holy shit,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” he said, his breathing still heavy. “My thoughts exactly.”

He flopped to the side and pulled her into him for a minute to catch his breath before retrieving a towel and cleaning her up. After he tossed the towel on the floor, he positioned himself next to her still-naked body.

*I could get used to this,* he thought as he held her close, relishing the feel of her bare skin on his.

She stifled a yawn as they lay there in the quiet.

Aiden stroked his fingertips up and down her back and asked, “Should we get going?”

“Maybe we could just sleep here tonight.”

Sleeping there meant it'd be easier for her to change her mind about spending the weekend with him. She could kick him out in the morning and be done with him, and that wasn't going to work.

“Why don't you just ride with me tonight?”

He felt her hair rub across his chest as she shook her head.

“I need to walk Barney in the morning.”

“Okay, baby. We'll sleep here tonight and bring him with us in the morning. There's a breakfast place by my house that has a dog-friendly patio. We could go there after we take him for a walk. Maybe we could even take him to World's End.”

That'd be a nice change of pace—actually going on a hike with her already there instead of trying to “innocently” run into her in the parking lot or on a trail.

“Okay,” she said without opening her eyes.

The next thing he knew, her breathing was steady, like she was fast asleep.

He kissed her hair and found himself nodding off, too. Happy and content to be lying next to her again.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*Dakota*

The vibrating on her wrist pulled her from her slumber, and she fumbled to shut off the alarm on her Fitbit.

*How is it morning already?*

Her wrist buzzed again, alerting her that she had a text from Chloe.

She glanced at Aiden and found him still sound asleep with his hand on her hip. She'd read her daughter's text in a minute. She wasn't about to miss the perfect opportunity to study his handsome face.

She spotted a small scar on his cheekbone that she'd never noticed before and had to fight the urge to run her finger along it. In his peaceful slumber, the lines around his eyes were relaxed, as was the one often furrowed between his eyebrows. He seemed at ease. It was a good look on him.

Dakota clicked on her Fitbit and was only able to read part of Chloe's text, but she got the gist of it. They were going to drop Barney off before they left for the beach. And Chloe noticed Aiden's car still in the driveway.

Should Dakota feel guilty about that? Dirty? Ashamed?

For more than two decades, she'd been careful about not letting a man spend the night when Chloe was around. And while Aiden had done some deliciously dirty things to her last night, she couldn't find it in her to feel bad about waking up with him. Even with her daughter and her family right next door.

What did that mean?

*Nothing. Other than your daughter is an adult and you're a grown woman with needs who shouldn't be ashamed of her sexuality.*

“Good morning, Sunshine.”

He had a soft smile when she looked over at him, and she couldn't help but return it.

“Good morning. Did you sleep okay?”

“Like a rock. I can't decide if I sleep better because you wear me out before, or because you soothe me.” He squeezed her hip as he kissed her hair. “Probably both.”

She liked the idea of being the one to soothe him.

*You need to get it together, girl. This is only for the weekend. Nothing more.*

Why did she get the feeling that would be easier said than done?

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*Aiden*

“I really don't mind driving myself,” she said while standing outside his car with an overnight bag in one hand and Barney's leash in the other. “That way I can just bring him home after our hike.”

“I already told you, Sunshine,” he said, closing the trunk after putting Barney's dog bed and dog dishes in it. “It's no

trouble. Barney will be fine with us.”

“But... your car is so nice. He’s going to get his hair all over it and will probably slobber on your windows.”

“That’s what car washes are for.

“And he’s going to get hair all over your house.”

“Good thing I have a cleaning lady.”

He wasn’t going to give her any reason to cut their time together this weekend short. That was why he’d insisted she bring Barney with her in the first place.

“Okay,” she said as she opened the rear passenger door and the pit bull jumped in. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He came round and opened her car door for her, tapping her nose before she got in. “I’ve been duly warned, and I’m not worried in the least, so you shouldn’t be either. Just relax, baby. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Something about her had been off ever since they were lying in bed that morning and heard her daughter announce from the kitchen, “I’m just dropping Barney off! He’s already been fed, so don’t fall for his tricks! Have a nice day! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

He reached for her hand once he put the car in drive. “Everything okay?”

Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes when she turned to him and said, “Yeah, why?”

“No reason, just making sure.”

By the time they drove into his neighborhood fifteen minutes later, she was back to herself.

“Wow, Aiden,” she said as she looked up at his red brick Colonial when they pulled into his driveway. “This is beautiful.”

“Thanks. It’s probably not something I would have picked if I’d had the luxury of time. But it was on the market when I moved out, and it’s close to my old house, so it’s what I went with. It works, for now.”

“For now?”

He shrugged. “If I ever get remarried, I’ll let my new wife decide if she wants to stay here or get something new. I’m not attached to it.”

Not like his old house. Aiden had loved that place—until Susan tainted it. After that, he didn’t care if he never set foot in it again.

“What if she has her own place and doesn’t want to leave?”

He couldn’t help but imagine she was talking about herself, and he found he liked the idea.

“I like your house, Sunshine. I could see myself living there.”

And, the funny thing was, he really could.

She let out a flustered, “I didn’t mean *me*.”

He winked at her to let her know he was teasing—kind of. “Well, I’m just sayin’—in case we ever need to decide where to live, it’s up to you.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a partnership.”

He thought about it as he opened his car door. By the time he'd come around to her side, she'd already gotten out and was opening the rear door.

“You’re right. We’ll have to discuss it first—make a list of pros and cons.”

Her response was an exasperated sigh, followed by a headshake and change of subject.

She gestured toward the door to his house. “I’ll just walk Barney while you change.”

“Nonsense,” he scoffed. “We’re going to take him on a *hike*, he doesn’t need a walk. Just come in, it won’t take me long.”

“Are you sure? About having him inside?”

“Sunshine, the two of you are staying here this weekend. I’m fucking positive.”

He reached for her hand and pulled her toward the steps to his house. “Come on in.”

He was letting a woman, and her dog, into his home—he hadn’t done that before. He couldn’t help but get the gnawing feeling, maybe he was letting her into his heart, too.

And while they didn’t make sense on paper, he liked how he felt when he was around her. That was enough, for now.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*Dakota*

Their hike was perfect. The right amount of talking mixed with pausing to admire nature and laugh at Barney's antics as he splashed in the water along the rocks, frantically trying to catch some creature scuttling or swimming about.

There was also the handholding. So. Much. Handholding.  
And stolen kisses.

He was the man of her dreams, why was she questioning this?

Maybe her visions were wrong. She'd seen Whitney and Steven with a baby only to have her friend miscarry. And Dakota found out last night they'd also broken up. Maybe she was losing her gift.

Then, as if he'd been reading her mind, out of the blue, he mused, "I wonder if Whitney and Steven made up."

"What do you mean?"

"She left the gala last night to go find him and try to work things out."

An image of them in an embrace popped in her head. Nope, she wasn't losing her gift.

"I think they did."

They found themselves back in the parking lot, and Aiden opened the back door to let Barney jump in, then opened her door.

He planted a kiss on her forehead before she slid in. The feeling of being cared for made her stomach dip. No man had ever handled her with such deference before. It was odd and thrilling at the same time.

“Hungry?” he asked when he got behind the wheel.

“Starving.”

“We’ll go to the place I mentioned and have breakfast on the patio with Barney.”

And he’d been such a great sport about welcoming Barney into his car and house.

If he was good with Asher, she was really in trouble.

But she didn’t have to worry about that since she was never going to introduce the two.

When Chloe had yelled from the kitchen earlier that morning, Dakota felt her body tense, worried her grandson would come crashing through her bedroom door and find his grandma in bed naked with a strange man.

Maybe she wasn’t as blasé about her family knowing she was with a man as she’d thought.

Aiden pulled into a parking lot next to a white building that had a neon sign touting they served breakfast all day. As they walked toward the entrance with Barney, he reached for her hand that wasn’t holding the leash.

“This doesn’t feel casual,” she admonished but didn’t pull away.

“Casual starts Monday. This weekend, I’m going to enjoy every minute with you.”

*Casual starts Monday.*

Okay, she could get on board with that.

They stopped outside the door, and he kissed her temple. “Wait here, I’ll go inside and see if they have anything available outside.”

Moments later, he appeared on the patio on the other side of a wrought iron gate. A younger woman carrying menus and silverware rolled in paper napkins waited patiently as he held the gate open for Dakota and Barney, then showed them to their table.

After handing them their menus, the hostess kneeled down and scratched Barney’s ears, to the pit bull’s delight. His furiously wagging tail banged against Dakota’s chair and got the women’s attention at the next table. When the hostess walked away, they asked if they could pet him.

Dakota released her hold on his lead and as he went over to get showered with more affection, Aiden laughed out loud.

“He is a lady killer.”

She shook her head as she watched her pup relishing the attention. “He’s shameless.”

She looked back at Aiden and found him staring at her with an affectionate smile.

“But, if it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t have met you at World’s End the first time.”

“But we met again at Steven’s house.”

“Only because the Universe wanted to bring us back together.”

She pursed her lips to keep from smiling at him. “You can’t talk like that when you don’t really believe it.”

“Who says I don’t believe it?”

Dakota shot him a look, and he broke out his panty-melting grin. “Like I said, maybe you’re making a believer out of me, Sunshine.”

The hostess returned and set a bowl of water for Barney down on the ground, then held up a dog biscuit.

“Is it okay if he has this?”

That got the dog’s attention, and he came back to their table, his tail thumping as he sat patiently waiting for the woman to cough up the snack.

“Sure.”

He accepted the treat like a perfect gentleman, then laid down at Dakota’s feet to eat it.

She opened the menu to peruse the selections.

“So, what’s good here?”

“Everything. I usually get one of their skilletts, but I know how much you like pancakes, and Kailey says theirs are the best.”

She was about to comment that it was sweet that he remembered she liked pancakes when a woman’s voice said, “Aiden?”

She looked up to see a pretty brunette standing at their table. She was probably late twenties, maybe early thirties, and her very perky boobs were on full display in the yellow sundress she was wearing. Her makeup and hair were flawless.

Dakota normally wasn't insecure, but she knew what she looked like in comparison, having just finished their hike. Her hair was in a high ponytail and there wasn't a drop of makeup on her face, which was good because if she had been wearing any, it would have been sweated off. Her t-shirt and shorts could almost be considered frumpy.

Aiden looked startled when he glanced up. "Hey..." There was a pause and Dakota could see his wheels turning. She knew the second the woman's name came to him because he nonchalantly leaned back in his seat before he finished. "Chelsea. How've you been?"

"Good." The woman touched his arm and pouted her perfect lips, not even sparing Dakota a second glance. "You never called."

He offered her what Dakota had come to recognize as a disingenuous smile. "Sorry about that. I've been busy."

Chelsea finally flicked a look Dakota's way. "Yeah, obviously."

He gave a quick shake of his head. "Where are my manners? This is my girlfriend, Dakota."

Chelsea's perfectly manicured hand went to her chest as she sputtered the same thing Dakota was thinking.

"Girlfriend?"

He glanced at Dakota. Her eyebrows were raised, but she remained silent, so he reached across the table for her hand and drew it toward his mouth. "Going on a month, now."

A mischievous grin crossed his lips as they brushed against her knuckles, as if daring Dakota to say something to

the contrary in front of this woman.

“Oh, well... congratulations.” Chelsea’s tone dripped disdain.

Aiden didn’t appear bothered in the least as he kept his eyes trained on Dakota. “Thanks. We’re really happy.”

Chelsea’s hand quivered slightly. Dakota almost felt sorry for her.

“That’s, uh, great. Well, I need to get back to my friends.” She gave a little wave before turning on her heel and walking away.

Dakota pulled her hand back and narrowed her eyes at him. “Girlfriend?”

“Oh, come on. You couldn’t take one for the team? Besides,” he grabbed her hand again. “Would that be so terrible?”

*No, it wouldn’t.*

The image of him in his suit leaving while she sat crying popped in her head, then she looked over to see Chelsea’s friends consoling her as she wiped away tears.

Nope, that wasn’t ever going to be her again. She’d learned her lesson about ignoring her visions.

She hastily withdrew her hand again and opened her menu, murmuring, “I think we both know the answer to that,” as she looked at the selections.

He folded his arms across his chest. “Enlighten me.”

“I have no desire to be left heartbroken like that poor girl.”

He glanced in the other woman's direction, who was still wiping her eyes. He turned back to Dakota with an incredulous look.

"You can't be serious. We went out *once*, like six months ago. I have no idea why she's acting like that."

"Well, you obviously left an impression."

"I never let her think I was anything but a good time—one time."

"Like when we met."

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

"Yes, I said that, but after spending the weekend with you at the Cape, I changed my mind."

"You changed your mind about casual?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out, as though he didn't know how to respond.

She flipped her menu to survey the back and decided to let him off the hook.

"For the record, we're on the same page. I don't want anything more than casual, either."

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

He didn't know what the fuck he wanted when it came to his hippy chick. He knew what he *should* want—casual, no strings attached—exactly what she was offering. But whenever he was in her presence, he found himself wanting more.

Imagining more.

It didn't matter though. She didn't want anything other than temporary, so he gave her his most-charming smile and replied, "Casual starts Monday, remember?"

The server arrived before she had a chance to respond.

"Do you know what you'd like?"

He lifted his brows to indicate she should go first.

"I'll have the farmer's omelet and whole wheat toast," she said sweetly as she handed the woman her menu.

"No pancakes?"

"No. I decided to try something new."

He didn't know if that was a warning or an invitation. Or if she just didn't feel like pancakes that morning.

But, in case it was an invitation, he said, "I'll have the same."



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*Dakota*

She was going to allow herself to have a good time with Aiden and not think about the love hangover she was sure to have come Monday.

The server asked if they needed anything else, and Aiden looked at Dakota. “Do you want dessert?”

That made her laugh out loud. “Dessert with breakfast? No, I’m good.”

He looked back at the server with a smile. “I guess we’re all set. Just the check.”

The woman promptly withdrew the bill from her apron, and he held out his hand to take it from her. Glancing down at the total, he withdrew a fifty-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it back to her.

“I’m all set.”

The server looked at the money and her eyes got wide. “Thanks!”

After she walked away, Dakota asked him, “How much did you tip her?”

“Twenty and some change.”

“You gave her a seventy percent tip?”

He shrugged. “My mom said you should always overtip your breakfast servers. They work just as hard, but the bill is always less than lunch or dinner. Besides, that twenty dollars means far more to her than it does me.”

Dakota stood up, muttering, “Old and salty, my ass.”

He gave her a wink as he pushed his chair in. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“Your secret’s safe with me, Doc.”

Barney got a few more head scratches as they walked out, and Aiden once again reached for her hand.

“Thank you for breakfast.”

“My pleasure.”

After she got her pit bull situated in his backseat, he opened her door for her. But before she could get, he leaned down to murmur in her ear, “And I’m definitely having your pussy for dessert when we get home.”

“Annnnd I’m instantly wet,” she replied as she sat in the passenger seat.

“Good,” he said with his trademark wicked grin before closing the door.

She noticed as he got in the driver’s side, she wasn’t the only one affected.

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*Aiden*

They’d gotten Barney’s bed situated in the family room and his water dish set up, then he put his hands on Dakota’s waist and jerked her against him. She let out a squeal, followed by a giggle.

It turned out, Barney didn't like that.

He leapt from his bed and wedged his nose between the two of them, pushing Aiden away from her.

"It's okay, Barney," she laughed, then patted the dog's head. "He's not going to hurt me."

Aiden reached for her again, slower this time. "Never, buddy, see?" He then made long strokes along her back, like he was petting her. His hand strayed to her ass, and he squeezed it gently.

"I guess I won't be smacking your ass in front of him," he murmured in her ear, like the dog could understand him if he heard him.

"That's probably a good idea."

"Let's go upstairs so I can violate you properly without worrying about Barney biting my dick off."

She laughed as she pulled from his embrace. "Lead the way."

\*\*\*\*

### *Dakota*

The first thing she noticed when she walked in his bedroom was how clean it was. His bed was perfectly made, and there wasn't a stray sock in sight.

Second, there was no doubt this was a man's bedroom. Every detail was masculine—the dark wood furniture, the grey and blue colors, the low lighting. Everything except...

“Are those throw pillows?”

Aiden chuckled as he closed the door behind him.

“My designer insisted. I throw them in the corner but when my housekeeper comes, she puts them back on the bed.”

“Ah, that’s why your room is so tidy.”

“Hey!” He scoffed. “I’m not a slob!”

“I know you’re not, but this is next-level clean. Especially for a man as busy as you are.”

He tilted his head. “How do you know I’m not a slob?”

“Well, aside from the fact I’ve ridden in your car and seen the downstairs of your house? You always make the bed. You did it at the Cape, and you did it again this morning at my house.”

“It was a rule growing up, so I guess it’s just ingrained.”

Dakota would like to meet the people who helped shape such a good man.

As soon as the thought entered her head, she chastised herself.

*What part of casual do you not understand, girl?*

He stepped closer with a wicked gleam in his eye. “But I’m much more interested in messing the bed up—starting with my head between your legs.”

“I should probably shower.”

“Didn’t you shower this morning?”

“Yeah, but we went on a hike...”

His hands slid up her shirt to fondle her boobs over her bra.

“So?”

“So, I got all sweaty.”

“Uh huh,” he murmured like he was no longer paying attention to what she had to say as he lifted the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

She protested again as he unbuttoned her shorts and tugged them down her hips, along with her panties.

“I’m dirty.”

He paused and grinned down at her. “Oh, I know, Sunshine. That’s one of the many things I love about you.”

“You know what I mean. I’m sure I smell.”

He dropped to his knees in front of her and traced the seam of her pussy with his index finger while leaning in and taking a deep breath. “You fucking smell divine.”

Dakota understood how pheromones worked. She was sure she’d find the smell and taste of him sexy right now, too. So, she let go of any insecurities she had when he lifted her thigh under his shoulder and swiped his tongue down her center.

“And you taste delicious.” The sight of him looking up at her from between her legs was hot, and his words even hotter. “I think I’m going to want dessert after every meal when I’m with you.”

He dove into her folds—licking her like she was his last meal.

She wove her fingers in his hair to steady her balance when she closed her eyes and let the sensations take over.

His middle finger pressed inside her, and he began to finger fuck her—leisurely at first. Then her moans grew louder and the grip on his hair tightened, and he increased the tempo of both his tongue and hand.

She felt a warmth start to creep over her body as her stomach tensed.

“Come for me, baby. Let me taste you.”

He rapidly flicked his tongue against her clit and jackhammered his finger into her until her climax consumed her and she cried out, “Oh my god! Yes! Yes!”

She shuddered from head to toe as he gripped her thighs tight to hold her steady. The euphoric feeling eventually gave way to one of contentment, and when she looked down to find him watching her with a reverent look on his face, she knew she was in trouble.

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*Aiden*

He lifted the hem of his shirt and wiped his face as he stood up, only to feel it be tugged over his head.

“My turn,” she whispered as she dropped to her knees in front of him.

She didn’t have to tell him twice; his cock was leaking after eating her pussy. He dutifully unbuttoned his shorts, and

she pulled them down his thighs followed by his boxer briefs; his cock bouncing as it was set free.

“Mmm, such a yummy cock,” she purred as she grasped it and stroked it mere inches from her mouth.

“Do you think it tastes good, baby?” he encouraged.

She licked her lips as she looked up at him. “Let’s find out.”

His sweet Sunshine was a goddamn porn star.

She confirmed that theory when she circled the tip with her tongue then plunged him deep in her throat.

“Oh fuuuuuck,” he shuddered, his hands instinctively searching for his bed as he leaned back.

When she pulled him from her mouth, his shaft was nice and slippery when she ran her hand up and down it.

“So good,” she cooed, then took his length in her mouth again. She stroked him from the base and met her mouth in the middle as she bobbed her head up and down in a perfect rhythm.

He brushed her hair from her face to get a better view.

“You are so fucking good at that, baby.”

Her lips around his cock was a sight he wanted to remember forever.

Then she pressed her tongue against the vein running down his length, and he felt the familiar tingling in his spine.

“Oh fuck, Sunshine. You’re going to make me come.”

Instead of pulling off him, she took him deeper.

*My little porn star.*

He gripped a handful of hair and used it as a handle to move her head at the pace he needed.

“I’m so fucking close, baby.”

She moaned around his shaft and gently squeezed his balls, and his stomach tightened.

He pulled away and stroked his cock, and she lifted her tits like an invitation.

“Fuuuck,” he roared as he spurted the first rope directly onto her left tit. After that, he saw stars as he emptied his balls blindly.

His first coherent thought before he opened his eyes was, *I hope I didn’t get any in her eye.*

When he finally looked, he found her chest covered in his cum, and a stray strand dripping from her chin.

“That is a fucking beautiful sight,” he observed. “Where’s my phone? I want a picture.”

She reached for his t-shirt that was a foot away and chastised, “You are not taking a picture of me like this.”

“Why not?” he teased. “I would never show anyone else. It’d just be for me.”

“Famous last words,” she said as she swiped at her chest and face. “Not. Happenin’.”

“How about just your tits? I promise not to include your face.”

“What? Aiden! No!”



“Aw, you’re no fun.”

“On the contrary. I think I just proved that I’m plenty of fun.”

He gripped her chin as he leaned down to kiss her lips.

“Touché, Sunshine. Touché.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

*Dakota*

They laid on his couch watching Netflix for the rest of the afternoon, alternating who got to choose what they watched next.

When it came to her turn, she scrolled down to the “since you watched, you might like...” portion.

She turned to him with a raised eyebrow. “*Gilmore Girls?*”

He wasn’t even the least bit embarrassed.

“I watch it with Kailey and Brianna when they’re here.”

She studied him for a minute before leaning over and kissing his cheek.

He smiled as he touched the spot she’d just kissed. “What was that for?”

“You’re a good dad. You’re the kind of man I would have wanted for Chloe’s dad.”

“That’s pretty high praise, Sunshine.”

“I’ve seen you with your daughters. I think it’s warranted.”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret...” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “I was a shitty dad when I was married.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe.”

“I mean, I wasn’t an asshole or anything like that. I just wasn’t around a lot, and even when I was, I wasn’t really

present. The divorce was a gift, in terms of my relationship with my girls.”

It was a good thing she’d had a hysterectomy because her ovaries wouldn’t have stood a fucking chance with that admission.

“I wasn’t the best mom, either. I mean, I tried. But, between work and school, I didn’t get to see a lot of Chloe’s early years.” She shrugged. “As parents, we just do the best we can. I don’t think she’s worse off because of the time she spent with my parents instead of me, and I don’t think your girls are either for the time they spent with their mom. And once we knew better, we did better.”

“Or, in your case, once you were financially able to.”

“Yeah, that too. But I was just a kid when I had her. I had no idea what I was doing.”

“Well, I wasn’t a kid when Kailey was born, but I still had no idea what I was doing. Hell, I still don’t.”

“You’re better than you think.”

“How’s my aura today?” he asked with a grin.

She leaned back to study him for a moment.

“It’s a very vibrant red and green.”

There were no blacks or grey anywhere, which made her happy.

The red made sense, considering how much sex they’d had in the last eighteen hours.

“Red and green? What am I—a walking Christmas card?”

“No, red symbolizes passion—a zest for life.”

“And green?”

“Green—” she paused. “Green means you have a kind heart.”

Or, it could also mean he was in love with someone who balanced him out.

Oh, this was bad.

*Casual starts Monday*, she reminded herself.

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*Aiden*

“What do you want to do for dinner?” he asked when she walked back in the family room after feeding Barney. “We can get takeout or I can cook something. Or we could go out.”

“I’m good with anything. What do you want to do?”

“Let’s go out.”

“Okay, but I didn’t bring anything other than jeans.”

“No problem. We’ll go to my favorite pub, if that’s okay? They have great burgers and they’re supposed to have a band tonight.”

“That sounds fun.”

As they got ready, it struck him that A) he couldn’t remember the last time he went on a real date and not just met up with a woman as part of the vetting process to fuck her, and

B) how easy the domesticity of them getting ready in the same bathroom was.

He leaned against the doorjamb of his room and watched her slip on a pair of strappy heels. Her ass was banging in the dark jeans she had on, and the peak-a-boo cleavage of her pink blouse was going to drive him crazy all night. Her freshly applied makeup and styled hair made her look beautiful in an entirely different way than how beautiful she'd been earlier without it.

“Damn, you’re sexy, Sunshine.”

She finished fastening the strap of her shoe and stood up with a bright smile.

“You’re not too bad yourself, Doc.”

They let Barney out one more time, then headed to the pub. Fortunately, it was early enough that the band hadn’t started so there was still plenty of parking.

They walked inside holding hands, and he didn’t let go until the hostess seated them in a corner booth. The stage was on the other side of the room, which meant they might actually be able to have a conversation when the band started if they weren’t on the dance floor.

“We’re a little short-staffed right now,” the hostess said. “But you can order food here,” she pointed to a freestanding tablet-looking device on the table, “and they’ll deliver it from the kitchen. You can also order drinks, but I’ll be honest, it’s usually a lot faster if you just go to the bar for those.”

“Thanks, good to know.”

Aiden flung his arm around Dakota's shoulder when she brought the tablet closer and studied it with her for less than ten seconds. He already knew what he was getting.

"I'm going to grab us a drink. Do you know what you'd like?"

She thought about it for a second.

"I haven't had a margarita in a while. That sounds good."

"Blended or on the rocks?"

"On the rocks is fine. With salt."

"Margarita on the rocks with salt, coming right up," he said as he slid out of the booth.

While he stood at the bar waiting for the bartender to take his order, he watched the Red Sox game on one of the many TVs the pub had broadcasting it.

Suddenly, he felt an arm around his waist, and he turned to pull Dakota into an embrace.

"Did you change your mind?"

Just as he was about to plant a kiss on her hair, he realized neither the arm around his waist nor the boobs pressed against him were his hippy chick's.

*Goddammit, not again.*

"No, I didn't, but it seems you did," the woman said with a smirk.

"Oh, hey, Jenna," he said as he extricated himself from her hold.

This time there was no hesitation remembering her name—not like he'd had with Chelsea that morning. He'd dated Jenna for almost a month before he stopped returning her calls. And what he meant by "dated" was fucked. They had nothing to talk about once their clothes were on, so they didn't spend a lot of time together when they weren't naked.

She'd been a decent lay—hence the reason he hung around for a month. But when it became obvious that she wanted more than just a hookup, he bailed. There'd been no point wasting her time; he hadn't been interested in anything more.

"How've you been? Still busy at the hospital?"

That had been the excuse he'd given her about why he couldn't see her anymore.

"Busy as ever."

"Not too busy, it seems."

She pointedly looked to where Dakota was sitting. He noticed she'd been watching them, but when they looked over, she quickly pretended to be studying the menu.

"No," he chuckled. "I guess not."

"Is it serious?"

He took another glance at his raven-haired beauty. "Yeah, I think it could be."

There was no point pretending Dakota wasn't special to him. He'd made time to be with her when he wouldn't have even considered doing the same for any other woman except his daughters.

Jenna studied Dakota for a second before she remarked, “Not the type I would have pegged you for.”

“Really? You don’t think beautiful and brilliant is my type?”

She ran a hand along her body and scoffed, “Obviously not.”

This would have normally been where he put her in her place and not given a fuck about hurting her feelings, but he decided to take the high road. He didn’t need that negativity in his life.

And if that wasn’t proof that Dakota was rubbing off on him, then he didn’t know what was.

“Whoever ends up with you is going to be a lucky man, Jenna,” he said dismissively and nodded to the bartender when they made eye contact, then went back to watching the game.

He should have known Jenna wouldn’t take the hint and leave.

“I wish I could say the same about you, Aiden. Someone should probably warn that poor woman.”

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling like he did when he was praying for patience with Kailey or Bri. Finally, he gestured toward their table. “Go ahead, she’s right there.”

“Maybe I will.”

He shrugged. “I can’t stop you,” then turned to give his drink order to the bartender. When he turned back around, he saw Jenna marching toward Dakota.

*Oh, for fuck’s sake.*



He really wasn't expecting her to call his bluff.

While Aiden didn't give a shit what Jenna was going to say to Dakota, he wasn't going to subject her to the drama of his past hookup.

"I'll be right back," he told the bartender and headed toward his table.

"Really?" Dakota was asking Jenna as he approached. "What makes you say that?"

"He'll make you think he cares about you only to disappear a month later."

Jenna saw him standing at the table and flashed him a 'Take that!' smirk.

"Well, thank you for the warning. I will definitely take it under advisement."

Jenna nodded. "Of course. Us women need to stick together."

"Absolutely."

With a toss of her hair, Jenna walked away.

He knew his expression was pleading when he looked back at Dakota.

"I swear I never once gave her the impression we were doing anything but hooking up. The minute I realized she wanted more, I tried to let her down easy."

"I know."

Aiden jerked his head back. "You do?"

“Her “warning” might have been more believable had she not tried to wrap herself around you at the bar.”

He sat down and cautiously moved closer. “So, you’re not mad?”

“About that? No. Although I don’t think I’ll be going out to eat with you again—who knows who else we might run into. You seem to have quite the list of conquests. Good thing casual starts Monday.”

He opened his mouth to defend himself when he heard, “Aiden!”

*What the actual fuck?*

How could he go out for months and not run into a single person he knew, yet today, they were coming out of the woodwork.

Fortunately, the voice this time was male, and he noticed Francisco Valencia, one of the orthopedic doctors from Boston General, walk toward them.

“Aiden! I thought that was you. Good to see you, man.”

Francisco glanced at Dakota, then did a double take.

“Dakota?”

“Pancho!” she exclaimed and scooted out of the booth to give him a big hug.

Francisco kissed her cheek as he returned the hug.

Of course, they’d run into an old lover of hers too, because, why wouldn’t they?

The karma gods were out in full force today—if he believed in such a thing.

Aiden gritted his teeth as he watched her keep her hand on his arm, all the while beaming up at him. “It’s so good to see you! How have you been?”

“I’ve been good. I keep meaning to call you, but I’ve been so busy.”

That’s exactly what Aiden had told Jenna a few months ago. But, unlike Jenna, Dakota didn’t seem fazed by it. And unlike Aiden, Francisco seemed genuinely remorseful.

“Do you still have my number?”

Aiden felt his spine stiffen.

“I do. I’ll call you soon, okay?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

*Over my dead body.*

The man looked at Aiden as if just then remembering he was even there.

“Are you two here together?”

Aiden offered a condescending smile. “We are.”

“Like, on a date?”

Instead of retorting what he was thinking, which was—*No, fucker I meet patients in bars these days. What kind of dumbass question is that?* he scoffed, “Yeah.”

Francisco’s jaw moved to the side while his tongue slid between his molars as he grunted, “Huh.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes. “You seem surprised.”

But not necessarily jealous, which Aiden found strange, given how tightly wound he was himself.

“I just never would have put the two of you together is all.”

Aiden leaned back and crossed his arms. “Oh? And why is that?”

*Because you're more her type? Too bad, buddy. She's here with me tonight.*

Francisco finally seemed to clue in that he was pissing Aiden off and threw up his hands in front of him in an “I’m harmless” gesture.

“Just not a match I would have envisioned. You seem to be polar opposites.”

“Well, you know what they say, opposites attract.”

“Hey, I think it’s great.”

Okay, he was obviously missing something if Francisco thought it was great Aiden and Dakota were dating. So, they probably weren’t lovers, which calmed some of his ire, but not all of it.

He didn’t know why he was pissed that people kept pointing out how opposite they were when that’d been an argument he’d been making with himself. But he didn’t like other people noticing or commenting on it.

Dakota seemed to be watching the exchange with interest but hadn’t said anything.

Francisco hugged her around the shoulders and said, “I’ll call you—I promise.”

“Hey, it’s only you who’s suffering if you don’t.”

Ah, so Francisco was probably a client of hers.

He waved at Aiden. “I’ll see you around the hospital.”

“Have a good night.”

Dakota sat back in the booth just as a waitress delivered their drinks.

“Oh, thanks. I was just on my way to grab them.”

“No problem. I’m Joyce, I’ll be the one taking care of you from now on. Just let me know if you need anything else.”

“Will do.” He turned to Dakota and raised his glass. “Cheers,” then waited until they’d both taken a drink then tried to sound nonchalant when he asked, “So, how long have you known Francisco? What did you call him? Pancho?”

She took another drink before answering. “Five years, maybe? And yes, his nickname is Pancho.”

“I didn’t know that. Is he a client?”

“Oh, no. We’re friends with benefits.”

Aiden had started to take another sip of his whiskey and choked, putting his glass back on the table while he coughed.

After gulping down some water, he asked, “Really? I, uh, didn’t realize.”

So, his first instinct was right. Now he wanted to go punch the dude in the face.

“No, not really, asshole! But it doesn’t feel good, does it?”

Her feelings were hurt, and he hated he'd been the cause of that.

"I know! I'm sorry! What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know... not be such a man whore?"

As much as he'd like to argue that he wasn't a man whore, that assessment wasn't exactly wrong.

"You're right. After my divorce, I may have gone a little overboard with the hookups."

"Do I need to get tested?"

"What? No! I always used a condom. And I told you, I was tested at my last physical and haven't been with anyone but you since."

That seemed to surprise her because she pulled her head back and asked, "Really?"

"Yeah—we talked about this. It's only been a few weeks since we were together, Sunshine." Then a thought occurred to him. "Have you really not been with anyone else?"

"No, I haven't."

He liked that answer, until she added, "I haven't had time."

She drained her glass and motioned for another when Joyce walked by, then turned to him with a sigh.

"Look, I know you're a single guy and have every right to screw as many women as you want. I'd just prefer not to have it thrown in my face when I'm out with you, that's all. But I also understand there's nothing you can do about it, so

how about we forget we ran into Chelsea and Jenna and just try to have fun tonight? Casual starts Monday.”

Why did this feel like a trap? Was she really going to let it go that easily?

“I can get on board with that.”

“Good, now let’s order. I’m dying to try these cheeseburgers you’ve been talking about.”

*Definitely a trap.*

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*Dakota*

Of course, Aiden dated other women. He was single, why shouldn’t he? And starting Monday, he was free to again without her having an opinion about it.

*I’m free to date whoever I want too,* she reminded herself.

Still, it didn’t mean she had to like it when women he’d been with threw themselves at him in front of her.

But they’d agreed they were together this weekend, and she was going to enjoy it.

The server put their dinners down in front of them.

“I’m glad I ordered the same thing as you, otherwise I might have dinner envy. This looks amazing.”

He picked up his burger using two hands. “Wait ‘til you taste it.”

She took a bite and closed her eyes, moaning, “So good,” with her mouth full.

Opening her eyes, she found him watching her with a goofy smile, and she immediately wiped her mouth with her napkin.

“What? Do I have food on my face?”

He shook his head. “No, nothing like that. I just like how you’re not afraid to show when you enjoy something.”

She thought about it for a second as she swallowed another bite. “I suppose I do. But I don’t see the point in trying to hide joy.”

He shook his head with a smile. “Sunshine and rainbows...”

“And don’t you forget it.”

“I couldn’t if I tried, Sunshine.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*Aiden*

The band began setting up as they ate their burgers, and started to play about the time she'd finished her third margarita.

The second song into their set was AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long," and the dance floor filled.

"Come on, Doc, let's dance."

She scooted out of the booth and hitched her finger in a "come here," motion at him.

He wasn't much of a fast dancer, but he sure as hell wasn't going to turn her down.

They ended up dancing to the next five songs straight. Her laughter and exuberance were contagious, and he found himself laughing along with her as he twirled her around.

Even during a fast song, he needed to touch her somehow.

She only let him rest long enough to gulp down some water and finish his whiskey before the intro to Def Leppard's "Pour Some Sugar on Me" started up and she headed back out onto the floor, and he quickly followed.

He couldn't remember when he'd had a better time.

The song ended and the band slowed things down with Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love." As he held her in his arms while they moved along the dance floor, he couldn't think of a more appropriate song for how he was

feeling that night, and he found himself hoping Monday never came.

*Fuck casual.*

They stayed until the band played their last song, then they plopped back into their booth laughing.

The cold water tasted good against his throat, and he was grateful that Joyce had topped their glasses off while they were on the dance floor. It probably helped that he'd tipped her well.

"They were so good!" Dakota exclaimed. "Do they play here often?"

"I think they're here every Saturday."

"We should come back again sometime."

His ears perked up at the idea of coming here again with her. "Yeah. I'll see what my schedule looks like next weekend."

"Oh..." she hemmed. "I, uh, I didn't mean we had to *next* weekend. Just sometime in the future. You know, someday."

He'd heard somewhere that someday was just another word for never.

Fuck. That.

"How about I look at my schedule, and if I have it off, that's a sign from the Universe saying we should come."

She gave him a patient smile. "Well, first of all, even if *you're* free, it doesn't necessarily mean *I* will be."

Shit, he hadn't considered that.

“Sorry. I know, that was presumptuous of me.”

“Besides,” she continued, “shouldn’t you be with your daughters the next weekend you’re off?”

“There’s nothing that says I can’t be with my girls during the day and take you out dancing at night.”

“Let’s just play it by ear.”

She might as well have said, “We’ll see,” like his mother would when she didn’t want to tell him no but had no intention of saying yes.

*She only wants casual*, he reminded himself.

But he still had tonight and tomorrow with her. Thirty more hours, and he wasn’t planning on wasting a minute.

“Come on, Sunshine,” he said as slid out of the booth and extended his hand. “I need to get you naked.”

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*

*I need to get you naked.*

His blatant desire for her was such a turn on.

Although, knowing she wasn’t the only one he made feel special helped keep things in perspective. She knew she was just part of a long list of Aiden Matthews’s conquests. Hopefully, he was getting out from under his dark cloud and would allow himself a relationship with someone someday.

He deserved to be happy.

She had been glad to learn Whitney and Steven made up. It confirmed her visions were not wrong, and she was right to not get too attached to him.

Because as good a time as she'd had so far this weekend, that could've been a real possibility. Getting blindsided would have been devastating.

But they still had tonight, and Dakota couldn't think of a better way to end their fun evening than getting naked.

She took his offered hand, and they walked to his car. With the click of his fob, the lights flashed as the door unlocked, but instead of opening her door for her, he leaned down and gently kissed her lips.

It was so sweet and tender that she let out a small whimper. Feeling the need to be closer to him, she wrapped her arms around his back and pulled him to her. One of his hands splayed across her ass while the other wove into her hair, and the tender kiss quickly became a lot more passionate.

Their tongues tangled as his grip on her hair tightened, and she could feel his cock harden against her stomach.

The sound of a horn honking as a car drove by and someone yelling, "Get a room!" brought them back to reality.

He chuckled as he dropped his forehead against hers.

"I guess we should finish this at home."

*Home.*

Not, "my house," but "home," like it was a place they shared.

She guessed that was what they were doing for the night.

“Probably,” she whispered with a shy smile.

He opened her car door and waited until she was situated before closing it and going around to the driver’s side.

Instead of starting the car, though, he leaned over the console and kissed her. Once again, their kisses heated up, and she thought he was going to pull her onto his lap. Instead, he broke the kiss with a groan and pushed the button that started the engine.

“Put your seatbelt on, Sunshine; I’m about to break a few laws.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

*Aiden*

He got them back to his house in one piece and closed the garage door before even exiting the car.

He hustled to go around to open her door for her, but she got out before he had a chance to, and they met at the hood of his car.

The lust was evident in her eyes as they stared at each other for a beat. Then he grabbed her face hungrily in both hands and captured her lips with his in a frantic kiss.

Her arms wove around his neck, and his hands slid down her neck to knead her tits. She reached to undo his belt, then unbuttoned his jeans. Sliding her hand under the waistband of his boxer briefs, she stroked his hard cock until it was leaking pre-cum.

“I fucking need you, *now*,” he growled as he undid the button on her jeans and tugged them down her thighs.

“Wait.”

She bent down to unfasten the straps of her shoes, then kicked them off and finished pulling her jeans down. As she did that, he toed out of his shoes and shucked his jeans and underwear.

With his cock jutting out proudly, he slid his hands under her ass and lifted her onto the hood of his car. Her arms came around his neck and she leaned back, pulling him with her.

Once again, his mouth pressed against hers, their tongues dancing, and his cock was perfectly lined up with her pussy.

“You drive me wild, Sunshine,” he murmured against her mouth.

Her fingers threaded through his hair as she pleaded, “Fuck me, Aiden.”

With one swift thrust he was inside her, and they both moaned in unison as he pushed balls deep.

“You feel so fucking good,” he moaned as he drove in and out of her heat.

Her legs wrapped around his waist and her fingernails raked down his back as she met him thrust for thrust.

Standing up straighter, he played with her clit while moving in and out of her pussy.

“I love watching your tits bounce as I fuck you.”

To emphasize his point, he pounded into her to make them bounce higher.

“Oh god, Aiden!”

Her pussy gripped his cock, and he increased the pressure on her clit.

“Are you going to come for me, Sunshine?”

“Mmm hmm,” she whimpered.

“Yeah? You gonna come all over my cock while I fuck you?”

He felt her body flush as she tensed, her lips parted in an “O,” then she arched off the hood as her body spasmed from

head to toe.

“Ohhhh yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

He wished he could record her cries and make it his ring tone. Except, every time someone called him, he’d get a boner.

Gripping her hips, he fucked her hard and fast until he pushed in deep as he roared his release.

“Fuuuuck!” The sound echoed off the cement floor while he filled her with rope after rope of his cum.

“My pussy,” he snarled with a final thrust, then dropped his head onto her tits while he caught his breath.

She held him against her with one hand while the fingers from her other hand skimmed along his back.

“That was hot.”

“You are a fucking goddess,” he uttered when his breathing finally evened out. He lifted his head to look her in the eye. “I could worship your body every day and never get tired of it.”

Her body erupted in goosebumps, and he chuckled as he traced her stiff nipple. His ego loved that he had that effect on her.

His cock began to soften, and she whispered, “You should probably grab a towel or something so we don’t ruin your paint job.”

He peeled off his t-shirt before he pulled out then placed it between her legs.

“For the record, I would gladly have my car repainted a thousand times if it meant we got to do that nine hundred and



ninety-nine more times.”

She folded his shirt in half and swiped her pussy once more before sliding off the hood.

“That was super sexy.”

Aiden scooped up their clothes and shoes and walked toward the door leading to the house.

“*You’re* super sexy, baby.”

She followed him inside and nearly ran into his back when he stopped short after hearing Barney’s tags jingle as he came out to greet them.

“He’s not going to bite my cock, is he?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, I’m not sure if he’s ever seen a cock other than his own, but I doubt he’ll think it’s a chew toy. Although you might want to guard it, just in case.”

His face must have paled because she took one look at him and started giggling.

“I’m teasing!”

His shoulders relaxed a little, until she added, “But you should probably put some shorts on, just in case.”

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*

Aiden had ruined her for any other man, she was sure of it.

She'd never experienced passion like she'd had with him. It was exhilarating and unnerving all at the same time.

Part of her wanted to bask in the protection of his embrace forever. It was the forever part that freaked her out and had her debating about calling an Uber and sneaking out with her dog in the middle of the night.

But that would be a shitty thing to do, even if it was in the name of protecting her heart.

The last time she'd allowed herself to be vulnerable, she'd wound up pregnant and alone. She'd been just a child back then and didn't know any better.

But if she had known better, then she wouldn't have Chloe. Or Asher. She wouldn't trade them for the world.

She was no longer a child, nor was she shutting off her gift anymore, so she wished the Universe would clue her in on the connection between her and Aiden. The only thing she'd been able to come up with was that he'd called her to him to help him heal from his divorce. But it seemed like he was ready to move on. His aura was lighter—the blacks and greys were gone. So why did it still feel like they were supposed to be together?

It's just closure, she argued. Their weekend together was closure. Nothing more.

They would enjoy their time and come Monday, they'd go back to their lives. Lives that didn't include each other.

It made her sad to think about, but she trusted her vision this time. Being with Aiden would only lead to heartbreak.

Hell, the Universe had practically planted the red flags in front of her today with the ghosts of his hookups past.

*I hear you, Universe. Just let me have tonight.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

*Dakota*

She woke to the smell of food wafting in his bedroom. Taking a long stretch, she felt deliciously sore in all the right places and couldn't help but let out a contented sigh as she looked down at her naked body. The events of last night played like a porno reel in her mind.

It was hard to believe the wanton woman starring in the porno was herself, but it was. And she didn't feel the least bit ashamed. On the contrary, she'd treasure the memories of feeling alive with desire when she returned to her normal life tomorrow.

Maybe that was the reason the Universe brought them together? So, she'd know what true passion felt like.

But then she had to wonder why? For what purpose did she need to know what true passion was like? Was she supposed to find someone herself? That had never felt like it was in the cards for her, but maybe this was the Cosmos's way of turning on that light for her and showing her she could have it, too.

Her stomach growled, and she decided, enough analyzing. Time to go enjoy her remaining time with Aiden, then get back to reality.

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*Aiden*

He almost dropped the spatula when he looked up and found her standing in the doorway of the kitchen in one of his t-shirts, her hair still tousled from last night.

She was the personification of sunshine, sex, and everything that was right with the world. And she was in his kitchen—with him.

“Good morning, Sunshine.” He gestured to the place settings on the table, along with the butter and syrup. “I hope you’re hungry.”

A slow smile formed on her lips as she sat down at the table. “You’re making pancakes.”

“Yeah. Although, I can make you something else, if you’d rather.”

“No,” she said as she put a napkin on her bare legs. “Pancakes sound perfect. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, baby.”

Aiden hummed a song they’d danced to last night as he plated the hotcakes he’d had on the griddle. He liked cooking for her.

Just like he’d liked waking up next to her.

“Where’s Barney?” she asked as he put the plate in front of her.

He kissed the top of her head. “He’s already been fed, and I took him for a quick walk. Right now, he’s out exploring the backyard.”

Before she could protest, he added, “Don’t worry—it’s completely fenced. He’s fine.” He pointed the spatula at her as he walked back to the stove. “Eat your breakfast.”

She picked up her knife and started buttering her pancakes. “Thank you, this looks great. And thank you for feeding and walking Barney.”

“He’s a good boy. We had a nice conversation on our walk.”

“Oh yeah? About what?”

“He said he likes it here and wants to come again.”

Pouring the syrup, she seemed unfazed. “Well, he also likes to roll in the mud, but he doesn’t get to do that either.”

“I’m just sayin’... he’s comfortable here, so he’s welcome back anytime. You are, too, of course.”

He poured more batter on the griddle for himself and watched as she took a bite.

Like she always did when she liked something she was eating, she closed her eyes and moaned, “Mmm, so good.”

He didn’t know why that made him so happy, but it did.

“I’m glad you like them. I was worried.”

“You were worried? Why?”

“Well, I’m not the best cook, although the girls say I’m getting better. But I just used a mix from the grocery store.”

“That’s all I use. Although,” she used the side of her fork to cut the stack. “Yours are much fluffier than mine. What’s your secret?”

He looked over at her with a smile and shook his head like the answer was obvious. “Love, Sunshine.”

Dakota rolled her eyes as she took another bite.

Aiden shrugged. “That’s what my mom says is the secret ingredient, and she’s never wrong, so if you disagree—you’ll have to take it up with her.”

He liked the idea of introducing her to his mom.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

She’d made it clear she wasn’t interested in anything more than a casual fling, and that certainly didn’t include meeting the parents. He needed to get it together.

*Aortas vs. auras, remember?*

The griddle was hot, so his pancakes cooked quickly, and he joined her at the table.

“What do you want to do today?”

“I should probably get home.”

“Why? Casual starts Monday, remember? We still have all day.”

She shook her head with a sad smile. “I really need to go home and get some things done before my work week starts.”

He felt like pouting and stomping his foot. He had one more day with her, dammit.

“Can’t it wait? I saw your house—it’s immaculate. Hell, I’ll send my housekeeper over if you really have things you need to get done.”

That made her giggle. “I don’t think your housekeeper is going to pay my bills and do my bookkeeping.”

“Okay, no, probably not. But still... the Universe wanted us to be together this weekend. Sundays are part of the weekend.”

“No, *you* decided it was for the weekend.”

“Sorry, Sunshine—there was a sign. It was the weekend.”

“I just think it’s better if I go home.”

He was on the verge of begging, but he gave himself an internal smack across the head.

*Have some dignity, man!*

“Yeah, okay. If that’s what you want. Let me just finish eating.”

Although he no longer had any appetite.

She squeezed the hand he had resting on the table.

“There’s no rush.” Her voice was quiet, like she was trying to soften the blow.

While part of him wanted to drag things out, part of him just wanted to take her home and get it over with. She obviously didn’t want to be there anymore.

He finished quickly and took his plate to the sink to rinse it.

She came up behind him. “I can help you clean up.”

“That’s okay, I’ll take care of it.”

“No,” she said as she rinsed her plate and put it in the dishwasher. “I insist. It’s the least I can do after you went to all



the trouble of making me breakfast.”

“There’s not that much to do…”

“Then it won’t take long.”

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### *Dakota*

It took every ounce of her being not to cave and stay with him. It was what she wanted more than anything. But she knew if she did, tomorrow would be that much harder.

He walked her and Barney inside her house, carrying Barney’s bed and the bag that contained his dishes and set them on the floor by the door.

“I had a great time, Sunshine. When can I see you again?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Aiden.”

He cocked his head, his brows furrowed. “Why not?”

“I just… don’t.”

“I’m going to need a little more than that.”

“You said so yourself, we’re too different.”

“No, *you* said that. Not me.”

“Oh, come on, Aiden. You know we are. And yes, you did say it. You told Francisco that opposites attract.”

“I know we’re good together.”

They were good together.

An image of them laughing and holding hands on the beach popped into her head. That was quickly followed by him walking through the double doors while she stood crying.

“I can’t, Aiden. I’m sorry.”

He stared at her for a beat, then slowly nodded his head.

“Yeah, okay.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “Take care, Sunshine,” then turned on his heel and walked out the door.

This time they didn’t leave it up to the Universe to decide if they’d see each other again, and she hadn’t realized until that moment how she’d held onto that hope since she left him at the Cape a few weeks ago.

Now that it was dashed, she felt emptier than she could ever remember.

Her tears started before he even pulled out of her driveway, and she almost ran out the door to stop him but thought better of it.

This was for the best, no matter how much her heart hurt. It would be way worse if she fell in love with him.

Although a tiny part of her wondered if she’d already had.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*Aiden*

“Dude, who pissed in your cornflakes this morning?”

Aiden was in the ER doing a consult with a patient who was having chest pains. He’d just come to the nurse’s station to inquire about the results of some tests he’d ordered. Steven had been nearby, talking with one of the nurses.

He looked up from the tablet he was using to examine the results and found Steven standing next to him with a scowl.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Aiden grumbled.

Steve glanced around like he was making sure there were no patients or visitors within earshot before he countered with, “Bullshit. Let’s go to my office.”

“I have to get back—”

Steven interrupted him, his tone clipped. “Your patient’s stable.” When Aiden didn’t move, Steven snarled, “Don’t fucking make me pull rank on you.”

With a sigh, Aiden closed the chart and put the tablet back, then followed his friend to his office. The words “ER Director” on the placard outside reminded Aiden of Steven’s position.

Aiden sat down in the chair across the desk from Steve but didn’t say anything.

“What’s going on with you, man? You haven’t been this surly since you left Susan.”

“Nothing’s going on. I’m just tired.”

*Tired of everyone’s bullshit.*

He kept that part to himself.

“Did something happen? I heard Susan’s engaged, but I thought you were over her.”

“I am over her. Hell, I’m fucking happy for her.”

“So, what the fuck is your problem? You’ve had nurses in tears at least two times a week for the last three weeks.”

“I apologized,” he grumbled. He’d felt like an asshole each time, and he had been trying to be gentler. “But come on, today was ridiculous. I hardly said anything, and she bolted.”

“That’s because she has PTSD from the last time you made her cry.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Maybe she needs to be transferred to the maternity ward or something. I can’t be the only doc who’s short with staff in the ER. It’s in the name, Steve. *Emergency*. I don’t have time to hold everyone’s goddamn hands or worry about their feelings.”

“Just... try to be nicer, okay? We’re short staffed as it is.”

Aiden let out a long breath. “Yeah, okay. I’ll try.”

“Okay, now that that’s done, I’m putting on my friend hat right now. What’s going on? You’re wound so tight, I’m worried *you’re* going to have a heart attack—and who the hell’s going to treat you if you do?”

“I already told you—Miles Cunningham is the only one allowed to cut me open.”

“Well, that’s what I’d like to avoid. Maybe you should get a massage or something. When’s the last time you got laid?”

He felt his jaw clench, and he had to will himself to release it.

“Three weeks ago.”

Steven’s mouth parted, and he drew out a nod as he said, “Ohhh,” like he’d had an ah-ha moment. “Three weeks ago was the animal fundraiser. The one that Dakota was at. *That’s* what this is all about.”

Aiden refused to confirm or deny his friend’s allegations, so Steven prodded.

“What happened? You two seemed so good together at the Cape.”

“We were great together. We’re just too different—her words, not mine.”

“Really? I mean, I know she’s a little more on the woo-woo side than you, but she seems like a cool chick.”

“She is a cool chick.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is she isn’t interested in dating me.”

“Why? I know how much you make, so money’s not the problem. Is it because you have kids? Work all the time?”

“She has a grandson, so I don’t think the girls are a big deal, and her massage business has three locations—she’s probably just as busy as I am.”

“Again, so what’s the problem? I’ve seen your dick in the locker room, so that’s not it.” Steven fought back a smirk. “Are you a lousy lay? Selfish lover?”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey! I’m just brainstorming here; trying to help you out. I’m the one who gave you a ticket to the gala, remember? I’m vested in seeing this relationship work out.”

“Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but it’s not going to work out. She’s not interested, and I don’t beg.”

“That’s fair. But are you sure she’s not interested? I mean, *too different?* That’s...” He trailed off, as if at a loss for the proper descriptor.

“Bullshit? Yeah, it is. I mean, at first, I thought so, too. Then I realized we have a lot in common, and I kind of like our differences.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“I mean, yeah, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I said we were good together, and she said she can’t date me. So, like I told you, I’m not going to beg her to be with me.”

“Well,” Steven stood up from behind his desk, so Aiden did, too. His friend clasped his shoulder as they walked toward the door. “Maybe give it one more shot? Go get a massage and tell her again how you feel. Kill two birds with one stone.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“And if that doesn’t work, find someone else to get laid with. But in the meantime, stop making my nurses fucking cry.”

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*Dakota*

She was debating between placing a to-go order and running home and grabbing a quick bite when the song coming through her SUV’s speakers was interrupted with the ringing of her phone.

The dashboard announced it was the Beacon Hill location of her business.

“This is Dakota.”

“Hi, um, Ms. Douglas? It’s uh, Marjorie from Beacon Hill.”

Marjorie was one of her newest hires. A college student who seemed to be afraid of her own shadow. Dakota sensed she’d had some trauma in her past, so she tried to be extra gentle with her.

“Hey, Marjorie. What’s up?”

“Um, are you on your way?”

“I planned on coming by this afternoon, why?”

“Well, your one o’clock is here.”

She had an appointment today?

She glanced at the time on her dashboard. Five minutes until one.

“Fuuuuck,” she murmured under her breath. Not again. This was the second time she’d forgotten an appointment this month, and she’d never missed an appointment. Ever.

Scatterbrained didn’t even begin to describe her these days.

*Damn you, Aiden Matthews.*

Good thing she had excellent staff at all three locations, and most of her clientele were regulars.

“Who is it?”

“Matt Alistair? This is his first time here. He said you met at some fundraiser?”

That was good. It was part of why she did those things. In addition to wanting to be a contributing member of society, it was also to get her business’s name known and drum up clients. She’d normally see the client once, then offer a “discounted rate” if they saw one of her therapists.

This wasn’t a very good first impression.

“Apologize for me profusely. Tell him I’m stuck in traffic and ask him if it’d be okay if another therapist worked on him today.”

Marjorie must have covered the mouthpiece with her hand because all Dakota could hear was muffled talking, then she came back on.

“He said he’d prefer you. He doesn’t mind waiting.”



Dakota was able to get in the left turn lane to make a U-turn.

“Okay. Let him know his massage today is on the house and apologize for me again. Have Angie do his intake. I should be there in fifteen.”

“Okay, I will. Drive safely.”

“You too. See you soon.”

She hung up then shook her head.

*You too?*

She just told Marjorie, who was sitting behind a desk, “you too,” in response to “drive safely”.

“I really need to get it together,” she said out loud.

She spent the drive to the studio trying to center herself. Normally on the day she was doing massages, she’d meditate in the morning. She wanted her energy to be grounded when working on a client.

Fortunately, the Universe was conspiring with her, and she hit all green lights—making it to the studio in eleven minutes.

Taking one last cleansing breath, she exited her Highlander and hurried inside.

“He’s in room three,” Angie said as Dakota washed her hands.

“Did he seem mad?”

“No, not at all. He’s super-hot though. He said he has a lot of tension and stress in his shoulders and lower back. He

said that you said a massage would help his aura.”

That made her freeze.

Dakota never talked about auras with clients. There was only person she'd told that to recently.

She took the clipboard with the form he'd filled out and scanned his information, murmuring, “What did you say his name was?”

“I think he said Matt?”

“Not Matthewsss?” She emphasized the “s.”

Angie shook her head. “No, just Matt.”

She knew before she even opened the door who was on the other side. She could sense his presence.

“Sorry I'm late, Mr. *Alistair*.”

“It's no problem. I've just been relaxing here on the table while I wait.”

He didn't lift his face from the cradle, but she'd know that muscular back anywhere. She'd practically committed every plane and angle of it to memory simply through touch. Lying in bed with him, her fingers had traced every inch of his back while he held her in his arms.

She swallowed hard as she looked at his body on the table.

*You can do this. You're a professional*, she reminded herself as she tied the apron holding the oils and lotions she used around her waist.

“What brings you in today, Mr. *Alistair*?”

“I’ve been having a lot of stress, lately. I thought maybe you could help me.”

She rubbed a calming blend of essential oils in her palms and then waved them below the face cradle, so the scent reached his nose.

“Where does it seem to be bothering you?”

This time, he lifted his head and looked at her. Her breath caught in her chest; she’d almost forgotten how handsome he was.

“My heart.”

She wanted to climb on the table and bury herself into his side and soothe her heart, too. But that would be a bad idea.

With a sad smile, she asked, “What are you doing here, Aiden?”

He sat up, moving the sheet so it covered him below the waist as his legs dangled from the table.

“You said a massage would be good for me. That it’d help my aura.”

“I did say that.”

“And I’m pretty sure my aura is completely fucked up right now. You see, there’s this woman I can’t stop thinking about. I thought for sure she was as crazy about me as I am her, but for some reason, she won’t see me again.”

“Aiden...” she whispered as a single tear trailed down her cheek. “I am crazy about you. But I can’t be with you. I’ve seen our future if we’re together, and it ends with me

heartbroken. I can't go through that. It's better to not even start anything."

"But we *have* started something, Sunshine. The Universe obviously wants us together."

"It was so I could help you get out from that black cloud that was following you around. I did that. Now you can move on."

"You obviously haven't checked lately, because that black cloud is back in full force, and it's brought friends."

She studied the area around his head. He wasn't lying. The colors surrounding him were dull, and blacks and greys swirled around them.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. "I need my Sunshine back."

Dakota leaned into his touch, closing her eyes as she relished the warmth of his hand and the scent of his skin.

An image of them together, holding hands flashed in her mind's eye, followed, as always, by the one of him leaving her crying.

"I'm sorry, Aiden," she whispered as more tears fell. "I can't."

With the pads of his thumbs, he swiped at her tears with a sad smile. "Don't be sorry. You can't help how you feel." He pulled his hands away, and she felt his defeat as his shoulders slumped. "But I had to try one more time, you know?"

She nodded, too afraid to speak. She was certain it'd come out in a sob.

“I’ll go,” he said softly.

Finally, she found her voice. “No. Let Angie give you a treatment. I think it would help you.”

“No, I don’t think I’m up for it right now.”

“I understand. But promise you’ll try it one day.”

He cupped her cheek again and stared at her for a beat, then leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“I will. I’m sorry I ambushed you like this. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

She felt his heart close off in that moment, and she knew he’d shut the door on them for good.

“Take care, Aiden. You deserve to be happy.”

“You, too, Dakota.”

*Dakota.* She wasn’t sure he’d ever called her that before.

She escaped into her office and buried her face in a towel to muffle the sobs.

So much for avoiding heartache.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

*Aiden*

“Dad, come on—you promised you wouldn’t treat me like a baby!”

He studied the belly dancer Halloween costume Kailey was proposing he buy for her.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.”

“Why not?”

He gestured to the bodice that would reveal entirely too much skin of his almost sixteen-year-old daughter. “That’s why not. I was a teenage boy once, Kay Cat. That would make their heads explode.”

“Boys are different these days, Dad.”

He snorted. “Bull. Shit.”

Gesturing to the princess costume next to it, he said, “What’s wrong with this?”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the aisle labeled “Toddlers” and found the same exact costume, only smaller, and gestured to it with both hands.

“*That’s* why not.”

Aiden heaved out a sigh. He was not prepared for this shit. “Fine, no princess costume, but there has to be a compromise. Something that isn’t going to give your cardiologist father a heart attack. I’d never live it down.”

Kailey rolled her eyes, “Oh, Dad.”

They started walking toward the end of the aisle when a little boy came around the corner and looked past them, crying out, “They have them here, Nana!”

A woman came from the next aisle over and almost ran straight into Aiden’s chest when she rounded the corner.

“Oh, excuse me.”

The realization of who each other was hit them at the same time but took Kailey about three seconds longer.

“Dakota!”

Dakota drew her wide-eyed gaze away from Aiden’s and looked at his oldest with a friendly smile.

“Hi, Kailey.”

“Nana!” The little boy whined impatiently.

“I’ll be right there, Ash.”

Aiden looked at the boy intently studying the superhero costumes. He had jet-black hair like Dakota’s, and the same nose.

His gaze returned to Dakota. She had her hair pulled back in a paisley headband, and her usual minimal amount of makeup. And she was as stunning as ever.

“That must be your grandson.”

“Yeah,” she said proudly as she looked over at him. “That’s my guy.”

*I was supposed to be your guy.*

As soon as the thought entered his head, he chastised himself. Like he’d been doing for the last several months.

*We spent two weekends together—it was no big deal.*

“I didn’t know you had a grandson!” Kailey exclaimed.

“Yeah, Asher. He’s three.”

Then, his daughter who was apparently wiser than he’d ever given her credit for, walked away to go chat with the boy, leaving the two of them standing there awkwardly looking at each other.

“How’ve you been?” he finally asked.

“Good. I hired another massage therapist, so that’s helped me not be so busy. You?”

“People are still smoking and not exercising, so business is booming.”

She studied him with a soft smile, then briefly touched his sleeve. “You look good.”

“Thanks, Sunshine. So do you.”

Her smile broadened when he called her Sunshine and their eyes locked. The same goddamn feelings he’d experienced the first time he laid eyes on her swept through him.

“I should”—she gestured to her grandson, who was now talking animatedly with Kailey—“get back to him. Poor Kailey’s going to know way more about superheroes than she ever wanted.”

He knew he needed to let her go but couldn’t resist trying to keep her engaged in conversation, even if just for a few more minutes.



“Maybe I’ll see you at Whitney and Steven’s engagement party next weekend.”

“Maybe.”

Aiden recognized her polite dismissal of him, and it pissed him off.

“Well, good seeing you,” he said curtly, then directed his attention to his daughter, still in the throes of a superhero discussion. “Kay Cat, come on. Let’s get that costume picked out.”

Kailey told Asher it was nice meeting him, and the little dude offered her his hand to shake. It was adorable.

Aiden glanced at Dakota and found her beaming at her grandson; the love she felt for him written all over her face. It made him want to hug her.

He needed to get the hell out of there.

With a wave and a, “good seeing you,” he directed Kailey back to the adult section of the Halloween store.

“So, I take it you never ran into her again.”

He’d never told the girls about their weekend after the gala.

“Just once. At the Animal Rescue Foundation fundraiser. She made it apparent she wasn’t interested.”

Kailey looped her arm through his and squeezed his biceps as she rested her head on his arm.

“Her loss. You’re a catch, Dad.”

*Fucking right I am.*

He needed to remember that.

Maybe it was time to get back on the horse. He'd tried a few times, only to meet up with a woman from the dating app, buy her a drink, and quietly critique all the ways she was inferior to his hippy. Then he'd go home alone and whack off as the memories of being with Dakota played in his head.

That shit needed to change. He'd wallowed long enough. The next time one of his colleagues offered to set him up, he was taking it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*Aiden*

Brianna pointed at the invitation hanging on his refrigerator door for Steven and Whitney's engagement party.

"That's tomorrow night. Are you going?"

"Nope."

She cocked her head. "Why not? I thought you weren't on call this weekend."

"I'm not. I have a date."

His youngest squealed and bounced on her heels as she clapped her hands, while Kailey just looked up from the homework she was doing at the kitchen table with raised eyebrows.

"You do? With who?"

"Her name is Denise. She works in advertising."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Well, technically, I haven't met her yet. She's the friend of Dr. Cunningham's wife, Bridget. We've talked on the phone a few times though."

"Do you like her?"

"She's seems nice."

Brianna snickered. "Translated: she seems borrr-rring."

Kailey shot her little sister a look, then turned to him and said brightly, "I think that's great, Dad."

“Isn’t it rude not to go to your friend’s party?” Brianna asked.

He’d decided when he left the Halloween store last week that he wasn’t going to give Dakota the satisfaction of simply being polite to him at the party—he just wasn’t going to go.

Then he casually let it slip to one of the physician assistants that he wouldn’t be opposed to being set up on a blind date. And that spread like wildfire.

By the next day, he had three doctors and one nurse all approach him about fixing him up with someone “just perfect” for him. Which, again, each time someone said it, he wondered, *How? Is she salty and bitter, too?*

He still couldn’t understand how anyone who knew him would want to send someone they actually liked on a date with him, but they did. He had three dates scheduled over the next two weeks. The fourth politely declined his invitation after talking with him on the phone.

He’d only chuckled and thought, *smart girl*.

“He doesn’t have to go to every party he’s invited to, Bri,” Kailey scolded. His oldest had been there when he’d asked Dakota about seeing her at the party. She knew why he wasn’t going.

Aiden defended himself by saying, “I sent a gift.”

“So where are you taking Denise?”

“*Chez Magnifique’s*.”

Bri’s eyes widened. “Ooh la la. Fancy.”

He shrugged. “I thought I’d try to make a good impression.”

He really was going to make an effort. That was the plan, anyway. He’d yet to muster feeling excited, but maybe that would come tomorrow night while he was getting ready.

At the very least, he’d go through the motions until it felt right again.

He thought about how easy it’d been with Dakota and worried it’d never feel right with anyone else.

*Nope. I survived a divorce after being married for sixteen years. I can certainly get over someone I spent two weekends with.*

Two amazing weekends, but still. It was time to move on.

“Do you know what you’re wearing?” Kailey asked.

He shook his head. “No, do you guys want to help me?”

And that’s how he ended up at the mall at seven o’clock on a Friday night.

After going through his closet, his daughters decided it was time to update his wardrobe. He’d gone along with it, thinking a change was just what the doctor ordered.

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*Dakota*

“You look great, Mom.”

Dakota tugged at the hem of her black dress as she looked at herself in the mirror.

“You don’t think it’s too short?”

Chloe stood up and hugged Dakota’s biceps from behind while putting her chin on her shoulder. Peering at her through the reflection in the mirror, she murmured, “No. It’s perfect. Trust me,” then briefly rubbed Dakota’s arms up and down before stepping back.

Dakota blew out a breath. “Okay. If you say so.”

“I say so.”

She nervously tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Why am I doing this again?”

“Because you said Hank is a nice guy, and it was time you got out of the house.”

“Oh yeah.” She absentmindedly tugged at the hem of her dress again, then turned to face her daughter head on, gesturing to the garment. “Don’t you think this is going to give off the wrong impression?”

“What? That you’re a beautiful, vibrant woman?”

“No. That I’m asking for it.”

The corner of Chloe’s mouth turned up. “Asking for what exactly?”

Dakota picked up a makeup sponge on the bathroom counter and tossed it at her. “You know what.”

Chloe caught the sponge and put it back on the counter.

“God, Mom, when did you become a prude?”

“I just don’t want him to think I’m interested in being more than friends.”

That was the only reason she’d agreed to the date in the first place. She’d hesitated when her accountant’s business partner asked her out yesterday after she dropped off some receipts at his office, so he’d been quick to add, “Strictly platonic.”

She got the feeling that’d been a ploy to get her to agree and had been having second thoughts all day. The only reason she hadn’t canceled was Chloe had been pestering her to get out of the house and stop thinking about Aiden. That and it was an excuse not to go to Whitney and Steven’s engagement party.

After seeing Aiden at the Halloween store last week, she knew her heart couldn’t handle being in the same room with him for more than five minutes without wanting to touch him.

“Would being more than friends with him be so bad?” Chloe inquired.

“Maybe not someday. But I’m just not ready right now.”

The doorbell rang and Dakota took a deep breath.

Chloe grabbed her by her biceps. “Try to have a nice time.” A small smirk escaped her lips. “And remember, just because he’s taking you to a fancy French restaurant—even if he pays, you don’t owe him anything.”

That’d been Dakota’s standard speech to Chloe when she’d left on a date as a teen.

“You’re a brat,” she grumbled, but kissed her cheek anyway. “I shouldn’t be too late.”

“I promise I won’t show up unannounced if there’s a car in the driveway in the morning. And for the record, no one will judge you if there is. I actually would love that for you.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

The doorbell rang again.

“Go! You look hot. Flirt, have fun, and try not to think about Aiden.”

It turned out that was easier said than done.

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*Aiden*

His date was beautiful, charming, and intelligent. He should be having a great time—maybe even thinking about getting naked later. But all he could think about as he listened to her talk was how he wished she were Dakota.

And it really annoyed him when she took a bite of her dinner without the slightest reaction.

“So, anyway. To finish my story, initially, the seller verbally accepted my offer, but then wouldn’t sign the contract. He didn’t even try to counter.”

Aiden nodded thoughtfully as he took a drink of his Scotch.

“Maybe that was a sign from the Universe that it’s not the right house for you.”



She started laughing then stopped when she noticed he wasn't joining in.

“Oh. You're serious.”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

“A sign from the Universe? You don't really believe in signs do you?”

He glanced toward the door and saw a woman waiting at the hostess stand in a little black dress that hugged her curves in a way he wished he could. At first, he was convinced his mind was playing tricks on him, then she smiled as she and her date were shown to their table, and he knew it was Dakota. Like he'd conjured her up.

Fuck yeah, he believed in signs.

“I sure do.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Really? From the Universe?”

“Why not?”

“I believe we make our own fate.”

He couldn't argue with that. Especially when he noticed Dakota stand and head toward the restroom.

“You're right,” he said, then stood and set his napkin on the table. “Will you excuse me for a second?”

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*

The hair on the back of her neck stood up as they were being shown to their table. She knew Aiden was there; she could feel his presence.

Once they were seated, she had a chance to survey the restaurant. It took less than a second for her to zero in on him. When she did, the pangs of jealousy hit her stomach. Of course, he was with a date, and of course, she was beautiful.

He looked as handsome as ever in a grey blazer and sky-blue oxford that matched his eyes. His shirt was open at the neck, giving him a relaxed look, and he seemed enthralled by whatever his companion was telling him.

“Dakota?”

She looked back at Hank with raised eyebrows. “Hmm?”

He motioned to the server standing at their table looking expectantly at her, and said, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Oh, yes. Um...” She glanced around the table for a drink menu but didn’t find one, so she went with something easy. “Pinot Grigio, please.”

After the server left, she knew she was going to have to make small talk with Hank but seeing Aiden—and on a date—had left her feeling discombobulated. She needed to try and center herself if she was going to get through the evening.

“Did you see where the bathrooms are?”

He pointed toward the entrance. “I think they’re just on the other side of the hostess stand.”

She offered him a smile as she stood. “Excuse me, I’ll be right back.”

Willing herself not to look in the direction of Aiden’s table, she found the restroom, locked herself in a stall, and buried her face in her hands.

*This is what you wanted—him to find someone.*

So really, seeing him with another woman was a good thing. It was what was supposed to happen after he cleared the grey away from his aura.

Right?

*Yes, of course!*

Then why did it feel all wrong? Her gut was in knots, and it felt like she was going to throw up. Or cry.

Or both.

*Come on, Dakota. This is what the Universe wants.*

Then she heard the little voice in her head ask, “Is it, though?”

She scrubbed her hands down her face and uttered, “I don’t know!”

She realized she’d said that out loud and looked under the stalls to see if anyone had heard her. Fortunately, she was alone.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep, cleansing breath through her nose and exhaled it in a rush out of her mouth. She did that a few more times until she heard the door open.

*Okay, you got this, girl.*

She stood and flushed the toilet, so the person didn't think she didn't flush, and opened the stall door to find Aiden standing on the other side.

"Aiden!" she gasped. "You can't be in here!"

He responded by crowding her back into the stall, grabbing her face with both hands, and after searching her eyes for a beat, lowered his mouth to hers.

She immediately surrendered to his touch. What was the point of fighting it anymore?

As their tongues tangled and his familiar scent and taste filled her senses, a sense of peace washed over her that she hadn't felt since the weekend of the ARF gala. Her body relaxed, and she sighed against his lips.

He broke the kiss but didn't let go of her face as he stared into her eyes.

"If you needed a sign the Universe wants us together, Sunshine, it delivered it tonight in spades. Why else would we both be here on the same exact day at the very same time? What are the odds? Or at the Halloween store? We keep being brought together for a reason."

She couldn't even argue.

"I know."

He jerked his head back, like he wasn't expecting her to agree with him. "You know?"

"I know you're right. I came here tonight to avoid seeing you at Steven and Whitney's party, and yet, here you are. I'm done fighting the forces at work."

She still wasn't convinced her heart was going to come out of this in one piece, but she knew better than to keep thumbing her nose at the Universe. It'd reveal its plan on its own schedule. She needed to trust the process.

It didn't mean she wouldn't guard her heart as best she could, though.

He leaned in and chuckled against her lips. "That was why I came here tonight, too."

His kiss this time was less urgent; like he had also relaxed.

Reluctantly, she pulled away.

"I do need to get back to my date, though."

He dropped his forehead against hers. "Yeah, me too." He let out a sigh. "Ditching them would be a shitty thing to do, right?"

"We don't need that karma."

"Good point." He opened the stall door and glanced around before stepping out and she followed. He paused before opening the door leading to the restaurant. "Leave your front door unlocked, Sunshine. I'll be by later to make up for lost time. I think we're at least a hundred orgasms behind, so we have some catching up to do."

With a wink, he opened the door and was gone.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror and smiled at the well-kissed woman staring back at her.

Pulling her lipstick from her clutch, she quickly reapplied it, then washed her hands and headed back to her table. This

time with a spring in her step as she finally had something to look forward to.

“Everything all right?” Hank asked as she sat down.

“Yes. I’m sorry. There was a line.” It was a plausible explanation.

“They need to make two women’s bathrooms for every men’s.”

“I know, right?”

He picked up his drink and held it aloft, like he was about to make a toast, so she reached for her wine glass that had been delivered in her absence.

“To new friends.”

“To new friends,” she reiterated, then clinked her glass against his before taking a sip.

“Have you eaten here before?” Hank asked as he opened his menu.

“Just once, many years ago. What about you?”

“It’s one of my favorite restaurants.”

“Oh, what do you recommend then?”

“Honestly? You can’t go wrong with any of their dishes, so it just depends on what you’re in the mood for.”

What she was in the mood for...

On instinct, Dakota looked over at Aiden and found him watching her, wearing a pirate grin. She had to quickly look down at her menu and press her lips together to keep from reacting.

But her insides were doing somersaults.

Thankfully, Hank was studying the selections and didn't seem to notice.

Their server came and took their order. When Dakota told her Chateaubriand, Hank commented, "Excellent choice."

After the server left, he picked up his glass and swirled the amber contents as he said, "So, tell me more about you. Raul said you have three locations; that's really impressive."

"Thank you. It's been a grind, but things are starting to pay off. I'm very thankful to have found such an amazing accountant in Raul. You have a great partner."

"I agree. We were college roommates, so I was a little worried about going into business with him. I didn't want to ruin our friendship, but we're about to celebrate our fifteenth year in business together."

"Wow, congratulations!"

"You'll have to be sure to come to our party."

"I'd love to. Be sure to send me an invite."

He really was a nice guy, and had she not been hung up on Aiden, she might have even considered dating him romantically. He was handsome, kind, and a genuinely good man. But he was no grumpy heart doctor who made her panties wet.

Dakota stole another glance at Aiden, who was once again watching her. Or maybe he'd never stopped.

She and Hank made more small talk all through dinner. She discovered he had thirteen-year-old twins, and she shared

that she was a grandma.

As their plates were removed, he looked over at her with a gentle smile. “This really is just going to be a platonic evening, isn’t it?”

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “I’m sorry. You’re a great guy and if I weren’t in love with someone else, I’d jump at the chance to date you.”

*Did I just say I’m in love with Aiden?*

That’s when she realized, she really was.

How was that even possible? They’d only spent two weekends together. It had to just be infatuation.

But in her heart, she knew it was more.

He was about to reply when they both noticed a woman standing at their table. It was Aiden’s date.

“Hi. Excuse me.” Her attention was focused solely on Hank. “I just wanted to let you know that if you thought there was going to be a love connection tonight with your date, you’re wasting your time. Apparently, she and my date are an item.” She handed him her card. “But if ever want to go out with someone who’s *actually* available, give me a call.”

Hank looked startled as he glanced back at Dakota. “Um... the guy you’re in love with—he’s here? On a date with someone else?”

Dakota winced. “Yes, it’s a long story, but I promise it wasn’t planned. Us both being here tonight was a happy accident.”



She looked up at the woman and smiled. She kind of admired her balls. Gesturing to one of the empty chairs, she said, “Would you like to sit down...?”

“Denise,” the woman supplied as she took a seat.

“Hi, Denise, I’m Dakota and this is Hank.”

“Hank,” she purred. “So nice to meet you.”

Hank had a glint in his eye when he took her hand, kissed her knuckles, and said, “The pleasure is all mine.”

He was a nice guy, but Dakota suspected he wasn’t too nice to let an opportunity to get laid pass him by.

Just then, Aiden appeared and offered his hand to Hank.

“Aiden Matthews.”

“Hank Romero.”

“Dinner is on me tonight, Hank. Get dessert, a bottle of expensive wine, and whatever else you want, but if you don’t mind, I’m going to take Dakota home.”

Hank’s expression was kind when he looked over at her. “I don’t mind at all.” He then turned to Denise with a salacious grin. “What do you say we take him up on that wine and dessert?”

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*Aiden*

He knew the bill tonight was going to set him back at least a grand, and he couldn’t care less. He needed to get

Dakota alone. Preferably naked, although at that point, he didn't even care about the naked part; he just wanted to hold her. So, if buying a few extra over-priced dinners, along with an expensive bottle of wine or two was the price he had to pay, so be it.

Denise had realized he was no longer listening to her, and it didn't take her long to figure out what, or rather—who, had his interest. Aiden suspected her not being the center of a man's attention didn't happen very often, because she was quick to call him on it. He decided his best course of action was honesty, something he quickly regretted when she stomped off toward Dakota and her date's table.

Then she sat down.

Aiden didn't give a shit about Denise's ire—although he probably was going to owe Miles and Bridget a really expensive baby gift when their kid was born in a few months—it was Dakota whom he didn't want pissed off at him for Denise's stunt.

With a sigh, he flagged down his waiter to have the desserts they'd ordered boxed instead of delivered to their table, and explained the bill situation, then headed to Dakota's table.

Fortunately, it seemed that Denise had been an excellent consolation prize because Dakota's date didn't give him any hassle about taking her home.

“Ready, Sunshine?”

She looked across the table at the man she'd come with.  
“Thank you for being so understanding, Hank.”

The dude gave a quick glance at Denise then back at Dakota. “Everything happens for a reason.”

Aiden admired his style.

As Dakota stood up, he gave Hank a head nod and offered, “It was nice meeting you, Denise.”

Aiden thought she was going to tell him off, but instead she barely glanced at him when she replied, “Thank you for dinner.”

He decided not to tell her to order another dessert since he was taking hers home with him. She’d figure it out.

“You’re welcome.” With his hand on Dakota’s back, he ushered her to the hostess stand to get his credit card and to-go bag. While they waited, he glanced over to find Hank and Denise laughing.

“That’ll be a great ‘how we met’ story if those two end up together,” he mused as he gestured to the pair.

“Heck, I think it’s a great story if *we* end up together.”

Aiden lifted her chin with his knuckle, so she had to look at him. “There’s no ‘if,’ Sunshine. I’m not letting you go again.”

Her patient smile let him know she wasn’t a believer.

They’d cleared the first hurdle—he was taking her home, but he knew he had his work cut out for him.

Good thing he could be a stubborn fucker when he needed to be.

## CHAPTER FORTY

*Dakota*

Once he put the Audi in drive, he reached for her hand.

“Do you want to go back to your house or mine? Or we could hop a plane to Vegas.”

“Vegas? In the mood to do a little gambling?”

“Haven’t you always wanted to get married by Elvis?”

His smirk let her know he was kidding, but her heart skipped a beat at the suggestion. The problem was she couldn’t figure out if the idea was exciting or scary.

Maybe a little of both.

“Let’s just go to my place. Barney is home by himself. I wasn’t planning on staying out late.”

“Damn right you weren’t.”

His growly possessiveness made her toes curl.

Still, she couldn’t help but give it back to him.  
“Although... Vegas could be fun.”

He took his eyes off the road to glare at her. “Don’t tease me, Sunshine. I’ll drive us to the airport right now.”

She realized he was serious.

“You’d really want to go to Vegas?”

“Sure. Like you said, it’d be fun.”

“To get married?”

“Okay,” he backpedaled. “I was just kidding about Elvis marrying us. But I think a spontaneous weekend away together would be perfect.”

A weekend anywhere with him sounded perfect. She still couldn't believe he was the one taking her home. She never saw that coming. After all, she'd gone out with Hank tonight to *avoid* running into him.

“Does it have to be Vegas?”

He brought her knuckles to his lips. “Sunshine, it can be wherever the fuck you want. Name it, I'll make it happen.”

She leaned her head back against the headrest and looked over at him with a grin. “Surprise me.”

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

There were two options that came to mind.

“You've got two choices, New York at the Four Seasons. We see a show, walk around, eat at a nice restaurant...”

“Or?”

“Or Hope just bought a bed and breakfast near the Cape. We can go on a color tour of the leaves changing, maybe walk on the beach and have dinner on the boardwalk. We could probably even bring Barney.”

Her eyes got wide. “I like that idea. But I think Barney would be happier if he stayed home with Asher.”

“The Dragonfly Inn it is. Although, we might have to wait until morning.”

Hopefully, Steven’s little sister would be willing to pull some strings for him and get him a room on such short notice and wouldn’t hold it against him that he’d bailed on her brother’s engagement party. Otherwise, he was going to go from hero to zero in three seconds flat.

The corner of her mouth tipped up. “Whatever shall we do tonight then?”

“The same thing we’re going to do tomorrow at the B and B. I told you, Sunshine, we have some catching up to do.”

They pulled into her drive, and she started to giggle.

“What’s so funny?”

“Chloe said if there was a strange car in my driveway in the morning that she wouldn’t show up unannounced.”

He felt a grumble in his chest at the idea of another man’s car in her driveway in the morning.

“Let her know she should probably get used to seeing my car in your driveway. And I have no problem if she shows up unannounced. I’d love to get to know your family better.”

“Oh... I, uh. No. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

He furrowed his brow as he opened up the driver’s door and asked, “Why not?” before he slipped out and went around to open her door.

He helped her out of the car as she replied, “It’s too soon to be meeting each other’s families, Aiden.”

“Well, I’ve actually already met Chloe *and* Asher, and you’ve met my daughters, so... that ship has already sailed.”

“You know what I mean. It’s too early to be getting to know them.”

“Again, why?” He tried to keep the snarl out of his voice as she unlocked her front door.

“It just is...”

That answer was bullshit. He knew she was hedging her bet, still not convinced they were supposed to be together.

They walked in the door and were greeted by Barney and his wiggling butt. The pit bull obviously remembered Aiden because he nudged his hand with his nose so he would pet him.

Aiden knelt and scratched his chest and ears with both hands. “Hey, buddy. Good to see you.” Looking up at Dakota, he asked, “Does he need to go out?”

“He has a doggie door.”

“Oh, that’s right. I need to install one of those at my house for him.”

“Why?”

Did she just ask him why?

He stood up and wrapped a hand around her waist to pull her against him.

“So, when you stay at my place, he’ll have a doggie door there, too. I expect you to bring him, Sunshine. I understand you’re part of a package deal that includes your dog and your family, just like my girls come with me.”

Dakota brushed the short hair above his ears with her fingertips.

“For someone who’s supposed to be old and salty, you sure can be accommodating.”

“Only for a select few.”

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.”

Aiden leaned down and nipped her lips with his.

“It’s no secret how I feel about you.”

“Yeah, although maybe you shouldn’t have shared it with your date tonight.”

“Why? I got to take you home, and who knows, maybe she and Hank ended up leaving together. The way I see it, it was a win-win for everyone.”

She rested her head against his chest and murmured, “Definitely a win for me.”

He hesitated, unsure if he and Barney were on good enough terms that the pup would allow Aiden to scoop Dakota up in his arms without biting his ass, but he decided to risk it.

Fortunately, as Barney watched from his bed, he must have decided it wasn’t worth the effort to get up. Aiden walked through the kitchen with her in his arms and up the stairs to her room, where he set her down on her feet next to her bed.

“You look sexy as fuck in this dress, baby,” he told her as he unzipped the back. “But I’m afraid it’s gotta go.”

The dress fell to a heap at her feet, and she stepped out, then went to kick off her shoes, but he stopped her. “Leave the



heels on.”

She looked like a walking wet dream in her matching black bra and panties, and high heels. Then he remembered a meme he’d once seen that said if you take her clothes off and her bra and panties match, it wasn’t you who’d decided to have sex. He felt his blood pressure spike, knowing she hadn’t gotten dressed intending to run into him tonight.

Running his finger under the strap of her bra at the shoulder, he grumbled, “You sure you were planning on coming home alone, Sunshine?”

“Why, Dr. Matthews. Are you jealous?”

His hand slid down her side and under the waistband of her panties to cup her mound.

“This is *my* pussy, so you’re goddamn right I am.”

She squeezed his cock over his slacks. “Yes, Doc. I knew I was coming home alone. No one could hold a candle to you.”

Her admission made his chest puff out.

She rubbed his length when she continued, almost in a challenge, “But what about you? Are you honestly going to stand here and tell me you weren’t planning on sleeping with Denise later?”

He ran a finger down her slit, happy to find her already wet.

“The thought never even crossed my mind.”

She snorted, “Yeah right. I’m sure you’ve been completely celibate these last few months.”

He put a knuckle from his other hand under her chin, so he was sure she was looking at him when he told her. “I haven’t been with another woman since the first time we were together, Sunshine.”

That seemed to surprise her because her eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

Pushing a finger inside her pussy, he growled, “Really. I don’t want anybody else but you.”

Aiden didn’t know if her long moan of, “Oooh,” was surprise, approval, pleasure, or a combination of the three. When she closed her eyes, widened her stance, and moaned again as he started to finger fuck her, he decided he didn’t care which it was.

“It feels like your pussy has missed me, baby.”

“So much,” she responded breathlessly, her eyes closed with one hand on his shoulder like she needed him for balance.

He removed his hand from her panties and tugged on the wisps of fabric along the waistband.

“These have to go. Along with your bra. Then you need to get on the bed, spread your legs, and get comfortable.”

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*Dakota*

Nothing like a sexy man with a deep voice telling you to spread your legs and get comfortable. She was pretty sure her pussy gushed at his command.

Her hands shook slightly with anticipation as she reached around and undid her bra, then let it fall down her arms and onto the floor next to her panties.

She stood naked, except for the shoes, before him, and his lustful expression—like he wanted to devour her—made her feel beautiful and powerful at the same time.

“Fuuuck you’re sexy,” he groaned.

She kicked her back heel up to gesture to her shoes.

“Should I take these off now?”

He slowly perused her from head to toe, then back up again to meet her eyes.

“I’d rather you didn’t.” His hands encircled her waist, and he lifted her onto the bed where she scrambled back against the pillows. Her knees fell open as he crawled up the bed between her thighs. Reaching back, he cradled her ankle while kissing her inner leg. “I want to look out of the corner of my eye while I eat your pussy and see these sexy high heels on my shoulders.”

Okay, well, if he insisted.

Aiden lifted her ankle onto his shoulder and pressed on the inner thigh of her other leg so she was splayed open.

“Such a pretty, pink pussy...” he murmured as he ran his finger down her seam. “So wet and ready for me.”

Dakota let out a small shiver of anticipation. He dipped his head down and darted his tongue through her folds.

“And so fucking delicious.” His tongue found her clit, and he lapped it, making her moan loudly as her little knot of

nerves zinged with pleasure. Then she arched off the bed when he sucked it between his lips.

Her fingers wove into his hair, and she held his head as she shamelessly ground against his mouth.

Dakota felt him slide a finger inside her slick channel as he skimmed his tongue along her engorged jewel.

“Fuck, your pussy is so tight.”

“It hasn’t had your cock to stretch it,” she panted.

“You want my cock, baby?”

“Oh yessss.”

She ached with desire to be filled with his dick

“You need to come first. I need to taste your orgasm, Sunshine.”

That sounded heavenly.

His tongue and fingers worked in rhythm—his digits plunging in and out of her pussy while he licked and flicked her magic button.

Dakota gripped the comforter tightly in her fists while her hips bucked against his mouth. Her nerve endings felt electrified. Her core was taut as she hovered on the edge.

“That’s it. Rub that wet pussy all over me.”

He pulled her folds apart and clamped his lips around her pearl, working it over with his tongue while he hammered her pussy with his fingers.

Her back bowed off the mattress as the first wave of her climax ripped through her.

“Oh my god, Aiden! Yes! Yes!”

Her body shuddered from head to toe, and she tried to twist out of his hold, but he held her in place with his forearm as he continued his ministrations.

“Mercy! Mercy!” she cried as she thrashed against his touch when it became too sensitive to bear.

He looked up from between her thighs with a wicked glint in his eye.

“That’s one.”

Gulping for air with her hand on her stomach, she asked, “How many were you expecting?”

Aiden crawled up alongside her and murmured in her ear, “You’re not going to sleep until you’ve come at least three times, baby.”

She drew his face within inches of hers and stared into his eyes. “Well, if history is any indicator, that shouldn’t be a problem. Just remember, tit for tat. I love making you come as much as you do me.”

He laid on his back and pulled her on top of him, so she was straddling him as he taunted, “Oh, you do, do you?”

Dakota rolled her hips, rubbing her pussy along his shaft.

“Yeah, I do.” Her hands dropped onto his stomach to hold herself upright as she dry humped his cock.

He reached up and squeezed her tits, drawing one nipple into his mouth so he could suckle it.

“Then ride my cock,” he demanded then swirled his tongue around her stiff peak and thrust his hips up. “Put it

deep in your cunt and fuck it.”

She tilted her pelvis slightly and his dick easily plunged inside her wet heat. Neither of them moved as her walls got accustomed to his size. Finally, she started to thrust her hips, moving up and down on his cock like a cowgirl riding a slow-moving mechanical bull.

“That’s it. Fuck that cock.” He let out a long groan when she took him balls deep. “Take it all.”

He reached up and massaged her knot with his thumb while he pinched a nipple with his other hand.

“Grind your wet pussy all over it.”

Her movements became stilted as the orgasm started to creep up her toes.

Aiden released her nipple and gripped her hip to hold her steady as he thrust upward while his thumb continued rubbing her clit.

“Come for me, baby. Let me feel you milk my cock.”

She felt her stomach tighten, and she knew her pussy was gripping his shaft tightly as her climax built.

“Let go, Sunshine,” he urged as he moved his cock in and out.

His lips wrapped around her nipple again and he bit down, yanking her hips so he was balls deep inside her.

The pain and the pleasure had her seeing stars as she fell over the edge. It felt like she was floating while the ropes of his cum splashed against her walls. He let out a low, guttural

moan that was so sexy her body erupted in goosebumps as aftershocks jolted through her.

He slumped back and pulled her with him, his arms going around her while he buried his face in her neck. His warmth provided her with a sense of comfort.

“Holy hell,” she gasped as she skimmed his sides with her nails.

She felt his smile against her throat and the rumble of his chest when he murmured, “That’s two.”

“No more!” she pleaded with a smile. “I’m an old woman, I have to pace myself!”

He lifted his head and stared up at her with pursed lips. “I’m older than you, so watch who you’re calling old.”

“But I’m a grandma,” she countered.

“A grandma I’m going to fuck. Repeatedly. All weekend.”

Dakota bit her bottom lip and wrapped her arms around his neck. He lifted his face to stare into her eyes, his mouth inches from hers as she whispered, “That sounds perfect.”

A sigh escaped her when he went in for another kiss, holding her close.

*A girl could get used to this.*

Aiden pulled away and rested his forehead against hers, his azure-colored eyes twinkling.

“I just remembered... we brought home dessert.”

“Orgasms and dessert—you are speaking my love language, Dr. Matthews.”



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

*Aiden*

**Hope Ericson: Of course, we have a room for you.**

**Aiden: I really appreciate that.**

**Hope Ericson: Taylor, our manager knows you're coming. Show up tomorrow whenever you want. My brother wants to know who you're taking with you.**

**Aiden: Dakota.**

**Hope Ericson: SQUEAL! Congratulations. She's good for you.**

*Yeah, she is.*

He looked over at her sitting cross-legged on her yoga mat on the living room floor. Her feet were above her knees—she'd referred to it as the lotus position. Her eyes were closed, and her palms were up, with her middle fingers and thumb touching. Her expression was peaceful, and she was so fucking beautiful he had to fight to keep from tackling her and planting kisses all over her body and ruining her calm state.

When they'd finished breakfast, she'd tried to get him to meditate after she'd talked him into doing yoga, but he'd declined. His dick had moved every time she'd bent over while she demonstrated a pose, so he knew the only thing he'd be able to think about was fucking her if he attempted to "quiet his mind," as she put it.

Not that he wasn't thinking about fucking her now, but at least he was multi-tasking as he did.

His phone buzzed with another incoming text.

**Steven: Thank fuck you got back together with Dakota. I was starting to worry about you.**

Aiden didn't even mind that he was the topic of gossip between Steven and his sister and probably whoever else was in the room with them.

**Aiden: Well, like Hope said... she's good for me.**

**Steven: I think you're good for her, too. Don't sell yourself short, bro.**

That was nice of his friend to say. And Aiden hoped it was true, otherwise he was a shitty partner who didn't deserve her sunshine and rainbows.

He wanted to be worthy of her.

**Aiden: I'm sorry I missed your party. I just didn't want to run into her. Apparently, she had the same idea, and we ended up at the same restaurant—each of us with a date.**

**Steven: STFU! I can't wait to get the details about how you ended up together.**

**Aiden: We sort of swapped dates. LOL**

**Steven: This story keeps getting better and better.**

Aiden wondered if Hank ended up taking Denise home. He hoped so. Maybe then Aiden wouldn't be on Miles's wife's shitlist.

**Steven: Have a great time at The Dragonfly!**

**Aiden: Planning on it. Thank Hope again for me.**

He felt Dakota's arms go around his shoulders, and she came around to sit on his lap.

"All done?" he asked as he pushed a strand of her long hair behind her ear.

"Yes!"

"Did you find your Zen?"

"I did. You really should try it."

"Sunshine, you had me practically wrapping my foot behind my head earlier. Take your win and don't be greedy."

"For the record, your foot was nowhere close to being behind your head—"

"Felt like it," he grumbled.

"And, I'm going to keep bugging you to do yoga *and* meditate because they're good for you. If that makes me greedy, so be it."

He massaged her tits over her sports bra. "Eating your pussy is like a form of meditation for me... does that count?"

"You're impossible."

"I know." He wasn't even the littlest bit sorry. "We have a reservation at The Dragonfly Inn, so go pack a bag."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, they had an opening?"

"Yes. And the weather is supposed to be nice tomorrow, so we can go look at the leaves. I thought it'd be better if we just went exploring on our own, that way we're not on someone else's timetable."

*And we can sneak off to fornicate whenever we want.*

“Give me fifteen minutes,” she said as she slid off his lap and started toward the doorway.

“We’re not in a rush, baby. Take your time.”

She didn’t respond, and he heard her racing up the stairs.

Barney lifted his head off his pillow, like he was debating whether to follow her. He must have decided Aiden needed to be supervised downstairs, because he put his head back down and fought to keep his eyes open.

Soon, the pup was snoring, and Aiden couldn’t help but chuckle.

Dakota appeared twenty minutes later in a pair of yoga pants, a grey Boston College sweatshirt, and a pair of bright white tennis shoes. Her hair was damp and pulled back from her face with one of her paisley headbands, and the only makeup she was wearing seemed to be her usual lip gloss and mascara.

She set a red leather weekender bag down by the front door and turned to him with a bright smile. “Are you ready?”

“Do we need to take Barney to Chloe’s?”

Aiden hoped so. He wanted another chance to get to know her family.

“No, I already texted her. She’ll come by after they’ve had breakfast and cleaned up.”

“Oh. Well, maybe I can meet her again when we get back.”

“Aiden...” her tone carried a warning. “We already talked about this. It’s too soon.”

He wasn't going to let that bother him. "Who knows," he said as he picked up her bag and opened the front door for her. "Maybe you'll change your mind after this weekend."

"Maybe. It's doubtful, but you never know."

"You never know..." he echoed.

He knew she wasn't going to change her mind, and he decided he needed to be okay with that.

For now.

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### *Dakota*

They had another perfect weekend together. The difference this time was there was no sense of impending doom as it drew to a close.

"I'm on call this week," he told her as they drove back to Boston. "So, it's going to be hard to see you as much as I'd like."

"My evenings are open this week, other than a few yoga classes, so if you have a slower night, maybe I could come by the hospital, and we can have dinner together."

He squeezed her hand he was holding and glanced over at her with a grin. "You must *really* like me if you're willing to have hospital cafeteria food just to have dinner with me."

"I do really like you, and I could bring takeout if you'd rather."

“Yesss, she likes me! I knew it!” he told a phantom audience. Then said, “Yeah, let’s plan on that. Although I’m not sure if it’ll even work out that I’ll be available, but I’ll keep you posted.”

They drove in silence for a few moments before she asked, “What was your favorite part of our trip?”

He took his eyes off the road to briefly look over at her.

“Other than the obvious?”

Dakota didn’t have to ask what he meant by that. She was deliciously sore from how much sex they’d had in the last forty-eight hours.

“Yes, other than that.”

“I liked waking up with you in my arms. Followed by a close second of how we were able to take our time over breakfast and just talk.”

“That was nice.”

“What about you? What was your favorite part?”

“Well, the colors were amazing.”

“We came at the perfect time,” he agreed.

“And my close second would be getting to explore all the little shops today. And the fact that you seemed to enjoy it, too, so I didn’t feel like I had to hurry.”

“Yeah, next time we should plan a long weekend, so we can hit a few wineries, too.”

She liked that they could plan something like that. It was nice not having a built-in expiration date on their time

together.

They pulled into her driveway, and he shut the car off, then got out. She opened her door while he went to the trunk and took out her suitcase.

“You’re not staying tonight?” she asked when she noticed he hadn’t gotten his duffel bag out.

The corner of his mouth hitched. “I’d love to; I just didn’t want to be presumptuous that you weren’t sick of me.”

“Impossible. You have an open invitation.”

He pulled his bag out, too, and closed the trunk.

“Should we go get Barney?”

“He’s already home. Chloe dropped him off about an hour ago.”

Sure enough, when she unlocked the door, she heard the jingle of Barney’s tags before she even switched on the light.

“You need automatic lights, Sunshine.”

“Probably, but that would mean finding a handyman, hiring said handyman, then being home when he is available. It’s much easier just to hit the switch when I walk through the door.”

“What happens when your hands are full? I can do it for you. It will literally take me five minutes—minus the trip to the hardware store.”

“You’d do that for me?”

His affection was obvious when he looked down at her and cupped her cheek. “There isn’t much I wouldn’t do for

you, baby.”

When he said stuff like that, it made it hard to keep her guard up. But the vision of him leaving her hadn't changed, so she knew it was only a matter of time.

But she was determined to enjoy the ride while it lasted.



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

*Aiden*

“Knock knock.”

He looked up from where he was dictating reports at his desk to find Miles standing in his doorway.

*Fuck.*

Aiden hadn't had a chance to properly apologize to Miles for bailing on his wife's friend.

“Hey, what's going on?”

“I'm not interrupting, am I?”

“No, no. Come on in.” Aiden gestured to the chair opposite his on the other side of the desk. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” Miles said as he walked in and sat down. Never one to beat around the bush, he got right down to the reason he was there. “So, Bridget has tasked me to talk to all the rude fucks from the hospital who haven't RSVP'd for our Halloween party.”

Aiden closed his eyes tight for a second.

“Aw shit. I forgot to send my regrets; I'm sorry, man. Susan was always the one who handled things like that, it's going to take some getting used to. In the meantime, I guess I should probably embrace my rude asshole persona.”

“From what I hear, you might have someone to help you out with that again, soon.”

“Yeah... about that. I’ve been meaning to stop in and apologize for bailing on Denise like I did.”

Miles waved his hand in front of him “I don’t give a shit. My wife, on the other hand...”

“Please extend my apologies to her.”

Miles shook his head. “No can do, my friend. You’re going to have to tell her yourself. She told me not to take no for an answer from you to the party invitation. And she’s insisting you bring the woman you blew Denise off for.”

“I didn’t blow her off. She decided the date was over, and then went and joined Dakota’s date. I guess it was her way of telling me ‘fuck you,’ without actually saying the words. Which I probably deserved. But in the interest of full disclosure, I still wouldn’t do anything differently.”

“Again, I don’t care. What I do care about is making my wife happy, so I’ll put you down for two.” Miles stood and moved toward the door, calling out over his shoulder, “And you’re not on the schedule, I already checked, so don’t even try using that as an excuse.”

“Fine, but I’m not wearing a costume.”

He turned in the doorway to face Aiden. “Yeah, you are. It’s a costume party. Besides, there’s a prize for the best one.”

He shot Miles a look. “How long have you known me? Do I seem like the type motivated by prizes?”

Miles rolled his eyes. “Whatever, dude. Just come as a doctor and naughty nurse then; you know that’s what half of the people from here are going to do.”

“I’m pretty sure Dakota wouldn’t go for that, unless I was the one in the naughty nurse costume.”

That made his friend laugh out loud. “I like her already. I’m looking forward to meeting her—tomorrow. Party starts at eight. I’ll see you there. I don’t care if you come as a ghost in a bedsheet with holes cut out of it, but you better be wearing a costume when you walk through my door. For some reason I’ll never understand, it’s important to Bridget that people come dressed up. My wife is almost seven months pregnant and hormonal as fuck—I swear to God, if you make her cry, I will end you.”

Then, in typical Miles’ fashion, he walked off without waiting for a reply.

*Fucking cardiothoracic guys. They think they’re such hot shit.*

Yet, there was no way Aiden was going to piss him off by not showing up. And he knew it’d be in costume, even if he was going to posture a little first.

Aiden pulled his phone from his desk drawer.

**Aiden: Hi, baby—we’ve been invited to a Halloween party tomorrow night. Do you want to go?**

**Sunshine: That’s kind of short notice...**

**Aiden: That’s my fault. I forgot about the invitation, but I kinda feel like I should go.**

**Sunshine: Is it a costume party?**

**Aiden: Yeah, but we don’t have to dress up.**

**Sunshine: It's a costume party, Aiden. Yes, we do. I'm not going to be *that* guy.**

**Aiden: I have no problem being that guy, but for you, I'll dress up. If that's what you want to do.**

There, he was doing it for Dakota, not because he'd been ordered to by Miles.

**Aiden: I know it's short notice—do you have any ideas about what to wear?**

**Sunshine: Do you want to do a couple's costume?**

He wasn't sure what exactly a couple's costume was, but he could use his context clues and figure it out.

**Aiden: Sure, why not? Unless you think it will be harder to find something this late. If that's the case, we can just wear whatever is available.**

**Sunshine: Let me do a little research and see what ideas are out there. Are you still coming over tonight?**

**Aiden: Wouldn't miss it.**

He'd been spending all his free time at her house but had yet to run into her daughter, son-in-law, or grandson again. On the nights Bri and Kailey stayed with him, she mysteriously always had a meeting or yoga class and couldn't make it over.

It'd only been a couple of weeks since they'd started officially dating, so he didn't press the issue. But the holidays were coming up, and things were going to have to change.

They just needed to get through this party first.

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*

She did an internet search for couples' Halloween costumes and found the perfect one.

Aiden laughed out loud when she showed him.

“You want to do that?”

“Why not? It'll be easy to recreate. I think we could probably still find mine at the Halloween store, and we should be able to find what we need for yours at the thrift store.”

“And I can probably get Bri to draw the tattoo for me.”

She broke out into a big smile. “That would be the perfect touch.”

He started rattling off ideas of things they should look for, and she wrote them down.

“This is going to be great,” he said as he studied the list. “We're going to win best costume for sure.”

“You didn't tell me there was a contest...”

“That's because I didn't give a shit about it until just now when I realized we really could win.”

She stroked her fingertips along his jawline.

“I like this competitive side of you. It's sexy.”

He dropped a chaste kiss on her lips as his hand snaked around her waist to squeeze her ass, and he uttered, “I like this side of you.”

She couldn't help but smile at his antics. He always had a way of making her feel so desired.

“Come on, Doc. We need to get to bed—we have to get up early and go shopping.”

“Well, we can go to bed, Sunshine. But we aren't going to be sleeping until *much* later.”

She stood on her tiptoes to peck his lips, then dropped back to her flat feet as she whispered, “I know.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

*Aiden*

“Who are you supposed to be again?” Brianna asked as she drew the woodpecker tattoo on his arm while he sat on a stool at the kitchen island.

“H.I. McDunnough, from the movie, *Raising Arizona*.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Well, probably not, since *I* was around five when the movie came out.”

“So then how do you know about it?”

“It’s kind of a cult classic. You’ll watch it someday, trust me.”

She looked at his crazy hair, yellowed-white tank top, and Hawaiian shirt with raised eyebrows expressing teenage judgment. “I hope other people have seen the movie, too, or you’re just going to look ridiculous.”

“I’m not worried.”

“And Dakota is going as who?”

“Hi’s wife, Ed.”

“Ed?”

“Short for Edwina.”

“Is she going to have crazy hair and a tattoo, too?”

“No, she’s going in a policewoman costume.”

“What?”

“It’s how the two meet. Ed takes Hi’s photo at the jail every time he’s arrested, and he eventually proposes.”

Bri rolled her eyes as she finished coloring the bird’s beak. “Sounds like a grrreat movie.”

Aiden rolled his eyes back. “Sorry it’s not *Barbie*.”

“Hey! You said it was cute!”

“It was,” he conceded begrudgingly. “My daughters have reduced me to watching *Gilmore Girls* and *Barbie* movies. When I stayed at the Dragonfly Inn a few weeks ago, I wanted to ask where Lorelai and Sookie were. And the fact that I know those names is disturbing.”

She kissed his cheek. “And we love you for it.”

“Yeah, you better,” he grumbled, trying to disguise that he was a big pile of mush when it came to his girls.

“I want to see you together,” Kailey said as she walked in the kitchen, looking at her phone. She flashed the screen, revealing Nicolas Cage and Holly Hunter together as the movie characters.

“I’m picking her up after I drop you guys off.”

“Aw, can’t you pick her up first, *then* drop us off?”

He thought about it for a second, then shrugged. “Yeah, we can do that.”

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*



She adjusted the police cap on her head and sighed as she looked at her reflection. The only policewoman's costume available was, of course, the sexy kind. Not that she looked bad—frankly, she looked amazing. But it was just so cliché.

Asher's voice called out, "Nana!"

"Be right there!"

She wasn't dreading the party, but other than Aiden, she probably wasn't going to know anybody. Aiden told her Steven was working, so Whitney wasn't going to be there, and Miles's wife, Bridget, used to date Zach Rudolf. Miles swooped in the second they broke up, so Miles was not a favorite with most of the group who were at the Cape over the Fourth.

"Just an opportunity to meet new people," she reminded herself, then headed downstairs.

Her grandson's eyes got big when he saw her.

"It's just my Halloween costume, buddy," she told him with a laugh. "Like your Spiderman one."

He turned toward his mother with an accusatory hand on his hip. "You said we weren't trick-or-treating for two more days!"

Chloe gave him a patient smile. "Nana isn't trick-or-treating, Ash. She's going to a costume party with her boyfriend."

This time his indignation was directed at Dakota.

*"You have a boyfriend?!"*

Dakota glared at Chloe, then softened her features when she kneeled down so she was eye-level with Asher.

“He’s my friend, and he’s a boy I like to spend time with.”

Chloe snorted. “And share cheery *ohs* with.” She emphasized the “ohs”.

Asher nodded knowingly. “The grown-up kind that she can’t get at ALDI’s.”

“Exactly.”

She’d been just about to usher them out the door when the doorbell rang. A quick glance at the clock on the wall told her he was ten minutes early.

*Dammit.*

Her two worlds were about to collide—precisely what she’d been trying to avoid.

“I’ll get it!” Asher cried and ran toward the door.

“Stop!” Chloe demanded and marched toward him already only a few feet from the entry. “What have I told you about answering the door?”

Her grandson looked at the ground and mumbled, “It’s a grownup’s job.”

“And are you a grownup?”

“No.”

“No,” Chloe agreed. In one hand, she held his while she opened the door with the other.

“Aiden! Hi! Nice to see you again, and... who’s this?”

Dakota heard him say, “These are my daughters, Brianna and Kailey.”

*He brought his girls?*

Why would he do that—especially without telling her first?

“Hi, I’m Chloe—Dakota’s daughter. And this guy,” she put her hands on Asher’s shoulders, “is my son, Asher.”

Kailey smiled and waved at the little guy staring at her. “Hi, Asher.”

“Please, come in,” Chloe said, stepping aside. Ash hid behind her legs, studying the newcomers.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Kailey said as she stepped through the door, followed by Brianna, then Aiden.

“Nice meeting you. Is Barney here?” Brianna asked as she looked around.

“How do you know Barney?” Asher demanded.

“We met him on a hike last summer.”

Her answer appeased him, and he replied, “Oh. Barney’s staying at my house.”

Aiden saw Dakota and broke out into a wide grin.

He approached her, and with a fake, backwoods Southern drawl, used a line from the movie. “What kind of name is Ed for a pretty thing like you?”

He looked great—his hair was sticking up everywhere, she could only imagine how much product he had to have used. And his outfit was spot on.

She couldn't help but return his grin as she barked Holly Hunter's line, "Short for Edwina. Turn to the right."

They both burst out laughing as their offspring looked on, confused. Which only made the moment more special, like they were sharing a secret.

Asher was still staring at Kailey and finally said, "I know you. You helped me pick out my costume."

Kailey gave him a sweet smile. "Good to see you again, Asher! Did you end up going with the Spiderman one?"

He nodded enthusiastically. There had been no changing his mind after the pretty blonde girl had told him she thought Spiderman was the perfect costume choice.

Aiden moved closer to Dakota to murmur in her ear, "I hope you don't mind I brought the girls before dropping them off. They wanted to see us dressed up together."

That made perfect sense, and yet she still didn't like it. But there was no way she'd ever say that out loud. Even in her head, she knew it made her sound like an asshole.

"Of course, I don't mind," she said with a smile. *Just don't make a habit out of it.*

Again, she kept that last part to herself.

"We need pictures!" Chloe declared.

"Yes!" Brianna and Kailey agreed in unison.

For the next five minutes, Aiden and Dakota posed for pictures like they were going to prom.

Aiden handed Brianna his phone to snap some shots with, and Dakota did the same, handing hers to Chloe.

“I want to be in the picture,” Asher whined.

“You don’t have your costume, Ash,” his mom told him.

“I’ll be right back! I need to show Kailey!”

Without a second look back, he bolted toward the door, and Chloe took off after him.

“Asher Todd Brighton! Stop right there!”

But he was too excited and kept going like he didn’t hear her.

Chloe cast them a sheepish look. “I’m sorry. Do you mind waiting for him to put his costume on?”

“Not at all,” Aiden said with a warm smile, obviously charmed by the three-year-old’s antics, and Chloe disappeared after her son.

Dakota took a breath through her nose and slowly exhaled it quietly.

“Can I get you ladies something to drink?” She opened her refrigerator and examined its contents. “Orange juice? Soda? Water? Chocolate milk?”

Aiden chuckled. “Tell me you have a three-year-old who visits regularly without telling me you have a three-year-old who visits regularly.”

“He’s not allowed soda.”

“No, I meant the chocolate milk.”

“Oh,” she felt a small blush creep up her cheeks as she admitted, “Well, I buy that for me.” Then quickly added, “But I do share.”

He winked at her. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

His daughters were watching their exchange with interest, so, Dakota coughed as she averted her attention back to the girls. “I’m happy to share with you, too, if that’s what you want.”

“Water is fine, thanks,” Kailey said.

Brianna agreed. “Yes, water, please.”

She felt their eyes on her as she got the glasses from the cupboard and felt self-conscious in the silence while she filled them with ice and water from the refrigerator door.

“You look amazing, Sunshine,” he told her as she handed the water to the girls.

Dakota glanced down with a shy smile. “Thanks. So do you.” She shifted her weight as she continued, “I’m sorry about Asher. It’s the first year where he really understands what’s going on. And since Kailey told him she liked Spiderman the best, he’s been practicing his web-throwing skills. I have no idea how he even learned that, since there’s no way Chloe would actually let him watch the movie at his age.”

As soon as she said that, “Spiderman” came bursting through her door, throwing imaginary webs all over the kitchen.

“Oh, thank goodness, you’re here, Spiderman!” Kailey cried out. “You scared the bad guys away!”

He put his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest.

“Wrong superhero, buddy,” Chloe said as she walked. “That’s Superman’s pose.”

“Oh hush,” Dakota told her, then turned to Asher. “Thanks for saving the day, Spiderman! It’s too bad my grandson isn’t here to meet you.”

He pulled off his mask. “It’s me, Nana!”

“Oh my goodness!” She put her hand to her chest. “That is a great costume, Ash. You had us all fooled.”

“I’m going to get so much candy!” He paused and looked Aiden and Dakota over. “Are you going to get candy tonight?”

Aiden subtly squeezed her hip but let her do the talking.

“No, we’re not trick-or-treating. We’re just going to a grownup party where everyone will be dressed up.” She glanced at the oven clock. “Speaking of which, we should probably get going.”

“You need a picture of me first,” Aiden proclaimed.

“Oh, yes, we do!”

She and Aiden assembled in front of the wall where they’d been posing earlier. Asher pulled his mask down and stood in front of them in a web-throwing pose.

After their daughters finished snapping pictures, Asher lifted the mask up, walked over to Kailey, and grabbed her hand.

“You should be in the picture, too.”

Kailey laughed as she set her phone on the counter and let the little boy lead her back to Dakota and Aiden.

That made Aiden chuckle, but Brianna put one hand on her hip and indignantly asked, “What about me?”

Asher barely glanced at her. “I guess you can be in it, too.”

“Gee, thanks,” Brianna grumbled as she stepped forward.

He directed her to stand next to Dakota while he put himself and Kailey in the center, with Aiden on the other side of his daughter.

Chloe shook her head as she watched her son doing his best to charm the blonde teenager.

Raising the phone, she asked, “Ready? One, two, three,” then snapped several pictures before scrolling through to look at them.

“Can you get some on my phone?” Kailey asked her as she grabbed her phone off the counter and unlocked it before handing it to Chloe.

“Mine too, please,” Dakota said.

They posed for a few more shots, then Dakota said, “Okay, we really need to get going.”

Kailey and Brianna dumped the remaining contents of their glasses in the sink, then Brianna placed them in the near-empty dishwasher.

“Thank you,” Dakota told her. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Aiden scoffed. “Yes, she did.”

Kailey rolled her eyes as she walked by and lowered her voice, like she was mimicking her dad, “I’m not raising wild animals.”

He followed her toward the door. “Well, I’m not!”



Dakota reassured him. “You have very nice daughters.”

“Who know how to be polite and clean up after themselves,” he grumbled.

Kailey and Bri reached the door first, then turned around.

Kailey waved at the little boy still staring at her like he’d never seen anyone so beautiful.

“Bye, Asher! Have a great time trick-or-treating on Monday!”

“Get lots of candy!” Bri added.

All of a sudden, his shyness returned, and he pulled his mask back down before hiding behind his mom’s legs again.

“Nice meeting you, Chloe,” Kailey said before walking out the door. Brianna agreed, then followed her.

Dakota left next, trailed closely by Aiden, but then she stopped short, causing Aiden to bump into her.

“I almost forgot!”

She dashed back inside and grabbed the gift bag off the counter.

“What’s that?”

“A hostess gift.” She walked by him and threw over her shoulder, “My mother didn’t raise wild animals either.”

Dakota felt his hand at her waist as his breath at the shell of her ear made her body tingle. “You sure about that, Sunshine?”

She turned to face him with a smirk.

He returned the smirk, then slipped back into character.  
“Oh, that’s right. You’re just a little desert flower.”

She looked up into his baby blues and realized she was in trouble, that’s what she was.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

*Aiden*

“That was rigged,” he grouched as he shut the driver’s door of his Audi.

“Oh, come on. Barbie and Ken were adorable. Besides, we got second place”—she waved the restaurant gift card they won at him—“and there were some great costumes we were competing with.”

“I don’t care. Ours was the best.”

“Next year, we’ll have to remember to be on-trend.”

*Next year?*

He liked the idea of that, and even more, he liked that she was planning on sticking around for that long.

He reached for her hand with a smile. “Okay, that’ll be the strategy next year.”

They drove in comfortable silence for a few minutes, then he asked, “I’m assuming since you didn’t bring an overnight bag, that you want me to take you home.”

“That depends. Did *you* bring a bag?”

“I don’t like being presumptuous, so no.”

“Aw... well, maybe you could still come in for a nightcap.”

“A nightcap? Do people really do that, or is it just code for sex?”

“I can’t speak for everyone, but I was using it as a polite way of asking you to come in and have your way with me.”

Her proposition made his cock move, and not for the first time that night. Every time he’d looked over and found her chatting with someone, wearing her genuine smile, he found himself wanting to find a closet to fuck her in.

“I would love to come in and have my way with you.” He brought her knuckles to his lips and kissed them. “And I just remembered; I have a bag I keep in the car for when I go to the gym.”

He glanced at her and found that smile he’d come to love.

“Perfect.”

Aiden couldn’t have described the whole night better himself.

He squeezed her hand he was still holding. “Thanks for going with me tonight. Everyone loved you.”

“How do you know?”

“They told me.”

“They told you?”

“Yeah. I can’t count how many people said how cute we are together and how happy they were for me. Although, I think what they really meant was they were glad someone as sweet as you was putting up with someone as curmudgeonly as me.”

“You know, you keep saying you’re this wicked grumpy old guy... I’ve yet to see it.”

“That’s because you bring out the good in me, Sunshine.”

It wasn't a lie. Being with her improved his days tenfold. She made him want to be a better man.

She pulled her fingers from his grip and squeezed his inner thigh. "Hopefully I bring the bad out, too."

Aiden returned the favor, only he moved his hand higher under her skirt and traced the trim along her panties.

"What do you think?"

"I think you probably should get us home for that nightcap."

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*Dakota*

She woke from her peaceful slumber and reached for Aiden, only to find his side of the bed empty. His spot was still warm, so she knew he hadn't gone far.

A quick glance at the open bathroom door with the light off ruled that out.

After a quick stop to brush her teeth and hair, she pulled her white, fluffy robe around her naked body and headed toward the stairs in search of her boyfriend.

*Wait.*

*Not boyfriend.*

Friend who's a boy who she likes to spend time with.

Chloe's smartass comment rang in her ears, "And share cheery *ohs* with."

The kind not found at the grocery store.

She pulled the robe tight around her chest with a smile, thinking back to all the O's he'd given her last night.

Aiden was the most amazing lover she'd ever had. By far. He seemed to be so attuned to her body. And if Dakota were being honest with herself—she was to his, too.

They were two imperfect people who, together, made a perfect pair.

Was she stupid for ignoring her visions and allowing herself to get involved with him?

Maybe.

But she was older and wiser this time around. She'd keep her heart safe and savor every moment with him while it lasted.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he called from the table—a cup of coffee in one hand and his phone in the other. “I thought we could invite Chloe, Todd, and Asher to go out to breakfast with us.”

“Oh...” She needed to think fast. To stall for a little time, she opened the cupboard and took out a mug, then snapped a K-Cup into the Keurig and pressed start before turning back to him.

“Todd likes to make a big Sunday breakfast for them. It's a little tradition they have.”

His face fell, and she almost reconsidered.

Almost.

“Are you not going because I’m here? Because I don’t want to keep you from having breakfast with your family.”

“No, no. I don’t usually join them. You and I can go out.” A smirk escaped her lips before she continued, “Although that didn’t work out very well for us last time.”

He stood and stalked toward her until she was boxed in between the counter and his body.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Sunshine. No one will ever doubt who I’m with again.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, and how are you planning on doing that?”

Her stomach dropped to her feet when he grabbed her left hand and kissed her ring finger.

With a twinkle in his eye, he replied, “I’ll just make it obvious. You’re not opposed to PDA, are you?”

“Well, no.” Then she thought better of it and clarified, “As long as it’s within reason.”

“You’re no fun.”

Her arms slid around his neck causing her robe to gape at the top, leaving him with an eyeful of her boobs.

“Why, Dr. Matthews. I think history suggests otherwise.”

He took a step back, untied her robe, and pulled it open. As he looked her naked body up and down, Dakota noticed the bulge in his boxer briefs grow. It made her feel beautiful and her body broke out in goosebumps.

He dragged his finger around her stiff nipple, murmuring, “I stand corrected.”

Dipping his head, his lips suctioned around her other rosy peak, causing her to grip the counter in order to keep her balance as she closed her eyes and let out a soft moan. He switched to her other boob, and she wove her fingers into his hair to hold him against her. As always, he knew exactly how to touch her so desire pooled in her belly.

She felt Aiden’s hands cup her ass, and he released her tit with a *pop* before lifting her onto the counter.

He pulled his underwear down so his cock was jutting out proudly as he stepped between her thighs.

“Are you wet for me, Sunshine?” he asked as he ran the tip along her folds.

“I’m assuming that’s a rhetorical question.”

He raised one eyebrow in warning. “Careful, baby, or I might bend you over and spank your ass red before I fuck you.”

“Next time,” she replied cheekily as she tilted her hips slightly, and his cock easily slid inside her pussy.

Aiden gripped her hips and closed his eyes. “Fuuuck, you always feel so damn good.”

“So do you.”

His lips captured hers as he thrust in and out with a steady rhythm. A soft whimper escaped her lips when he broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers to stare into her eyes as he fucked her.



Except he wasn't fucking her—he was making love to her, and it made her feel vulnerable.

She quickly closed her eyes and gently dragged her nails down his back. He reached between them to circle her clit with this thumb.

Her body began to tingle when she felt her orgasm creeping up from her toes.

“Look at me, baby,” he ordered as he increased the pressure on her clit.

Dakota felt compelled to obey and opened her eyes and was immediately struck with how red his aura was. With his free hand, he dug his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck.

“I fucking love...”

Her body tensed as her breath caught in her throat. She didn't know if he sensed her panic about how he was going to finish that thought, and that's what made him pause but relief coursed through her when he tried again while increasing the pressure and speed on her sensitive bud.

“I fucking love making you come. Come for me, Sunshine.”

Now *that*, she could do.

Her body quivered as she fell over the edge, calling out his name when the climax overtook her.

Aiden quickly followed, pushing deep inside her as he let out a long groan.

Leaning down, he planted a soft kiss on her lips.

“I could start and end every day just like this.”

So could she. And that scared the hell out of her.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

*Aiden*

He looked up from the article he was reading on his phone when James and Steven loudly set their trays down at his table in the cafeteria.

“Are you guys having a work bromance?” Aiden quipped with a smirk as the two took their seats. “Because it seems like every time I’m in here, you two are together.”

“I think we just get hungry at the same time,” James offered.

“You mean like at lunchtime?” Steven supplied as he put his napkin on his lap. “And you’re one to talk about having a bromance... I hear you and Miles have been having one.”

“What? Hardly. I mean, I went to his Halloween party...”

“And he set you up with Bridget’s smokin’ hot friend, Denise,” James added.

“How do you know Denise?”

“Zach dated Bridget for like, forever, remember? She’d be at their parties.”

“Oh, that’s right. Yeah, we went out, but I ended up taking Dakota home and leaving her with Dakota’s date.”

“So, I heard. That’s some legendary shit you pulled.”

“How did you hear that?” Aiden gave Steven an accusatory look, causing the other man to throw his hands up, chest high.

“It wasn’t me!”

Aiden hadn’t pegged Miles to be one to gossip, which is part of the reason he liked the man.

“Denise is friends with one of the nurses on the sixth floor. I guess she’s been dating the guy since that night.”

That made him chuckle. “I told Dakota they’d hit it off.”

Aiden normally hated being the topic of gossip, but at least there was a funny-meet-cute attached to it.

“Are you and your girlfriend doing anything for Thanksgiving?”

*My girlfriend.*

*Whoa.*

That was the first time their relationship had been categorized like that out loud. It was kind of weird hearing it phrased that way.

“I’m not sure. We haven’t talked about it yet.”

“Do your girls like her?”

“Yeah...”

Steven raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound very convincing.”

“They just haven’t spent a lot of time together yet.”

Aiden had tried after Miles and Bridget’s party, since it seemed to have gone well when he brought the girls to her house. But Dakota always had an excuse about why she wasn’t available when he had the girls. And he’d yet to spend any more time with Chloe and Asher, let alone even meet Todd.

“Well, the holidays will be a good chance to remedy that,” James said.

Aiden thought so, too, but was worried Dakota wasn't going to come around by then. That, however, was not information he felt like sharing with them. He needed to change the subject.

“You and Zach still double dating strippers?”

James glanced down, like he was embarrassed, then mumbled, “Zach's getting serious with Steve's neighbor on the Cape.”

“What about you? After the Fourth, I half-expected you'd give your notice and move to California to be with Yvette.”

James's face fell, and it was obvious Aiden had struck a nerve.

*Shit.*

He glanced at Steven, hoping his look conveyed his plea for help in getting out of whatever he'd just stepped in.

Steve quickly interjected, “Hey, did you get my wedding invitation?”

*Thank God for quick-thinking friends.*

“I did, and I even sent back my RSVP.” He'd learned his lesson when he forgot to send a reply to Miles for his party. “*And* I already made my reservation at the Dragonfly when I was there.”

“Awesome. You're bringing Dakota, right?”

“Yep. She made a note in her RSVP that we were each other's plus one so you don't count us twice.”

“Whit’s in charge of all that, but I’m glad you two are together. As is the rest of the hospital staff. I don’t think you’ve made anyone cry in almost a month.”

Aiden rubbed his chin with his middle finger.

“What were you saying about fucking off?”

That made Steven and James laugh out loud.

“Just try to keep her around. She’s good for you.”

That was the plan, he just wasn’t convinced it was *her* plan.

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“Do you have to work on Thanksgiving?”

Her question surprised him—in a good way. He’d been holding off volunteering to work a double shift in case Dakota asked him to join her and her family. He got the impression that’s where this conversation was headed. At least that was what he hoped.

“I’ll be done by two in the afternoon.”

“Are you spending it with the girls?”

“No, it’s Susan’s turn this year. I’ll have them next year.”

“Do you want to come over after you get off work?”

Was she finally going to let him spend time with her family? Maybe James was right—the holidays were a good time to remedy not knowing each other’s families.

“I could make a traditional dinner,” she continued. “Or we could do something out of the box.”

“Out of the box? Like what?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. We could make tacos or get Chinese takeout. Or whatever we want to do.”

“You don’t want to do the traditional thing for Asher?”

“Asher isn’t going to be there. They’re going to Todd’s family for dinner this year.”

*Oh.*

So, she wasn’t inviting him to get to know her family after all.

Still, spending Thanksgiving with her beat working a double shift. Actually, it beat almost anything else he could think of.

Except maybe spending time with her and their families.

Aiden knew he just needed to be patient. But some days that was easier said than done.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

*Aiden*

“You’re having *what* for dinner tomorrow?” Brianna exclaimed as she poured cereal into her bowl.

“Chinese food,” Aiden repeated.

“That actually sounds good,” Kailey said as she took the Honey Nut Cheerios box from her sister. “Better than what we’re going to have.”

“You’re not going to the club?” Aiden asked.

That was Susan’s go-to for Thanksgiving ever since they could afford to be members—dinner at the country club. She’d said it just seemed silly to have leftovers for days, but he’d wistfully missed that. He remembered that being part of his favorite thing about the holiday when he was younger—eating leftovers until he returned to school on Monday. He would secretly be glad when they’d spend the holiday with his parents, and his mom would send them home with bags and containers of food.

“Yeah, we are. But eating Chinese and watching movies sounds like more fun than going to the stuffy country club and getting the side-eye from mom for using the wrong fork.”

“We’re watching football, not movies,” Aiden corrected his oldest. He wasn’t touching the other stuff.

“I’d still take that over what we’re doing.”

“Well, next year you guys are with me, so it’s a plan.”



“What if Dakota doesn’t want to do that next year?”  
Brianna chimed in.

Kailey turned to him. “Do you think you’ll still be seeing her next year?”

“I’d like to think so...”

Although, if he were a gambling man, he wouldn’t bet on it. She’d only lowered her walls enough to date him—and that was simply because the Universe had practically beat her over the head with it. She was always careful not to talk about the future, even when he tried during pillow talk.

He’d finally found a woman he wanted to settle down with, and she wanted no such thing.

How’s that for the Cosmos having a sense of humor?

“I hope you are,” Bri said before taking a bite of cereal.  
“I like her.”

“Me, too,” Kailey agreed.

Aiden quietly added, “Me three.”

Except he knew it was more than like, and that worried him.

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### *Dakota*

Traffic was light during the drive to Golden Dragon to pick up their order. She’d waited to put it in because even though Aiden said he should be done by two, she knew just by

dating him for the last month that wasn't a guarantee. He'd promised to let her know if he was going to be late.

When she hadn't heard from him by one thirty, she ordered their food and was taken aback when they told her it would take forty minutes.

A lot more people than she realized must be skipping the traditional dinner this year.

Maybe they were all single like she was.

*Wait—am I still considered single?*

*Kind of?*

She'd check the single box if she were filling out a form, but she was exclusive with Aiden.

Did that make him her boyfriend?

Good grief, she didn't have the mental energy for this.

She'd sent him a text and told him the code to open the garage because she knew he'd beat her to her place. At least if he really left the hospital on time.

He'd responded he was picking up a bottle of wine and then he'd be over.

A few minutes later, he sent her another text.

**Aiden: What kind of wine goes with Chinese food?**

**Dakota: I think any white should be fine.**

**Aiden: Any requests?**

**Dakota: Sauvignon Blanc.**

**Aiden: On it.**

**Dakota: And maybe dessert?**

**Aiden: Already bought a few pies at the bakery yesterday.**

**Dakota: My hero!**

He really was the most wonderful man she'd ever met. And if she were giving anyone else advice, she'd tell them the future wasn't predetermined, and not to let a silly vision dictate their life.

But the last time she ignored her vision, it had bit her in the ass. Hard.

Not that she wasn't grateful for the way her life turned out in the end. But sixteen, pregnant, and alone was not something she'd wish on anyone.

*I'm not a child anymore*, she reminded herself.

That didn't mean she wasn't susceptible to heartbreak. And she'd been embracing her gift now for almost twenty years and knew better than to ignore her visions.

The only thing she couldn't figure out is why the Universe had insisted on bringing them together.

A smile lit up her face when she pulled into her drive and saw his Audi. Maybe they weren't supposed to be together forever, and maybe he was going to break her heart someday, but it wasn't today.

And she was going to enjoy her time with him while it lasted.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

*Aiden*

He scooped lo mein noodles onto his plate, next to the sesame chicken, and beef with broccoli.

“I can honestly say I’ve never not had turkey and mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving.”

“Me neither,” Dakota replied as she took a bite of food. “Normally, we go to my parents’ house, but they’re on a cruise this year.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, and she wrinkled her nose when she looked down at her plate and murmured, “I don’t think I’m a fan. It doesn’t feel like Thanksgiving. Even with the Lions playing on TV.”

“I know what you mean. Maybe if we incorporated some traditions...”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. We always say what we’re thankful for while we eat. And when I was growing up, there was always a trash talking game of cards before dessert.”

“That’s so funny, we did the same thing growing up. Although once my brothers got older, and if the weather was nice, the card game turned into a touch football game.”

Aiden replied, “Football probably wouldn’t be very much fun with just the two of us.” Then added hopefully, “Maybe next year we can get our families together, and we’ll have enough people to play.”

“Maybe.”

She couldn't be more noncommittal. It didn't sit well with him, but he tried not to let it bother him.

“So, what are you thankful for this year?” Maybe she'd include meeting him.

Chewing slowly, as if contemplating her answer, she swallowed and said, “My family, of course...”

“Of course.”

“My business is growing.”

He nodded. “I'm so proud of you.”

She looked at him with a soft smile. “And I'm dating a sexy heart doctor I adore. Although, allegedly he's also grumpy, but I've yet to see it.”

That made him feel better than he had a minute ago.

He leaned over and planted a chaste kiss to her lips.

“I can't imagine there ever being a time when you will.”

Her brows creased, and he cocked his head in confusion. “Isn't that a good thing?”

“No! It means you're not showing me the real you. You're giving me the polished version.”

He thought about it for a second.

“I'll admit, I'm not eager for you to see my faults. But the point I was trying to make is when I'm around you, I don't feel grumpy. I feel the opposite of grumpy.”

A small smile escaped her lips. “Oh.”

Her smile disappeared after a beat, and she added, “I’m sure you won’t always feel that way.”

It was his turn to furrow his brow.

“What makes you say that?”

“I just....”

She faded off without finishing, so he prompted, “You just what?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it with a deep exhale out her nose.

Aiden pressed, “Tell me.”

“Just... just I don’t see us together in the future.”

Her declaration felt like a punch to the stomach, and he chose his next words carefully.

“You don’t *want* to be together in the future or you can’t picture it?”

“Every vision I have of us includes our relationship ending.”

*Ouch.*

He’d give her points for honesty, but it still stung.

“Is that why it always feels like you have one foot out the door?”

She pulled her neck back with her eyebrows raised, like his question surprised her.

“Do I do that?”

Aiden shrugged. “That’s how it feels.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize I was doing that. But, yeah, I guess I am protecting myself. The last time I ignored a recurring vision like this, I wound up alone and pregnant at sixteen.”

“You have a *recurring* vision of us breaking up?”

She looked down at the table while whispering, “Yes. Of you leaving me heartbroken.”

*Well, that’s not good.*

“Do you get an indication *why* we break up?”

There were tears in her eyes when she finally glanced back up at him as she shook her head.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this helpless.

“So, what do we do?”

“I-I guess we enjoy it while it lasts?”

What kind of answer was that?

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

*Dakota*

The same college-age girl from the time they'd visited in October greeted them from behind the counter with a big smile.

"Welcome back to the Dragonfly!"

"Thanks. It's nice to see you, Taylor."

"It's nice to see you, too, Dakota."

"Are we the last to arrive?"

"No, one of the first, actually. The only people here so far are James and Yvette, and Zach. Steven and Hope's parents from California aren't due in for another few hours. Their other two sisters don't get in until tomorrow, but they're staying at Steven's house on the Cape after the wedding."

"Wait," Aiden said as he set their bags down. He folded the one carrying his suit over the two carryon-size suitcases while Dakota held the garment bag containing her dress for the wedding tomorrow night. "Did you say James *and* Yvette?"

The younger girl smiled. "Yeah. Yvette is actually one of the owners and lives on the property full-time, although I'm not sure for how much longer."

"Is she going back to California?" Dakota asked.

"Oh, no. James is trying to convince her to go to Boston. He doesn't like her here without him. He's worried she's going to get snowed in and go into labor. He even bought an SUV with four-wheel drive—just in case."



Aiden looked at Dakota incredulously. “This is all news to me. The last time I talked to him, which wasn’t that long ago, he was still single and not going to be a dad.”

“We obviously have some catching up to do,” Dakota said with a laugh.

A knowing look appeared on Taylor’s face as she clicked buttons on her computer.

“I think they’re in the salon right now if you want the scoop.”

“Maybe we’ll swing by there once we get settled,” Aiden told her.

“Steven and Whitney are hosting happy hour at five, and dinner will be served at six.” Taylor slid key cards in the trifold that highlighted all the bed and breakfast had to offer, then handed it to Aiden. “Your room is all ready for you. Number Eleven. Just take the hall after the stairs, and it’s almost at the end on the right. The WiFi password is ‘Wedding,’ and I’ve included two key cards.”

Aiden took the offered brochure and reached down to drape the bag holding his suit over his arm.

“Would you like help with your bags?” Taylor asked.

“Nah, I got it,” he replied before extending the telescopic handles on the two bags and walking toward the stairs.

“I already tried,” Dakota said with a smirk and a shake of her head. “He’s stubborn but sweet.”

“You’re lucky.”

She watched him for a beat before conceding, “Yeah, he’s great.”

Ever since she’d confessed her vision to him on Thanksgiving, things had been noticeably different. He no longer talked about a future with her or tried to plan anything too far in advance. He’d stopped inviting her over if his girls were staying with him, and if he spent the night at her house, he was up and dressed, ready to leave, by the time she woke up.

Not that she blamed him for cooling things a little.

It’s hard to get serious with someone after they tell you there’s no future with them.

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*Aiden*

He didn’t understand her.

One day she’s telling him they have an expiration date, she just doesn’t know exactly when it is, and the next she’s telling the young woman at the Dragonfly’s front desk how great he is.

He’d spent almost all of December trying to figure out how to be in this relationship and fall *out* of love with her, with no luck.

Dakota was brilliant, kind, beautiful, and made his dick so fucking hard just looking at her, there was no way he could

be anything but in love with her. Probably not even once they broke up—something she was convinced was inevitable.

And it kind of pissed him off a little.

Aiden respected her gift, or as he preferred to call it—her intuition—but this wasn't fair to him. He didn't think he deserved to be punished for a crime he hadn't actually committed, but she'd had a "vision" about.

She'd already decided he was going to hurt her when he'd given her no reason to think that way. If anything, ever since she told him she saw him leaving her heartbroken in the future, he'd taken extra care with everything he said and did to make sure he didn't inadvertently hurt her feelings with a careless word or action.

He didn't know what else he could do.

They approached their room door, and she said, "Here, I've got it," as she took the trifold from his hand, slipped the key card out, and waved it in front of the door. The green light came on and she turned the knob.

Aiden appreciated the view when she entered in front of him. And he didn't mean the room, although Dakota let out a little squeal when she noticed the Christmas tree decorated in pink and purple in the corner.

The fire in the fireplace was going, and on the small table next to it, there was a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket with two champagne flutes and an envelope covered in hearts with their names on it. He took out the card and smiled when he read it out loud.

The left side was in flowing penmanship.

*Dear Aiden and Dakota,*

*Thank you for being here. Steven and I are so happy you're celebrating our wedding with us and are thrilled that you're here as a couple. We like to think we played a small role in bringing you two together. <dusts shoulders>*

*We're the luckiest people in the world to have found each other and can't wait to say I do tomorrow in front of our closest friends and family.*

*Thank you again for being a part of our special day.*

*Love, Whitney*

On the right was the block writing that he immediately recognized as Steven's.

*Thanks for being here to witness me marrying the love of my life. I obviously did something right to deserve such a wonderful woman.*

*Have some champagne, relax, and enjoy your time together.*

*And in the words of the Golden Girls—thank you for being a friend.*

*Cheers—*

*Steven*

“That’s so sweet,” Dakota cooed.

Aiden dropped the card on the table and pulled the bottle from the ice bucket to examine the label.

“They sprang for the good stuff, too,” he said with a grin as he removed the foil around the top and untwisted the wire cage that ensured the cork didn’t explode.

After a brief tug, the cork was free and only a little of the bottle’s contents overflowed on the table before he poured two glasses.

Handing her one, he held the flute aloft.

“To a wonderful weekend celebrating with our friends. And to starting the new year right by being with you.”

“Cheers,” she said as she clinked her glass against his.

He took a sip, then mused, “Who’d have thought last Fourth of July that we’d be here at the end of year for Steven and Whitney’s wedding.”

“Together.”

Aiden studied her face for a minute. She was so damn beautiful, and that red lipstick she was wearing was just calling to him to kiss it off.

He placed his flute on the table, then reached for hers and set it next to his before pulling her tight against him.

“Yeah, together.”

As his lips crashed down on hers, he couldn’t help but wonder, *but for how long?*

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

*Dakota*

*Damn this man knows how to kiss.*

She found herself gripping his biceps as his tongue plundered her mouth, and she pressed her body tightly against his.

Her pussy tingled as her need for him grew. Her body began to feel flush underneath her sweater.

“You’re wearing too many clothes, Sunshine,” he murmured as he lifted the bottom of her beige cable knit and pulled it over her head, so she was left in nothing but her red satin bra and jeans.

Dakota tucked her hands under his Henley and ran her nails along the ridges of his six-pack.

“So are you.”

Without a word, he reached behind his neck and tugged the collar until the shirt was over his head.

She let out a sigh as she looked him over. He was, by far, the sexiest, most handsome man she’d ever known.

The corner of his mouth turned up. “What was the sigh for?”

“It’s probably a good thing you’re grumpy at work. Otherwise, I doubt you would ever get any work done with the number of nurses who’d be throwing themselves at you.”

He threw back his head and laughed.

“That’s definitely not a problem. Most nurses steer clear of me.”

“Is it bad that I’m glad to hear that?”

He slipped his arms around her waist, the warmth of his skin against hers made her break out in goosebumps, and she leaned against him while he looked down at her.

“Even if I wasn’t a salty bastard, you’d never have to worry about another woman. I only have eyes for you.”

That made her toes curl, and she broke his gaze as she tried to disguise her smile.

With his right hand, he lifted her chin, so she had no choice but to look at him when he continued. “I think being monogamous with someone you love is the sexiest aphrodisiac there is.”

She couldn’t disagree.

*Wait.*

*Did he just say—?*

As if reading her mind, he leaned down to murmur against her lips, “I’m in love with you, Dakota Douglas.”

An image of them laughing as they stood on the beach holding hands popped into her head.

This should have been when she told him she was in love with him, too. Because she was. Her soul sang and her body thrummed whenever they were together.

Yet she didn’t say anything because the next reel that played in her mind was the one that always followed; the one of him walking away while tears streamed down her face.

She stared at the flames crackling in the fireplace, as if they would have the answer to how she should respond.

She knew she'd waited too long to reply when his hand holding her chin dropped away, and he kissed her forehead with a sad smile before he released his hold on her waist and stepped back.

"I probably shouldn't have said anything."

Her voice was whisper quiet when she responded. "I—I think I already knew. Just like I'm sure you know how I feel about you."

"That's just it—I *don't* know you feel. When we're together, you act like you care about me and like there's no place you'd rather be."

"I do care about you—"

He cut her off. "But you're careful not to let me in too far. You don't want to spend time with my girls, and you won't let me anywhere near your family. We only spend time together when we can be alone. I want to take things to the next level while you're holding me at arm's length. I'm not sure how much longer my heart can take it."

She felt her stomach drop to her feet as tears filled her eyes.

"What are you saying? Do you want to break up?"

"No, Sunshine. I want to do the *opposite* of break up, but you won't let me in. I'm only allowed a tiny sliver of your heart, and I want the whole damn thing. If I thought being patient was the answer, I'd wait. But you're convinced that we



aren't meant to be because of some vision you keep having, and I don't know how to combat that."

A single tear slid down her cheek as she whispered, "I don't either. I'm sorry."

He gave her another sad smile. "Me too. More than you know."

More tears followed and she was unable to brush them away fast enough. She'd give anything for him to pull her close again, where she could burrow her head against his chest so he couldn't see her crying.

Aiden handed her tissues and kissed her temple.

"Let's get ready for cocktail hour."

That was the last thing Dakota wanted to do. She wanted to get naked and lose herself in him. Where she didn't have to think and worry and could just *be*. Where she felt safe and loved—in Aiden's arms.

But she couldn't find the words to tell him that, so she nodded her head and escaped to the bathroom.

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*Aiden*

He still wasn't sure he believed in auras, but even he couldn't deny the Universe had conspired to bring him and Dakota together. But he also believed in gut feelings, and right now, his gut was all twisted up with an ominous feeling this weekend was going to be their last.

She came out of the bathroom in a black dress that hugged her waist while the skirt flared. The fabric gave the illusion of crossing at her chest, emphasizing her incredible tits. She wore a rhinestone lariat necklace that shimmered in the light and drew his eye to the hint of cleavage that her dress revealed.

Her hair was piled high on her head, and her long dangling earrings matched her necklace. Her makeup was dramatic, like she'd worn at the Animal Rescue gala, and her lips were red and shiny and would look incredible wrapped around his dick.

The black stilettos completed the ensemble.

“You are fucking stunning.”

She glanced down and smoothed invisible wrinkles at her stomach. “What? This old thing?”

It felt good when they both laughed.

Aiden refilled their glasses, emptying the bottle in the process, and handed hers to her.

“Thanks,” she said and immediately took a long pull before telling him, “You look very handsome yourself. I love that suit.”

“Thank you.”

For a guy who didn't have to wear a suit to work, he certainly owned a lot of them. He couldn't remember the last time he'd worn the one he had on, or the one he brought for tomorrow night. Fortunately, other than when he lost fifteen pounds after finding out about Susan and Bjorn, his weight

rarely fluctuated, so he never had to worry about them not fitting.

He gulped his champagne down and set the empty flute on the table with a wink. “I knew I’d have to keep up with my hot date.”

She gave him a polite smile before taking another long drink, then set her glass next to his.

“Shall we go?”

He offered her his arm. “Yes, ma’am.”

She looped her arm through his and held his biceps as they walked out the door.

If there was one thing they’d mastered in their short time together, it was ignoring the elephant in the room.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

*Dakota*

The salon was buzzing when they walked in. There were faces she immediately recognized—including Zoe from the Cape, and she bit back a knowing smile when she noticed Zach was glued to her side.

Whitney was glowing while Steven's face lit up every time he looked at his bride-to-be. Dakota was so happy for her friends. Their bliss was palpable.

Aiden laced his fingers through hers and walked them toward the bar.

"More champagne?" he asked as they approached the counter.

"Just one more until dinner. I haven't eaten since breakfast, so it's starting to hit me."

Aiden told the man, "One champagne and a whiskey on the rocks," then turned around and surveyed the crowd. He nodded toward Steven and Whitney laughing with Zoe and Zach. "They're so happy."

"Which ones?"

He chuckled at her question. "Both, it appears."

She saw dark clouds ahead for Zoe and Zach, but sunshine peeking through if they managed to weather the storm.

"They're a good match."

He threw her question back at her. "Which ones?"

“Both.”

Aiden considered the new couple for a minute. “Yeah, I think you’re right. Zoe seems perfect for Zach. She definitely won’t take his shit.”

She laughed. “Is that the key—not taking someone’s shit?”

He looked her square in the eye when he replied, “I wouldn’t know.”

*Ouch.*

The bartender set their drinks down in front of them and with glasses in hand, they walked a few feet away, out of earshot of anyone standing at the bar.

“What does that mean?”

She didn’t like the idea that he thought he was “taking her shit”. That both emasculated him and made her look like a bitch.

He shrugged, which pissed her off.

“Passive-aggressive much?”

“Emotionally unavailable much?”

That felt like a punch to her gut.

“That’s not fair, Aiden.”

“What would you call it then?”

What would she call it?

“I care about you...”

He snorted as he stared straight ahead and took a pull of the amber liquid.

Dakota noticed Steven and Whitney headed toward them and nodded in their direction. “You really want to do this now?”

His eyes tracked where she’d nodded, and she noticed his shoulders visibly sag.

“No, I don’t.”

She gripped his elbow and said through smiling teeth, “Good. Act happy for them.”

His face lit up with a genuine smile as the happy couple approached, and she forced herself to do the same.

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*Aiden*

Okay, so maybe he hadn’t *mastered* ignoring the elephant in the room; she was right to call him on being passive-aggressive.

And maybe it was unfair of him to call her emotionally unavailable, but being here—surrounded by people obviously in love and planning their lives together—made him wonder what the hell he was doing if she didn’t see a future with him.

He’d hoped she’d see he was a good man and wasn’t going to hurt her—that he *loved* her—but none of that seemed to matter.

Thank fuck she didn't reply with "thank you" when he'd told her earlier that he loved her. But her silence had hurt just as much.

It felt like a knife twisted in his heart when later that evening, Hope ordered her brother to spend the night away from his bride-to-be. His friend had balked, but when his sister didn't back down, Steven had turned to Whitney and stared lovingly into her eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow, my future wife."

Whitney stared back and cupped his cheek. "I love you."

Then, after kissing her gently, he said softly, "I can't wait to marry you."

Aiden had to look away as the pangs of envy hit him square in the chest. He was elated for his friend; if anyone deserved a happily ever after, it was Steven and Whitney. But Aiden wanted that with Dakota, obviously not tomorrow, but someday. Or to at least know it was a possibility in the future.

Instead, it constantly felt he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Something needed to change.

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*Dakota*

She wrapped her hand around his biceps and leaned her head against his shoulder with a sigh as she exclaimed, "They're so adorable together."

His body stiffened slightly, but he didn't pull away when he replied, "They really are."

His rigid spine pissed her off, so she decided to poke the bear. Pressing her boobs against his arms, she whispered, "Are you ready to go finish what we started?"

Aiden quirked a brow. "Finish what we started?"

"Yeah."

"Before or after I told you I loved you."

*And you didn't say it back.* He left it unspoken, but it hung in the air.

"I guess that's up to you."

He scrubbed a hand down his face. "It's too late to hash it out with you tonight, Sunshine. I think we should just go fuck."

Dakota let out a little gasp at his crudeness. Yet her nipples pebbled under her dress, and she was certain he could feel the points against his arm. Heat pooled between her legs.

Swallowing hard, she murmured, "I think so, too."

"Good."

They made their way toward the door, waving at the remaining partygoers and nodding when they were told, "See you tomorrow!"

When they got to their room door, he paused before waving his key in front of the screen. His mouth was set in a tight line when he looked down at her.



“Once we get inside, take off your clothes and bend over the bed.”

The negative energy rolled off him in waves. He was keyed up, and she knew he needed an outlet for it.

“What if I don’t?”

He didn’t flinch at her sassiness. Just quietly leaned down to growl in her ear, “Try it and find out.”

*Oh snap.*

She was torn. Part of her *did* want to try it and find out—turned on at the idea of what he might do. But part of her wanted to do as he said because that might help placate him. Plus, she knew he’d reward her for her obedience.

Maybe it was because of the underlying tension she was feeling from the fight they’d yet to have, and maybe part of her wanted him to punish her because she knew his heart was hurting, and she was the cause, but she chose the former.

Some good old-fashioned hate sex sounded perfect right now.

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*Aiden*

She walked into the room, pausing in front of the fire to stare at the dying flames, while making no attempt to unzip her dress. He shed his jacket—dropping it on the chair, rolled his sleeves, then grabbed her arm and spun her around.

Her eyes were wide as he steered her toward the wall, but her nipples were like headlights poking out from the fabric of her dress. Pushing her against the plaster, he pinned her wrists over her head using one hand while he pressed his body against hers.

His free hand came around to squeeze her neck lightly as his mouth came within an inch of hers.

“What did I tell you about fucking around and finding out?”

Her chest heaved and she bowed her body as if trying to get closer to his while she licked her lips, still saying nothing. Her pupils dilated.

She liked this. She wanted it rough, too.

“I bet your pussy is drenched, isn’t it?”

Finally, she purred, “I don’t know. You tell me.”

His cock went from hard to steel.

He released his grip on her wrists, but she didn’t move them from the spot on the wall. Keeping her in place with his hold on her neck, he kicked her legs farther apart before reaching under her skirt, only to discover her stockings weren’t thigh highs. With a firm yank, the crotch of her pantyhose ripped down the seam, giving him access to her pussy.

“You dirty little girl... you aren’t wearing any panties,” he taunted as he ran a finger down her slit. “And just as I suspected, you’re fucking soaked.”

She closed her eyes and moaned against his mouth.

Ramming his middle finger inside her opening, he continued, “Why aren’t you wearing panties, little slut? Did you have a vision I was going to do this to you?”

Her eyes flew open at his callous comment. It was a low blow, but he didn’t care. But he didn’t wait for a response, either.

He squeezed her neck slightly and added his ring finger to her pussy and began to finger fuck her roughly.

“Your cunt’s getting wetter, baby. You like when I finger you, don’t you?”

Her “mmm hmm” was barely audible.

Aiden found her clit with his index finger and massaged the engorged nub while he continued pumping into her, causing her to moan louder.

He felt her body tense.

“Are you going to come?”

She whimpered, “Yes,” and he quickly withdrew his hand.

“No, you’re not. Not until you’ve earned it.”

He stepped back, and she looked at him with daggers in her eyes, like he’d thrown cold water on her. Which, he guessed he’d had—at least in a theoretical sense.

Yanking his belt to unbuckle it, he withdrew it from the loops in one motion, then folded it in half and tapped it against his other hand.

“Take. Off. Your. Fucking. Dress.”

She didn't move as quickly as he would have preferred, so he added, "Or I'll rip it off you."

She obviously wasn't worried because she simply turned around and tilted her neck down, offering him the zipper.

With the hand holding his belt, he pulled the fabric away from her skin while lowering the fastener with his other hand until it reached the curve of her back. Her dress must have had a built-in bra because she wasn't wearing one, and he bit back a groan at the sight of her bare back.

He couldn't help but drop the belt and grip her shoulders to kiss them when the bodice fell to her waist and exposed her creamy skin. She was soft like silk, and the smell of her perfume filled his senses as he moved his lips along her shoulder blade to the back of her neck, causing her to break out in goosebumps.

She let out a heady sigh.

It was then that he realized what he was doing. As if the gentle kisses he gave was somehow a sign of weakness right now, he countered it by reaching around and crudely cupping her tits and squeezing. Finding her stiff nipples, he twisted and pulled them away from her body until she let out a moan.

"Such perfect tits," he hissed in her ear while roughly jiggling them up and down then mashing them together. "I want to see them wrapped around my cock."

The look she shot him when she turned to face him screamed, "I ain't *scurred*," and she pushed him toward one of the high back chairs by the fireplace.

Aiden leaned down to pick up the belt—why, he wasn't really sure. It wasn't like he'd ever really use it on her, but he liked the idea of it making him appear menacing.

He sat down with a *thump* in the grey upholstered wingback, and she strutted toward him in her heels, ripped stockings, and nothing else.

It was hot as fuck.

He again tapped the belt into his free hand as he perused her up and down.

“Get on your fucking knees.”

This time, she immediately complied with his demand, and dropped between his thighs.

“Good girl.”

She stroked his length over his slacks while staring up at him doe-eyed.

“Take my cock out.”

Again, she moved to do as he instructed, and he lifted his ass so she could slide his pants and underwear down his thighs.

His cock bounced when it sprang free, and Aiden could see the bead of precum already on the tip.

She looked up at him and bit her bottom lip as she untied one of his shiny black Oxford shoes and pulled it off. Then she reached under his pant cuff and sensually ran her hands up his calf and pulled his sock down. She quickly repeated the movement on this other leg. When his pants were all the way

off, she moved them to the side before knee-walking closer to him.

He reached out and tenderly caressed her cheek by her ear, and she closed her eyes when she leaned into his touch.

She was so goddamn perfect. Why wouldn't she just fall in love with him already?

He almost voiced exactly that but thought better of it. Now was not the time.

Running his thumb roughly along her bottom lip, he lifted his chin toward his cock jutting out proudly.

“I’m waiting.”

Instead of fucking him with her tits as she was told, she engulfed his cock in her mouth, making his hips jerk forward before he let out a long, “Fuuuuck.”

She bobbed her head up and down on the shaft until it was slippery, then slurped off him and squeezed the lubed pole between her perfect C cups.

Their gaze remained locked as she fucked him with her tits. His shaft between her pillowy mounds was a mental image he'd be jerking off to for years.

It felt like an electrical current ran down his spine and straight to his dick.

“You are so fucking sexy,” he murmured as he watched, mesmerized. This woman was a goddess. She looked like a goddamn porn star, and he fucking loved it.

A thought hit him... *damn, I'm going to miss this.*

He'd never had a lover like her—adventurous, beautiful, sexy. Confident in her own skin. With the perfect amount of submissive and sassy.

And the idea of another man having her in his bed pissed Aiden the fuck off.

He reached down and hauled her to her feet as he barked, “Bend over the bed. Ass up.”

Her eyes were wide as she looked up at him. “Did I do something—”

“Stop talking and do what I fucking said.”

He half expected her to put her hand on her hip and rip him a new one, which would have been hot in its own right, but she didn't. She just scrambled to the bed and put her chest and face on the comforter.

“Spread your ass.”

Both of her hands came back to cup her round globes and pull them apart, giving him a clear view of her puckered star along with her delicious pink pussy.

She was offering herself, and he knew she wouldn't deny him whichever hole he chose.

With methodical steps, he slowly approached her, laying one hand firmly at the small of her back while the fingers of the other traced between her crack and dipped lower. Pausing before touching her pussy, he asked with a smirk, “Is your cunt still wet, baby?”

He knew it was. He could see it glistening, calling out to him.

When she didn't answer, perhaps thinking it was a rhetorical question, he delivered a loud smack to her ass. "I asked you a question."

"Yes, Sir."

His cock jumped at her use of the word, *sir*.

Using his thumb, he circled her backdoor. "Whose ass is this?"

"Yours."

He pressed against her ring, and he felt her tense. "I'm sorry—whose?"

"Yours, *Sir*."

He patted her behind. "Good girl."

Gripping his shaft, he dragged the tip through her nectar and distributed her juices along her slit until he rubbed her clit with the head of his dick.

"Whose pussy is this?"

"Mmm, yours, Sir," she purred.

"Goddamn right it's mine," he snarled just before he thrust inside her. They moaned in unison as he filled her balls deep. He closed his eyes and started moving in and out of her heat. "Your pussy was made for my cock, Sunshine."

She released her hold on her ass and gripped the comforter tight in both fists.

He decided not to chastise her about moving her hands without his permission. He wanted her to be comfortable, and he imagined that position could make her shoulders start to



ache. That didn't stop him from gripping her soft flesh and spreading her himself though.

"Fuuuck," he groaned as he looked down to watch his wet cock slide in and out of her tight little hole. His balls tingled as they drew up.

"My pussy," he growled through gritted teeth and pumped her harder.

"My."

He forcefully slammed his hips against her jiggling cheeks.

"Fucking."

*Slam!*

"Pussy."

With the final thrust, he held her hips tight against him and roared his release. As he made mini thrusts, he spilled rope after rope of his cum deep inside her. He wanted his seed to leak out of her for days, as if that would somehow mark her as his.

Aiden dropped his forehead onto her back, breathing heavily. When he finally caught his breath, he kissed her spine then slowly pulled out and retreated to the bathroom for a towel.

She lay still while he attended to her but moaned softly when he rubbed her folds with extra enthusiasm.

Aiden sat on the bed with his back against the headboard, legs spread, and patted the mattress in front of him.

"Come on, Sunshine. You earned your orgasm."

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*Dakota*

Okay, bossy, dominant, asshole Aiden was turning her on.

She knew there was an undercurrent of aggression because of their situation, and maybe that's why it felt so good.

Instead of fighting—they were fucking. She didn't have to talk about her feelings, and she was going to get an orgasm out of the deal.

Win-win.

Plus, she had no doubt she was safe with him. For all his blustering, she knew he'd never really hurt her.

Not physically anyway.

She slid between his legs, and he situated her so her back was to his front with her legs spread wide. The feeling of helplessness as he pinned her in place with his muscular legs over her ripped stockings added to her arousal.

His left hand came around her neck while the right explored the folds of her pussy. When he circled her clit, she let out a long moan.

His hand moved from her neck to cover her mouth, so she had to breathe through her nose.

He was leaving her no doubt that not only was he in control of her orgasm, but her ability to breathe. It was the

hottest thing ever, and she moaned against his hand.

Aiden chuckled in her ear. “Your little clit is so fat, baby. You like being at my mercy with your legs spread wide while I do whatever I want to you.”

Fuck yeah, she did.

After dipping a finger inside her pussy, he resumed his ministrations on her clit, moving his fingers faster as he continued his dirty talk.

“Your pussy’s getting wetter, baby. Or maybe that’s just my cum leaking out of you. You love it when I come deep inside your cunt, don’t you?”

He pressed harder on her mouth as she panted through her nose. Her cries of pleasure as her orgasm began to build were muffled by his hand. Overloaded by the stimulation, her body went taut, and she arched her back, causing her tits to jut out.

His leg pushed down harder on hers, and he growled, “That’s it. Take it like a good little slut,” while he polished her clit at a frantic pace.

Dakota screamed against his hand as the most intense climax of her life wracked through her body, causing her to convulse from head to toe.

Aiden didn’t release his hold on her mouth as he continued to rub her pussy. Her body became sensitive, and she pushed both his arms away. He let go immediately, then wrapped her in a warm embrace as she slumped against him, her limbs feeling like Jello.

Now, the words he murmured in her ear were sweet and soothing as he petted her hair and kissed her temple.

“You are so beautiful, Sunshine. Did you enjoy that, baby?”

“That was...” she paused as she searched for the right word. All she could come up with in her post-orgasmic bliss was, “Wow.”

He chuckled when he slid out from behind her and disappeared into the bathroom.

She flopped onto the pillow and barely stirred when she felt a warm washcloth between her legs.

“Thank you,” she managed to whisper.

Before she fell into the deep slumber she always did when Aiden was in bed next to her, she heard him murmur something about an elephant and one more night.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

*Aiden*

“Good morning, Sunshine,” he said, kissing Dakota’s hair when he noticed she was awake next to where he sat in bed reading the news on his tablet.

“Hi,” she replied with a sleepy smile. “Have you been up long?”

“Maybe an hour. How’d you sleep?”

“Good. This bed is really comfy. Except, I kept dreaming I was being squished by an elephant sitting on me.”

He thought she’d already fallen asleep before he snarked about ignoring the elephant in the room for one more night. Still, he slid his tongue along his molars and said, “Huh. That’s weird.”

“I know, right? So random.”

The way she said it made him suspect she hadn’t been asleep at all when he’d said it. Still, Aiden wasn’t going to pounce on her the first thing after she woke up to try and address said elephant.

She pulled the covers back, revealing her naked body and making his dick jump. She swung her feet to the floor, and he changed the subject, calling after her as she walked toward the bathroom, “Do you want to have breakfast and then do some cross-country skiing? When I got coffee earlier, Isaac said they have the equipment here we can use. Or we could just hang around and see what everyone else is doing today.”

“Hold on,” she said before closing the bathroom door.

He hoped she would choose to go skiing. They needed to be alone so they could talk.

When she emerged five minutes later, she had fresh mascara and lipstick on, and her hair was brushed and pulled back in a mint-green headband that was in stark contrast to her black hair.

But she was still naked.

He loved that she was comfortable with her body and didn't try to cover it up in front of him. Lord knows he enjoyed the view. But damn it made it hard to think about anything else.

Lifting his reading glass onto his head, he blatantly stared at her tits swaying as she rummaged through her suitcase.

He coughed when a flashback from last night of them wrapped around his cock turned his semi into a full-blown erection.

“So, did you decide what you want to do?”

The corner of her mouth lifted when she saw him staring, and she palmed both tits in her hands and squeezed while her gaze locked with his.

“I have a few ideas.”

He got out of bed and approached her from behind, moving her hands out of the way so he was the one holding her tits while he pulled her against him to ensure she could feel his erection under the pajama pants he'd put on before he left the room earlier.

“Like what? Skiing?”

She wiggled her ass against his cock then reached under his waistband to stroke his length.

“Mmm, I think I want to do this.”

A benefit with avoidance?

Using sex as a distraction.

His cock was not complaining, but his heart knew he was headed for a fall.

But as she stroked his cock while standing naked before him, he decided he'd worry about it later.

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*Dakota*

Aiden's aura was grey and gloomy, but as he was fucking her, it became brighter. So that was an upside. Not to mention the sex. He seemed to have gotten more dominant, not to mention rougher, which was a huge turn on for her.

“Get on your fucking knees,” he barked just as her second orgasm that morning began to subside.

She dropped down in front of him while he feverishly jerked his cock in front of her face.

“Stick your tongue out.”

Just as she did, a jet of cum splashed across her lips. The second and third missed their mark when they hit her cheek

and nose, and maybe a little in her hair. By then he got the hang of it and the remaining ropes hit her tongue and lips.

Looking down at his handiwork, he gripped her chin and pressed the tip of his cock against her lips and ordered, “Clean it.”

If he hadn’t already wrung three orgasms out of her in the last twelve hours, that just might have triggered a fourth.

She locked eyes with him as she dutifully cleaned his cock while the once-warm jizz on her face began to turn cold and sticky.

He plucked at a strand of her hair. “Oh, baby, I’m sorry. I got some in your hair.”

Dakota pulled his dick from her mouth and stood up to peck his lips. “It’s a small price to pay. That was super-hot.”

“We seem to be having a lot of super-hot sex lately,” he mused as he wiped her face with one of his used t-shirts. “I wonder what’s changed.”

He knew damn well what had changed, but she knew he wanted to hear her say it. Yet, she couldn’t bring herself to, so she played dumb.

“Hmm, I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you do.”

She glanced down at the floor for a beat before looking back at him as she eeked out a whisper, “I’m sorry. I care so much about you—”

“But there’s no future for us—you’ve seen it.” He tossed the shirt toward his bag with more force than was probably



needed. “Yeah, so you’ve said.”

She hated the way things were between them, but she was scared to address it, since she had a feeling where things were headed once they did.

“I’m going to go jump in the shower. I’ll hurry.”

He shrugged and reached for his pajama pants on the floor. “Take your time. We’ve got all day.”

“Yeah, but I’m starving *now*.” She tried to bring some levity back between them. “I’ve um, burned some calories since the last time we ate.”

His mouth twitched as he lifted an eyebrow. “Speak for yourself.”

“*Food*. Since the last time we ate *food*.”

“Your pussy is so delicious, baby. I could eat it every day, twice a day. It’s like dessert.”

The thought of being with him every day was bittersweet. It was something her heart would love, but her head reminded her that wasn’t in the cards for them.

It made her soul hurt, and she retreated to the shower where the tears could fall, and she could pretend they were nothing more than water droplets from the showerhead.

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The inn was bustling with people when she and Aiden finally made it to breakfast.

She caught up with Whitney at the omelet station.

“It’s your wedding day!”

Whitney blew out a breath, causing her bangs to flutter.

“I don’t know how brides who handle everything themselves do it! Yvette and her staff did most of the planning and executing, and our guest list is pretty small, but I’m still a nervous wreck!”

“Everything is going to be wonderful. Correction—it already *is* wonderful. Just enjoy yourself and take it all in. This is your special day!”

Whitney flashed her a wide smile. “Thanks. I’m so glad you’re here.” She then nudged Dakota’s shoulder with hers. “So how are things going with Aiden?”

Dakota fought to keep a neutral look on her face as a million thoughts raced through her head.

*How were things going with Aiden?*

*Well, the sex is amazing, but that seems to be the only thing right between us at the moment, even though he makes me deliriously happy, and we apparently love each other. But I don’t want to admit that I love him—even to myself—because I keep having visions of him breaking my heart, and I’m trying to protect myself from getting hurt. Which isn’t really working because now he’s mad at me and I’m pretty sure we’re on the verge of breaking up, and I’m going to end up heartbroken anyway.*

Obviously, she wasn’t going to unload that word vomit on Whitney on the woman’s wedding day, so she went with something vague, but that was still the truth. “He’s great.”

“Steve says you’re really good for him.”

Maybe at one point Dakota would have believed that, but for the last month, it’d felt like she’d been hurting him, which in turn, hurt her heart. The last thing she wanted was to be the cause of his unhappiness and dark aura.

When they’d first met, she’d thought the Universe had brought them together so she could help him heal and be ready for when the right woman came along.

Then he’d almost convinced her *she* was the right woman.

Or maybe she’d wanted to be convinced.

But maybe it was time to look at things realistically and let him go so he could be happy.

Again, now was not the time to discuss this with her friend, so she gave another noncommittal reply. “We’ve really enjoyed our time together.”

Whitney was so deliriously happy she didn’t notice Dakota’s lack of response.

Steven appeared and wrapped his arm around his bride-to-be’s waist. “Here’s my future wife. I’ve been looking for you.”

Whitney was beaming when she looked up at him and replied. “Hi, future husband.”

He leaned down to kiss Whitney’s smiling mouth, and a vision of them joyful as they held blond babies in their arms flashed in Dakota’s head. There was such peace and serenity

with it that Dakota had no doubt they were going to be happy together for the rest of their lives.

Then another vision appeared. This one was of her and Aiden holding hands and walking along the beach in light-colored clothing, happy, and for a moment, her heart felt full, and it almost seemed like she was being given the Universe's blessing to let her guard down and wallow in her love for him.

Then that nasty vision of him walking away while she stood crying popped in her mind's eye, like a bucket of ice water being poured on her head. She could feel the immense pain of the moment and decided there was no way she could go through that.

"I'll see you two lovebirds later this afternoon," she said when the woman making her omelet handed her a plate with her breakfast.

"Bye!"

"See you later!"

As Dakota walked to the table where Aiden sat, she was taken aback by how handsome he was, and a sense of sadness swept over her. She knew she'd done the right thing keeping him at a distance, even if it meant she was eventually going to lose him. Better to deal with things sooner rather than later before she was too far gone over him.

Or was that already a moot point?

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## *Aiden*

Steven and Whitney had chartered vans to take their guests to Chatham to attend the New Year's Eve festival the town put on every year, so he and Dakota decided to do that instead of cross-country skiing.

They walked around holding hands as they listened to the many musical performances, but he was back to feeling like he did when they first met—like he was living on borrowed time with her.

Frankly, it sucked.

Fortunately, they only stayed a few hours before the vans returned them to the inn so everyone could get ready for the six o'clock wedding.

His jaw dropped when Dakota walked out of the bathroom at five thirty wearing a satin, royal-blue floor-length wrap dress that hugged her curves and a slit that ran to the middle of her right thigh. The tight bodice emphasized her spectacular tits and her sparkling silver stilettos completed the outfit.

The blue color was perfect with her ivory complexion and dark hair that she was wearing curled and styled around her shoulders. Her makeup was dramatic, like it had been the previous night, and her shiny red lips made his dick bob up and down when he pictured them wrapped around his shaft.

Her Y-pendant sapphire and rhinestone necklace was the exact color of her dress and hung spectacularly just above her cleavage. Her matching dangling teardrop earrings glimmered

when the light reflected off them, making her look almost angelic—or downright sinful, he wasn't sure which.

“Not to sound like a broken record, but you are stunning.”

He stepped toward her to get a closer look and breathed in the scent of her perfume, causing his olfactory receptors to go into overdrive.

“Absolutely breathtaking.”

She looked at him with a shy smile. “Thank you. You look really handsome,” then lifted his silver and royal blue tie with tinkling laughter. “We match. It's like we're going to prom.”

“God, if only my prom date had been as hot as you.”

“Well, at least you went. I was seven months pregnant when my junior prom rolled around. And the online school I attended my senior year after I had Chloe didn't have extracurriculars like sports or dances.”

“Well, if it helps, you didn't miss much. At least from my experience.” He caressed her biceps, careful not to mess up her hair when he leaned closer to look into her eyes. “And I'd much rather be with you tonight at forty-two than when I was a pimply-faced teenager whose dick got hard when the wind blew. I wouldn't have stood a chance around you.”

That made her throw her head back and laugh.

“I think I would have liked to have known the teenage Aiden.”

He shook his head. “God, no. You wouldn’t have given me the time of day.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure about that.” She paused. “Well, at least before I got pregnant. Afterwards, I didn’t give any man who wasn’t my father the time of day.”

“Chloe’s dad burned you pretty bad, huh?”

She huffed out a humorless laugh. “You could say that.” She stared at the wall for a second, as if lost in her thoughts before looking back at him. “You know the worst part? I had visions he was going to desert me—even though I had closed that part of me down, they still kept popping in my head. But instead of heeding them, I ignored them, because I was convinced he loved me and believed him when he said he’d be there to support me and the baby.”

It dawned on Aiden in that moment that he was paying for Chloe’s asshole dad’s sins.

“But you’re not sixteen anymore, Sunshine. And I’m not some loser who doesn’t keep his word and bails on his pregnant, teenage girlfriend.”

“I know you’re not.”

He cocked his head. “Do you? Because that’s not how it feels.”

A tiny tear escaped the corner of her eye, and he felt like a jerk for making her cry.

He pulled a tissue from the box on the table and handed it to her. “I’m sorry, I don’t want you to mess up your makeup. We can talk about this later.”

That seemed to be a running theme between them lately. “We’ll talk about it later.” Although he already knew the probability of them actually addressing the elephant in the room was slim to none.

Maybe that was for the best—for now.



## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

*Dakota*

Whitney was the most beautiful bride she'd ever seen—she was absolutely radiant when she looked up at her groom. The love between Whitney and Steven shone through to the entire room as they exchanged their vows.

Dakota sent out a silent plea to the Universe that the two always remembered how they felt on this day and that their bond only grew stronger as the years went by.

Zach stood next to Steven as his best man and kept staring at Zoe, who was seated next to Dakota. The entire ceremony, he wore a ridiculous grin on his face.

Dakota sensed the storm clouds looming between the two, though, and sent out another request to the Cosmos that they find a way to be together. They were energetically a good fit.

Then there was the beautiful man on the other side of her.

When she walked out of the bathroom, she was relieved to find he wasn't wearing the black suit and red tie from her vision. But the sense of dread still consumed her. Especially when she felt his energy when they watched Steven and Whitney pledge their love to each other.

He wanted that for himself.

Oh, how she wished she could be the woman for him.

The ceremony ended, and the guests were directed into a larger room that looked like a winter wonderland. The tables

were decorated with white linen tablecloths, icy-blue place settings, and crystal water goblets as well as champagne flutes. The tall, slender crystal centerpieces glowed blue and contained frosted branches and blue and white calla lilies and hydrangeas. Twinkling lights hung from the ceiling, along with a chandelier, and a roaring fire in the fireplace that was the focal point of the room completed the ambiance.

It was elegant, yet simple, a lot like the newly married couple. Dakota thought about how the whole weekend had been a perfect reflection of the bride and groom and made a mental note to offer her kudos to Yvette for doing such a beautiful job.

They were in the middle of dinner and people started clinking their glasses for the bride and groom to kiss. It was the third time since they'd sat down at the bridal table, but the happy couple didn't seem to mind in the least.

After obliging the guests, a cheer went up and people resumed eating. Moments later, Dakota noticed Barbie, the woman Zach had brought to the Cape over the Fourth of July, standing at the head table in front of Zach with one hand on her hip while she gestured wildly with the other. Zach glanced around as if embarrassed and got up from his chair to escort her out of the room. Zoe remained seated with a dignified expression, as if nothing was wrong, but Dakota could sense her pain and humiliation.

She sent the woman an energetic hug.

Zoe must have felt it because ten minutes later, she sat down next to Dakota and said with a way-too-cheerful smile, "So, I've been thinking about adopting a dog."

Dakota was happy to tell her all about the dogs she knew were available through ARF, knowing the woman wasn't really listening. But she did a good job pretending she wasn't affected by whatever the hell just happened with Zach and Barbie, so Dakota was happy to play along. Not to mention, it helped her avoid the conversation she could tell Aiden was itching to have.

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### *Aiden*

Whitney sat down next to Zoe and hugged her around her shoulders. If you asked Aiden, it was Zach who needed the hug. The poor guy looked absolutely wrecked as he sat at the head table alone, stealing pathetic glances at Zoe every three seconds.

For her part, Zoe had managed to look cool as a cucumber when Zach pulled Barbie away, only to return sans the stripper ten minutes later. But the damage had been done, and Zoe quickly made a beeline to Dakota, and Zach didn't follow.

The DJ called out through the speakers, "Mrs. Steven Ericson, you're wanted on the dance floor. Mrs. Steven Ericson."

Whitney looked surprised and exclaimed, "Oh! That's me!" before jumping up. She pushed in her chair and warned, "You guys better plan on shaking a tail feather with us. And don't forget the party favors for when it turns midnight."

Zoe gave a small shake of her head. “I don’t think I’m going to make it until midnight; I’m sorry.”

The bride tilted her head and offered a small smile. “I don’t like it, but I understand. I’m so sorry.”

“I’ll be okay, I promise.”

She might be, but Aiden had serious doubts about Zach. He was a little worried about the guy.

God, is that how Aiden was going to be when he and Dakota broke up?

The fact that he had accepted it as a foregone conclusion was concerning. What the hell were they even doing? Their relationship was obviously one-sided, and he’d be damned if he was going to be the guy who waited around hoping the girl would eventually fall for the good guy for once.

He was determined to make the best of their weekend together, but the writing was on the wall. Once they got back to Boston tomorrow, he would be starting the new year alone.

He glanced over at her talking with Zoe, and she smiled when she noticed him watching her, making his heart splinter. He was going to miss everything about his hippy chick.

The DJ called for people to join the bride and groom on the dance floor at the end of their first dance. Aiden stood and gestured to the door leading to the lobby, where the temporary dance floor was set up.

With an outstretched hand, he asked “Would you care to dance?”

She took his offered hand as she rose from her chair. “I’d love to.”

Just as he placed an arm around her back and pulled her close, the song ended, and another began. He huffed out a little laugh when Elvis’s voice began to croon, “Wise men say, only fools rush in...”

*Ain’t that the fucking truth.*

*Message received, Universe.*

Jesus Christ, she had him talking to the damn Universe now.

But as he pulled her closer and she laid her head on his shoulder, he realized even if their relationship was ending, he wouldn’t have missed the ride with her for anything.

He closed his eyes and rested his cheek on the crown of her head, breathing in the scent of her shampoo.

Being with her had made him a better man. He always felt lighter when he was in her presence. Hell, he’d even managed to forgive his ex-wife and wish her well with Bjorn—something he never thought would happen. Maybe he’d even take a yoga class someday. The thought made him want to laugh.

She had changed him, made him open his heart again. But considering she didn’t want it, maybe that wasn’t such a good thing.

When the song ended, he led her back to their table where he sat with his arm around the back of her chair and gently played with her hair as he zoned out the conversation between her and Zoe. Instead, he basked in how good she felt next to

him; how right. And how unfair it was she didn't feel the same.

Maybe it was karma for all the women who'd wanted to be something more to him than a one-night stand, and he wanted nothing more to do with them.

Around eleven, Zoe declared she was calling it a night just as another slow song came on, and without even having to ask, Dakota stood and they walked toward the dance floor.

With eyes closed, they swayed to the beat as their bodies pressed against each other. He tried committing to memory how she felt in his arms.

He knew tonight, when they made love, it was going to be for the last time.

Aiden murmured in her ear, "Come on, Sunshine. Let's go back to the room."

He almost expected her to protest, but she just nodded, like she was on the same page.

If it wasn't so cruel how in sync they were, even when ending their relationship, it'd almost be funny.

Almost.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

*Dakota*

The only light in the room was the moon shining through the windows as Aiden carefully undressed her. Neither had said a word since they walked through the door. They both knew what this was—a way to say goodbye. Why ruin it with words?

When her dress was laying at her feet, he guided her to the bed where she lay back with her head on the pillow and watched him slip off his clothes. Her breath caught in her throat when he stood before her in all his naked glory.

She broke the silence when she whispered, “God, you’re beautiful,” as he climbed onto the mattress next to her.

“So are you, Sunshine.”

For the next hour, he kissed and caressed every inch of her skin until she was aching for his cock to be inside her.

“Aiden, please. I need you.”

He swirled his tongue around her nipple before releasing it, then moved up her body, aligning his cock with her entrance. Instead of pressing inside, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her sensuously, then paused to stare into her eyes when he thrust into her heat.

He didn’t say the words again, but his body told her he loved her, and her body whispered back what she couldn’t bring herself to say out loud.

Her climax began to build, and her pussy tightened around his cock, and she let out a long moan.

“Look at me, Sunshine,” he commanded just as the sounds of people shouting the countdown to the New Year came through the walls. It was like the whole inn was counting down to her orgasm.

As the cries of, “Happy New Year,” echoed throughout the Dragonfly, she fell over the edge, holding his gaze until she couldn’t help but close her eyes while calling out his name in ecstasy.

He burrowed his face into her neck and wrapped his arm tight around her as he thrust fast and hard. The sound of his grunts in her ear prolonged her orgasm, as did the feel of his warm cum when it filled her pussy.

His lips captured hers once more, and he stroked the hair from her face before kissing her like she was oxygen. He didn’t stop until his cock softened, and it slipped out of her, causing his cum to leak down her thighs.

With a kiss to her forehead, he murmured, “Be right back,” then returned moments later with a towel to clean her up.

He’d been as tender and caring tonight as he’d been dirty and rough that morning and the night before. And she knew why. Last night had been angry sex, but tonight he was saying goodbye.

As much as she knew it was for the best—it still made her heart heavy. Perhaps in another lifetime they could be



together. Maybe that's what the glimpses she'd get of them happy and together were from—another life.

While nestled against Aiden's hard body in the darkness of night, she wanted to whisper, "I love you," but held her tongue. What good would come from confessing her feelings? It would only complicate things.

Instead, she kissed his chest, and allowed sleep to overtake her.

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*Aiden*

He felt her stirring next to him and gently squeezed her hip. He'd been dreading this since she fell asleep last night. When they got up, it'd be the last time they'd be in bed together.

"Good morning," he said quietly.

"Good morning. Happy New Year."

It didn't feel very happy.

"Any resolutions?"

"Oh, you know—the usual. Drink more water, do yoga more, try to be more present. You?"

Fuck it. He didn't have anything to lose by being honest.

"This year, I want to settle down. Maybe get married again."

“Find the girl of your dreams and marry her within a year? That’s quite ambitious,” she teased.

He gave her a soft smile when he tucked her hair behind her ear. “I already found the girl of my dreams.”

She returned the smile and nuzzled her cheek into his hand. “I wish things could be different.”

He pushed up onto his elbow to look at her straight on.

“Why can’t they be? What’s stopping you? You could choose me—us.”

“Aiden,” she choked back a sob. “I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

It hurt to keep looking at her, so he stared at the Christmas tree in the corner when he muttered, “And I can’t do this anymore.”

Her voice was whisper soft when she uttered, “I know.”

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The ride back to Boston was painfully quiet, as neither of them seemed to know what else to say.

Polite chitchat almost seemed callous at that point, so instead, they didn’t say anything.

It was the longest ninety minutes of his life.

Yet, in a way, he never wanted it to end. Once they reached her house, they’d be officially over. He’d rather have her next to him, even in the awkward silence, than lose her forever.

And how pathetic was that?

He pulled into her driveway and put the car in park before shutting it off. She glanced over at him with a furrowed brow.

“Don’t worry, I’m not coming in—just walking you to the door.”

She swallowed hard and nodded, then opened her door. He grabbed her suitcase from the trunk and waited beside her as she unlocked her front door.

Turning to him after she set her suitcase inside, she stroked his cheek with watery eyes.

Before she could say anything, he blurted out, “We could be great; if you’d just give us a chance.”

A single tear ran down her cheek as she shook her head. “In another life.”

He’d had to give it one more try, and now that she’d shot him down, he needed to walk away with some semblance of his pride still intact.

Kissing her cheek, he murmured, “Goodbye, Sunshine. If you ever need me, I’m always here for you.”

And without another word, he walked back to his car—leaving his heart on her doorstep.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

*Dakota*

She allowed herself one night to sob into her pillow and mourn the loss of the best relationship she'd ever had.

And while a sense of emptiness consumed her when she woke up on January second, she was determined to act like nothing was wrong.

Fake it 'til you make it.

Her life went on autopilot. She showed up for work every day on time and made sure to spend her free time with Asher and laugh at the corny jokes that only a three-year-old would find funny, even though it was like something had died inside her.

She guessed in a way, it had.

Barney must have sensed her sorrow, because he made sure to be glued to her side whenever she was home.

"You're a good boy," she assured him with a kiss to the top of his head when he hopped on the couch to snuggle her while she attempted to watch a documentary on Netflix. Rom coms were going to be a thing of the past—at least for a while.

Dakota knew time healed all wounds, but this one wound was deep and was going to take a while.

She lost count of the number of times she'd picked up her phone to send him a text, but each time, she was at a loss for what to say.

"I'm so sorry," seemed inadequate.

“I love you,” felt too little, too late.

“I miss you. Please forgive me,” felt the most right, but the vision of him leaving her had been so vivid, and the feeling of loss so real, that in the end she decided it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Being alone was her destiny; she'd long ago accepted that. But it had been nice to believe it wasn't, if only for a little while.

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*Aiden*

He got blackout drunk when he got home after dropping Dakota off on New Year's Day and had kept a steady blood alcohol content of at least double the legal driving limit for the next several days.

Not the best way to start the new year, but it was the only way he could deal with the gaping hole she left in his heart.

By the evening of January fifth, he knew he couldn't keep calling in sick to work and hauled his ass into the shower to sober up so he'd be ready to go to the hospital the next day.

When his head was finally clear, he went from heartbroken to pissed.

Pissed that she threw their relationship away, like it meant nothing.

Pissed that he'd never given her a reason to doubt his feelings for her.

Pissed that he was paying for another man's sins.

Pissed that it felt like he'd been the only one committed to making it work.

"Good riddance," he muttered as he punched his pillow and turned over.

But even as the words left his lips, he knew he didn't mean them.

The time spent with her had been a gift, and he'd do it all over again, in spite of the pain.

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His first day back, Aiden went to great lengths not to be an asshole to everyone, even though he'd wanted to snap at every fucking moron working at the hospital.

Which, apparently, there was a steady supply of.

He found the smartest place to spend his time after his last patient would be in his office, away from people, catching up on reports. That way, there was much less chance of him biting someone's head off and getting called into the chief of staff, Parker Preston's office.

"Knock knock," came a voice from his doorway. He looked up to find James Rudolf standing at the threshold.

"Hey, James. What's up?"

His friend walked in and sat down in the chair across from him, then slid a beige linen envelope across the desk.

Aiden glanced down to see his name in calligraphy writing, alongside Dakota's.

Seeing her name next to his felt like a punch to the stomach.

“What's this?” he asked as he turned it over and slid his index finger under the wax seal.

“My wedding invitation. I know it's last minute, but I wanted to seal the deal as soon as possible.”

Aiden let out a chuckle. “That's probably smart.”

He pulled out the invitation and glanced at the date written on it—January sixteenth. He also noticed it was being held at the Dragonfly Inn. He didn't know if he could bring himself to go there again. At least not this soon.

“Well, a couple of things... Dakota and I broke up, so we wouldn't be attending together.”

James pulled a pen from his pocket, reached across the desk for the envelope, and proceeded to cross her name off and write, “and Guest.” He had doctor's penmanship, so his writing was vastly different than the flowing calligraphy.

The symbolism of crossing her name off hurt almost as much as it had seeing it next to his.

“There, problem solved,” James said as he handed him back the envelope.

Aiden took it back without a glance and continued, “And the second thing is I just spent the last week drunk and off work, so I don't know if I can request another day so soon.”

“Well, the good news is since it’s such short notice, we’re not asking anyone to RSVP. If you can make it, cool. If not, we’ll understand.” James stood but paused before leaving. “But I really hope you can make it. It’d mean a lot to us.”

James had been a good friend; Aiden needed to be there to celebrate with him.

“I’ll try my best.”



## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

*Aiden*

The night of January fifteenth arrived, and Aiden stood in his closet, looking at suits while deciding if he was going to James and Yvette's reception the following day.

He had to work so he wouldn't make the wedding ceremony, but he was scheduled to get off early enough that he could still make the reception.

But the thought of being at the Dragonfly again filled his gut with a sense of dread. It was where he and Dakota had their first getaway together. And where they'd ended things. Talk about a dichotomy of memories.

*Oh, for Chrissake, Aiden. You really only dated her for three months; man the fuck up. You survived your sixteen-year marriage imploding, this is nothing. Get over it, dude, and be a fucking friend, already.*

He pulled the hanger that held his black suit and put it in his garment bag. Then he took the new tie he'd gotten from Kailey at Christmas from his tie rack and placed it in the bag, along with a white dress shirt, black dress socks, and black dress shoes.

He still wasn't a hundred percent convinced he was going to go, but at least he'd have the option.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

*Aiden*

He walked into the hospital locker room at five in the morning, holding his garment bag over his shoulder. After the little pep talk he gave himself last night, when he woke up in the morning, he decided he was going to head to the Dragonfly Inn after all. It wouldn't be the same without Dakota—frankly, it was going to suck. But he needed to move on and start living life and not hiding by working sixteen-hour days like he'd done for the last ten days.

He was also going to be better to the people who cared about him—and James was one of those people. He needed to support his friend.

He noticed Miles standing in front of his locker, tying the waistband on his scrubs.

“Hey, Miles. I thought you were on paternity leave?”

“Hi, Aiden. You know that's not possible, we're so fucking short staffed. But I am trying to keep it to forty hours, so my wife doesn't leave me and take my baby girl with her.”

Miles sat on the bench and bent over to lace up his shoes but lifted his head toward the bag Aiden hung in his locker.

“What's that?”

“My suit and tie. I'm headed to the Cape after my shift for James's wedding reception.”

“James Rudolf?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t even know he was engaged.”

Aiden chuckled as he closed his locker. “Says the guy who got married and had a kid without hardly anyone knowing.”

The cardiothoracic surgeon sat up and shrugged. “The people who matter know. Are you still seeing Dakota?”

Aiden felt his face fall. “No. We called it quits on New Year’s Day.”

“Fuck, dude. I’m sorry. I gotta tell you, I’m surprised. You two seemed great together at the Halloween party.”

“Yeah, we were,” he said wistfully, then caught himself and pulled his shoulders back. “Until we weren’t.”

Miles stood and closed his locker. “Don’t know what that means, but I’m still sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.” He sounded pathetic, so he made sure to add, “But life goes on.”

“You think you’re going to try dating again?”

“I’m not looking, but I’m not going to rule it out, either. If it happens, it happens.”

“There’s someone out there for you, and you’ll find her when you least expect it.”

Aiden knew that scenario all too well. His mind flashed back to the parking lot at World’s End, then fast forwarded to Steven’s house over the Fourth of July. That hippy chick was the last thing he’d expected.

Then he fucked it up and fell in love with her—even when he assured her and himself that he wouldn’t.

“You’re right. It’ll happen when it’s supposed to.”

*Look at me, all philosophical and shit.*

“Have a good time at the reception. I’d say tell James congratulations for me, but, you know...”

He left the “but I swooped in and took James’s brother’s girl from him a week after they broke up, so they all hate me” part out.

“I think enough time has passed that he’s over it.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Miles was head over heels in love with Bridget, so Aiden knew he didn’t really give a fuck about being hated for getting the girl.

They walked out of the locker room together and paused in the hall before parting ways.

“Enjoy yourself,” Miles told him.

“Thanks. Hopefully I get out of here on time. I’m trying to be a better friend this year.”

Miles snorted as he walked backwards, away from Aiden. “Good luck with that. I’m obviously not the guy to call if you need any pointers, since I have a three-week-old baby at home and my dumb ass is here.”

Aiden laughed. “It’s why they pay you the big bucks.”

He turned and called over his shoulder, “Yeah, yeah. Later.”

\*\*

As the day wore on, Aiden began having second thoughts about going to the Dragonfly after all. There were going to be too many reminders of Dakota. The pep talk from last night seemed to have been long forgotten.

He still fucking missed her every damn second.

Why did he think he needed a commitment from her? They could just hang out...

He shook his head, as if that would dislodge the thought from his brain and chastised himself.

*Knock it off! Quit being a little bitch.*

*I'm going to James and Yvette's reception, I'm going to support my friend, and I'm not going to think about Dakota.*

*Okay, so two out of three isn't bad.*

\*\*

It turned out the ambulance with the patient in cardiac arrest arriving fifteen minutes before he was scheduled to leave took the decision to go to the reception out of his hands.

As he stood at the scrub sink prepping for surgery, Miles walked in. His friend took one look at him and made a point of looking at the clock on the wall before shaking his head and breaking out in a grin.

“You can't escape the dark side, my friend.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

*Aiden*

On Valentine's Day, he walked into the locker room carrying the garment bag he hadn't bothered to unpack since missing James's wedding.

Miles was sitting on the bench in the middle of the room and looked up at him with a smile when Aiden hung the black bag in his locker.

"This looks familiar. Whose wedding you missing tonight?"

"Ha ha. I have a date."

The other man's eyes widened. "A first date on Valentine's Day—you're brave. That's dangerous."

"Dangerous? How do you mean?"

"Well, you're taking her out on a night when couples celebrate being a couple, so that could send the wrong message right off the bat. And, romance will be in the air everywhere you go, so even if it's just a mediocre date, she's probably going to think it was a great night. So, if you end up not wanting a second date, she won't understand why. Then you have a potential stalker situation."

"Damn, you've given this a lot of thought."

"Let's just say, I've had my share of stalkers and crazy women."

Aiden closed his locker and turned to his friend. "Well, it's our third date, so..."

“Third date?” Miles wagged his eyebrows. “You know what that means.”

He laughed. “Yeah, she mentioned that, too.”

Miles watched him carefully. “Why do I get a feeling there’s a ‘but,’ in there?”

Aiden shrugged. “No buts. I just don’t know if I want to take it to that level yet. Especially on Valentine’s Day. You made some valid points about the day’s significance that I hadn’t considered.”

“Yeah, that’s not it. You’re not over Dakota.”

He sighed. “Not entirely. But I’m getting there. I don’t think about her every freaking waking minute anymore. And, like I said, this is my third date with Jean, so I’m moving on.”

“Good for you, man. If Bridget ever left me, I think I’d be drunk for at least a year, and a wreck for the next decade.”

Aiden didn’t mention he had been drunk for almost a week after it happened.

“Bridget loves you, and that makes all the difference.”

Miles nodded. He understood what Aiden was leaving unsaid, and being a good friend, didn’t push for more.

“Well, enjoy Valentine’s Day with your new lady. I promised my wife a romantic night out, so hopefully today’s surgery goes smoothly, and I get out of here on time.”

“You and me, both.”

“Remember—you’re not the only cardiologist who works here. I never realized how fucking out of whack my personal and professional life was until I got married and had a

daughter. I don't want to miss a minute of her growing up. But people aren't used to me having a home life, so they seem surprised and get their nose out of joint when I tell them no."

"I'm working on the whole work-life balance thing myself. Working one hundred hours a week didn't make my problems go away, it just helped me put off dealing with them for a while."

Miles grinned. "Too bad your problems aren't financial, I'm sure the hundred-hour weeks would've helped that."

"Yeah, Kailey is definitely going to benefit. I'm buying her a car."

"I can't believe she's sixteen. I remember when she started kindergarten."

Aiden smiled at the memory of her in pigtails, wearing the navy-blue jumper with the bright red apple on the front that she'd picked out at the mall. How she'd smiled brightly as she waved when he and Susan left her classroom.

"Yeah, me too. It goes fast. You make sure to enjoy that baby girl while she's still a baby."

"Way ahead of ya. Enjoy your date." With a cocky smirk, he added, "Don't let her pressure you into doing anything you don't want to do. Men have a right to say no just as much as women."

"Fuck you."

With a cackle, Miles walked out of the locker room, leaving Aiden alone with his thoughts.



Jean was a great woman. She was smart, pretty, and had a terrific sense of humor. There wasn't a reason in the world he shouldn't be attracted to her.

Yet, their goodnight kisses had done nothing for him. His dick didn't get hard simply by her walking in the room, not like it had when he was with Dakota, when all he ever wanted was her in his arms, all the time.

Maybe that was the problem. They were too hot, too fast.

*Bullshit*, his inner voice chided. *I loved her with her clothes on, too.*

It didn't matter. She didn't love him back.

Jean had signaled on their first date that she was looking for a long-term relationship. And when he asked her out for tonight's dinner, she casually pointed out that it was their third date, and said with a laugh, "You know what that means."

He'd chuckled in return, even though he'd had no idea what it meant—he had to Google it. Then he really laughed because all of his previous dates he'd fucked on the first date, with only a handful ever making it to a third.

Maybe he should sleep with her. He enjoyed spending time with her. They might have more chemistry with their clothes off.

\*\*

Aiden had just finished the last of his rounds and was standing at the nurse's station signing off on tests he'd ordered

when they received an alert that there was a patient en route via ambulance in possible cardiac arrest.

He thought back to Miles's words earlier, "Remember, you're not the only cardiologist who works here."

"You got that, Ken?"

"Yep," his colleague grinned. "Get out of here while you can."

Signing out of the tablet, he slid it back in the tray and headed to the locker room to change into his suit and tie and get the hell out of there.

As he looped the red-black-and-grey striped tie into a Windsor knot around his neck, he realized he was apprehensive about dinner. He still wasn't sure what to do about having sex with Jean.

He pulled the knot tight and huffed out a laugh.

*What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm really not sure about having sex?*

It'd been six weeks—what was there to even consider?

Dakota's face flashed in his mind.

*Doesn't matter. She's doesn't want me. Move the fuck on already.*

Hell, it hadn't taken him but a month to find someone to fuck after leaving Susan. What was his problem? He was going to have dinner with a beautiful woman who'd made it obvious she wouldn't be opposed to more. So, if the night led to sex, then he was going to welcome it, dammit.

Grabbing his duffel bag, he walked out of the locker room, keeping his head down as he made his way toward the exit.

The automatic doors leading to the parking garage were in sight when he heard it.

His name over the PA system beckoning him to the ER.

*Fuck!*

Aiden glanced at the doors as they opened; he was so close he could feel the cold air from the outside. He could ignore the page and keep walking—no one would ever know he hadn't quite made it out of the building.

*There are other cardiologists who work here,* he reminded himself and took another step. Then he heard it again.

*“Doctor Matthews to the emergency room.”*

Closing his eyes and taking a deep inhale through his nose, he warred with himself as his phone buzzed with an incoming text. He didn't even need to look to know it was the ER nurse's station.

With a grumble and a curse, he turned on his heel and headed to the ER.

The nurse that he'd made cry—twice—paled when she saw him striding toward the nurse's station.

“I was paged?” he snarled.

The woman looked like she was going to cry for a third time and opened and closed her mouth twice with no words coming out.

Finally, another nurse spoke up. “There’s a woman here waiting for her father to arrive by ambulance. She specifically asked for you. We told her you’d already logged off for the day, but Dr. Cunningham saw her and said you’d want to know she was here. Dakota—?”

He dropped his bag and demanded, “Where is she?”

“In the waiting room.”

Without another word, he hustled through the double doors. His heart skipped a beat when he saw her sitting on the edge of one of the tan vinyl chairs, wringing a tissue in her hands. She somehow looked smaller than he remembered.

There was no makeup around her red-rimmed eyes, as if she’d cried it off, and yet, she was still the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen.

He knew the minute she noticed he was in the waiting room because she jumped to her feet and started toward him.

Without hesitation, he pulled her in for a hug. The minute his arms came around her, she buried her face in his chest as her body wracked with silent sobs. He held her tighter, and she melted into his frame, while his heart melted at her feet.

Her familiar scent, the feel of her in his arms... it all felt like coming home. One second holding her and all the progress he’d made about getting over her flew out the window.

He waited for her to stop shaking, stroking her back until she was still, before asking quietly, “What’s going on, baby?”

She pulled back, wiping her eyes with both hands at the same time.

“My dad—he collapsed during dinner. My mom called an ambulance.” Her face twisted and a small sob escaped her. “She said the EMTs think it was a heart attack.”

He stroked her biceps, careful not to say something he couldn't guarantee like, “Everything's going to be all right”. Instead, he asked, “How long ago was this?”

“I don't know? Maybe thirty minutes? Mom called me when they were loading him into the ambulance. I came straight here from the studio, so I beat them here.”

Her phone dinged, and she pulled it from her pocket to look at the screen.

“They're here.” She looked so fragile when her tear-filled eyes met his. “Please help him, Aiden.”

“I'll do everything I can, Sunshine. I promise.” He couldn't help himself; he kissed her forehead before heading back into the ER. He gave her one last look as he walked through the double doors. His heart broke when her bottom lip trembled, and he hoped like hell he had good news the next time he saw her.

As he hustled down the hall to wait for the EMTs to bring Dakota's dad inside, he reached in his pocket for his phone and fired off a text to Jean.

**Aiden: I am so sorry; we're going to have to reschedule dinner. I'm stuck at the hospital. I'll call you when I have a free minute.**

His phone buzzed immediately with a reply, but they were wheeling in Mr. Douglas, so he didn't have time to see what it said.

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*

It was like déjà vu, watching Aiden walk through the double doors. The scene had played in her head more than a dozen times—right down to the black suit and red tie he was wearing and the grim expression on his face.

This is what her vision had been about. Her father having a heart attack. Not Aiden breaking her heart.

*How could I have been such a fool?*

She felt like she was going to vomit.

Dakota collapsed onto the beige cracked-vinyl chair and wrapped her arms around her middle as she rocked herself. Her father had to pull through. The idea of losing both men she loved was more than she could bear.

Her mother, Christine, was pale when she came into the waiting room a short time later, appearing dazed.

Dakota jumped to her feet. “How is he?”

“They’re running more tests, but it was definitely a heart attack.”

“Is he awake?”

She nodded. “The EMTs had to use the defibrillator in the ambulance. Twice.”

Dakota hugged the older woman around her shoulders. “Oh, Mom! He’s going to be okay. Aiden is the best

cardiologist there is.”

Her mother blinked at her. “Aiden?”

Dakota realized she’d never told her parents about dating Aiden, and quickly tried to minimize her association. Now was not the time to spring that on her mother.

“Dr. Matthews. The doctor working on him.”

Dakota wasn’t sure how she’d explain how she knew him, but fortunately, her mom didn’t ask. Instead, she moved into crisis mode and started listing all the things she needed to do.

“I need to call your sister and brothers.”

“I’ve already talked to them. Utah and Denver are on their way, and Phoenix will be on the next flight out in the morning.”

“Oh, Phoenix doesn’t need to—”

Dakota put her hand on her mother’s arm. “We both know there’s not a chance Phoenix isn’t coming.”

“I need to get the guest room ready, and—”

“Mom! Stop! Your husband just had a heart attack, you don’t need to worry about anything other than Dad right now.”

She nodded. “You’re right.” Then tears filled her eyes and she whispered, “I don’t know what I’d do without him, Dakota.”

“You won’t have to find out. He’s going to be around for a long, long time. Dad’s a fighter, and he has the best team working on him.”

Dakota noticed her brother through the windows, the collar of his coat turned up to try to keep the cold out as he hurried along the sidewalk toward the automatic doors, and she murmured, “Denver’s here.”

Seconds later, her younger brother was pulling their mom into a tight embrace, and over her head his eyebrows shot to his hairline while he mouthed, “How is he?” to Dakota.

“They’re doing more tests, but the doctor said it was a heart attack.”

“I want to talk to the doctor.”

There her brother went, trying to control the situation.

“He’s in good hands, Denver. The best, actually.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, I met his doctor on the Cape over the Fourth of July. There were at least four other doctors and medical professionals there, and they all talked about how great a cardiologist Dr. Matthews is, and he’s who they’d want to work on them if the need ever arose. So, that’s how.”

“And what were you doing at the Cape with a handful of doctors?”

*Really? That’s what you got out of that?*

Still, she answered him because Denver could be a dog with a bone when he wanted to be.

“My friend Whitney just married one, smartass. I was there as her guest.”

Her brother nodded with a small smile. “Uh huh.”



“Thank God he was working tonight,” Christine interjected.

“He was actually walking out the door when I caught him.”

Denver cocked his head. “And he stayed?”

“Well, yeah. I asked him to.”

He eyed her with a smirk, but she met his gaze unflinchingly. Her little brother wasn’t going to make her squirm. He could try all he wanted; it wasn’t going to happen.

Utah arrived a few minutes later, announcing, “He’s got the best doctor working on him.”

“How do you even know who his doctor is?” Denver demanded. “You just got here.”

“I called in a favor. Don’t worry about it.”

Dakota pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. She knew how. Liam McDonald—Boston General’s CEO. The man from the Animal Rescue Foundation’s fundraiser. The one who adopted Phoebe, and Dakota had arranged for Utah to be the one to deliver her.

At least her vision had been right about them.

She closed her eyes tight. How could she have misinterpreted that vision about Aiden so badly?

The answer seemed obvious—now.

Craig.

Her sixteen-year-old self wouldn’t let her believe she could really have true love. That’s the only explanation she

could think of about why she was going on forty and had never been in a real relationship. Why she'd been so convinced Aiden was going to hurt her, even though in her heart she'd known better.

Hopefully it wasn't too late to tell him how sorry she was.

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

Of course, Jean's response had been gracious.

**Jean: I hope I didn't scare you off. I was just teasing about the third date rule. We can take things as slow or as fast as you want.**

Shouldn't that be his line?

She really was great. Why couldn't his heart flutter at the idea of seeing her like it was as he walked toward the waiting room, knowing Dakota was there?

He'd been kicking himself for hugging her and kissing her forehead like they were still together. They were not a couple anymore. But he'd reacted instinctively when he saw she was hurting.

God, his heart was such a fucking traitor.

And that was exactly why it wasn't in charge anymore.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

*Aiden*

He'd changed into scrubs when he walked into the waiting room, and Dakota was the first on her feet, followed by the rest of her family who were now there, including Chloe, Asher, and who he assumed was Todd—although he wasn't positive, since he'd never met her son-in-law before.

“Dr. Aiden!” the little boy squealed and came barreling into his legs, to Chloe's horror.

He waved her off when she came running over and leaned down to lift the little boy up and set him on his hip.

“Hey, little man. How are you?”

Asher's face grew somber.

“My grampy is sick.” He fiddled with the stethoscope around Aiden's neck. “Aunt Utah said you're going to make him better. Are you making him better?”

“I'm trying my hardest.”

The boy clapped his hands around Aiden's cheeks and brought his face close so Aiden could smell the chocolate on the little guy's breath when he whispered, “Don't mess up.”

Aiden bit back a laugh as he nodded solemnly. “I'll try not to.”

Asher leaned back but didn't let go of Aiden's face when he cocked his head and observed, “You haven't visited Nana in a while.”

He glanced over at Dakota, unsure what to say.

Thankfully, Asher continued, “Mama says you’ve been busy at the hospital,” while releasing his hold on Aiden’s face.

Aiden didn’t have to lie when he replied, “That I have.” He glanced at the rest of the family anxiously watching him. “Hey, little man, I need to talk your grandma about how your grampy is doing, okay?”

He gave a serious nod. “Okay.”

Setting the boy on his feet, Aiden walked closer to the group. All eyes were wide on him as they waited expectantly for what he had to report.

“He has an almost completely blocked artery.”

He paused for the expected gasps that came.

“He’s being prepped for surgery. I’m going to perform an angioplasty—which is the insertion of a balloon to stretch the artery and get blood flowing to his heart again. That’s temporary. But I’m also going to insert a stent which will be permanent.”

Aiden then answered all of the family’s questions about the risks involved and the expected outcome.

“How long will he have to stay in the hospital?” Dakota asked.

“I’ll have a better answer for you after surgery.”

She nodded and looked up at him tenderly. “Thank you. I’m so grateful you’re the one doing the procedure.”

He clenched and unclenched his fists to keep from touching her. She could so easily be his undoing, which is probably why he replied, “I’m glad I was still here.”

Fortunately, my date is okay celebrating Valentine's Day on February fifteenth."

Her face fell, but she recovered quickly, telling him, "I'm sorry your plans were ruined. Please thank her for being so understanding."

"She knows my job can be unpredictable."

Aiden didn't know if that was really true or not, but it made it sound like they had an intimate familiarity.

*See? I'm not still hung up on you. At. All.*

*I've moved on. You don't have any power over me anymore.*

Maybe if he told himself that enough he could make it true.

\*\*\*\*

*Dakota*

Of course, he had a date tonight. That's why he was wearing the suit.

Knowing Chloe was watching, she tried to maintain some semblance of dignity, when all she wanted to do was curl up in a corner and cry.

Cry for her dad and the fear she was feeling about his health. And cry for herself at having ruined the best thing to come into her life since Asher was born. And for no fucking reason other than she was scared.

As big a believer as Dakota was about the Universe having her back about all other areas in her life, she'd never really believed it when it came to love.

She'd brought this on herself.

"She knows my job can be unpredictable."

Dakota felt the corner of her mouth tug up, and she murmured softly, "I remember."

There had been times he'd had to cancel dinner, but he always crawled into bed with her when he finished his shift. Would he be doing that tonight with his new girlfriend?

He stared at her for a beat, then as if realizing what he was doing, quickly broke eye contact and looked around at her family as he cleared his throat.

"I'll be back to let you know how it went."

Her mom grabbed his hand before he had a chance to turn around.

"He's my world, Dr. Matthews. Please take good care of him."

He gave her a sympathetic smile as he patted her hand with his free one. "You have my word."

And with that, he disappeared out the double doors that had been haunting her visions. But as she watched him go this time, the sadness and fear were gone, replaced with a sense of peace.

There wasn't a doubt in her mind that Aiden would take good care of her father, and for that, she was grateful.

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

“Everything went great,” he declared as he pulled the surgical cap from his head, then filled the family in on what he’d found once he’d gotten a better look at the damage to Tim’s heart.

“He’s resting comfortably, and you should be able to go back as soon as he wakes up.” He glanced around at the group. “But limit it to two or three at a time. And only one of you will be able to be with him after visiting hours.”

A man Aiden assumed was Dakota’s brother piped up. “I’ll stay tonight, Mom. You’ll need to go home and rest.”

“Thanks, Denver, but I need to be with him tonight, for my own peace of mind. Maybe you can take a shift tomorrow.”

Her brother turned to Aiden. “How long before he can go home?”

“Let’s play it by ear, but a minimum three days.”

“We’ll come up with a schedule so someone is always with him,” Dakota told her family.

Aiden didn’t need to be a part of this conversation. He wasn’t part of her family, and he never would be.

“Have a good night.” But before he could turn to leave, Dakota pulled him to the side.

She looked up at him with those brown eyes he could get lost in.

“Thank you... for everything.”

He wanted to be a hard ass, but now wasn't the time.

“I told you if you ever needed me, I'd be there.”

“And you're a man of your word.”

“Yeah, Sunshine. I am.”

*I wish you would have realized that six weeks ago.*

“I know.” Tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks. If she started crying, there's no telling what he'd try to do to comfort her.

He patted her forearm. “Go home and get some rest. Your mom is going to need someone to relieve her tomorrow.” He turned and took three steps before she called out his name.

He looked back to see her wiping her face with her fingertips, and it gutted him not to wrap his arms around her again.

“Will we see you tomorrow?”

She sounded so hopeful at the prospect.

*Damn her!*

“On my rounds in the morning.”

“Okay. Do you think I could buy you lunch? You know, as a thank you.”

“That's not necess—”

“But I want to,” she interrupted.

That made him pull his neck back and stare at her in surprise. Finally, he shook his head. “I don't think that's a



good idea.”

Her shoulders slumped and her bottom lip quivered.  
“Oh.”

One word from her and his resolve was waning. One fucking two-letter word.

“Maybe I’ll let you buy me a piece of pie.”

Her smile returned. “Text me what time you’re going to have lunch.”

Aiden nodded; half pissed at himself for caving, while the other half couldn’t wait until the next day when he could be alone with her, even for a little while, in the cafeteria.

*Your heart’s not in charge, loser.*

Tomorrow was going to be a test of his resolve. And he was determined to get through lunch without falling back under her spell.

Or was it too late?

*Fuck!*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

*Dakota*

She was sitting next to her dad's hospital bed, telling him about Asher's latest antics, when Aiden walked in. Her heart skipped a beat seeing him look so professional in his white lab coat over a sky-blue shirt with a stethoscope around his neck. His blue and pink-striped tie matched his aura, except the colors of his tie were vibrant, whereas his aura was dull—a signal of distrust and rejection.

Seeing that hit her square in the solar plexus. It hurt to know he felt that way about her. But the cold look in his eye when he noticed her hurt even more.

What happened to the man who'd wrapped her in a warm embrace last night in the waiting room when he saw she was upset?

She needed to make things right. At least apologize and try to explain about her visions. Hopefully her father was Aiden's final stop before lunch, so then they could go to the cafeteria when he was finished with her dad.

“Hi,” she said with a bright smile.

He barely acknowledged her when he replied, “Good morning,” as he scrolled through the tablet in his hand. His tone was professional when he addressed her dad, commenting about his test results.

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“Yeah,” her dad grumbled. “Am I really not allowed to have salt?”

The corner of Aiden's mouth lifted slightly, offering her a glimpse of the man she remembered.

“Mr. Douglas, you're a grown man—you're *allowed* to have whatever you want. As your cardiologist, do I strongly advise against salt? One hundred percent. Sodium increases your blood pressure, which is the last thing you need right now.”

“But someday I can, right?”

“My advice is to maintain a low fat, sodium, and sugar diet for the rest of your life.”

Tim grumbled under his breath, and Dakota patted his arm. “Dad, you need to listen to Aid—er, Dr. Matthews. We need you around for a long, long time.”

Her mom and Denver walked in, each holding a coffee cup.

“Dr. Matthews!” Christine exclaimed. “It's so nice to see you again. I'm sorry I didn't properly thank you last night for everything you did for Tim. My only excuse is I think I was still in shock.”

Aiden's face softened into a smile.

“It's why I'm here, no thanks necessary.”

“Yeah, and I think Dakota will thank him enough for all of us,” snarked Denver.

Dakota felt the heat creep up her chest and face. She was going to kill her brother.

“What's that supposed to mean?” their dad snarled.

“I'm buying Aid—er, Dr. Matthews a piece of pie, Dad.”

“Yeah, but what kind of pie?” Denver muttered.

Her mother was either oblivious to Denver’s innuendo or pretended to play dumb, offering, “Oh, blueberry is my favorite.”

She glanced at Aiden, half-expecting to see him wearing a smirk. Instead, he blinked with a straight face and said, “I’m going to have to take a raincheck on that. I have patient appointments scheduled all afternoon.”

Dakota felt the panic well up in her chest. He was blowing her off!

“Surely you have to eat?”

“I’ll have someone from my staff bring me a sandwich when they come back from lunch.”

She was cognizant of her family watching, so she was careful to school her expression and not appear as desperate as she was feeling.

With as much dignity as she could muster, she offered a polite smile. “Another time then.”

He nodded once. “Another time,” then turned to her dad and mom—who was now seated on the other side of the bed, next to her husband.

“One of my partners, Dr. Ngyuen, will be making rounds this evening with the residents, so he’ll stop and check on you. In the meantime, if you need anything, make sure to let the nurses know, and they can reach me, if necessary.”

Translated—*don’t contact me directly, Dakota.*

She bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling when she stared back at him.

*Message received, Dr. Matthews.*

\*\*\*\*

*Aiden*

He reread Jean's text as he walked down the hall after leaving Mr. Douglas's room.

**Jean: Tonight works perfectly. I look forward to it!**

Here was a woman who was excited to spend time with him; he needed to concentrate on her and not the hippy chick with the big brown eyes and ink-black hair that felt like silk when he held it in his fist when she moved her mouth up and down his—

*Focus, dipshit!*

He'd purposefully asked Jean to dinner that night before visiting Tim Douglas. He thought that reminder might help him keep his feelings for Dakota in check if she was in the room with her father.

It'd worked. He'd been distant—but professional—and had even turned down her offer to buy him a piece of pie. That had been hard, and his heart was not happy with him, but he knew if he was alone with her, he'd do something stupid. Like he had last night when he pulled her into his arms.

Those few minutes holding her was the first time it'd felt like he could breathe since the year started.

*It wasn't real!*

She didn't want him, and he needed to move the fuck on. Turning her down and not caving when he noticed her lip tremble was a big step in the right direction.

He just proved he could do this.

Life goes on.

## CHAPTER SIXTY

*Dakota*

Her steps slowed when she approached the open door. Doubt crept through her body as she looked down at the cellophane-covered plate. Bringing Aiden a slice of cherry pie had seemed like a good idea, but now that she was actually outside his office, she wondered if he might not appreciate her ignoring his declination for the dessert.

She'd told herself, "Message received," when he'd been in her dad's room, but then she spent the afternoon thinking about it, and decided she still needed to apologize.

And what better way than with dessert?

Pulling her shoulders back, she took a deep breath and advanced to the open door next to the placard that read, "Dr. Aiden Matthews, Cardiology".

"Special delivery!" she called out with a big smile.

He drew his attention from the computer monitor on his desk to where she stood at the threshold. Instead of returning her smile, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

*That's not a good sign.*

"What are you doing here, Dakota?"

She refused to let her smile waver as she stepped inside and brightly replied, "Well, I thought since you didn't have time for pie, I'd bring the pie to you." Taking the remaining

steps until she was in front of his desk, she held out the plate. “It’s your favorite, cherry.”

A polite smile crossed his lips when he reached for the pie. “Thank you.”

Not waiting for an invitation, she sank into the chair opposite him. “It’s the least I could do.”

“Like I told your mom, it’s not necessary. It’s my job.”

“I know, but your Valentine’s Day plans were ruined.”

She was hoping he’d tell her it wasn’t a big deal. Give her a sign he hadn’t already moved on, that there was still hope for them. Then she’d apologize, he’d accept it, and they could get back together.

Instead, he shrugged and said, “I’m making it up to her tonight.” He then glanced at his watch. “Which means, I need to finish this report so I can get out of here on time.”

He was dismissing her, so he could make his date on time.

She almost lost her nerve and was going to stand to leave, but a little voice urged, “Tell him!”

“Um, there’s another reason I brought the pie. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Is it about your dad?”

“No, well—kind of.”

His mouth was set in a grim line as he waited for her to continue.



“Remember when I told you about my visions of you breaking my heart?”

“Yeah, I remember,” he bit out. “Even though I’d done nothing to suggest anything of the sort.”

“Well, I need to apologize.”

That seemed to surprise him because he narrowed his eyes and cocked his head.

“You need to apologize?”

“Um,” she twisted her hands in her lap as she tried to find the right words, and the courage, to say what she needed to tell him. “After the ambulance got here last night, when you left me in the waiting room crying, I realized that’s what my vision had been about. It wasn’t about you leaving me, it was about you going to save my dad.”

His gaze hardened as his jaw clenched. It seemed like an eternity before he finally spoke, and when he did, she felt the derision dripping from his words.

“So, you let our relationship end based on a vision that you didn’t even understand the meaning of?”

Dakota swallowed hard and nodded, unable to form a reply.

He leaned back in his chair and scoffed, “Un-fucking-believable.”

She lurched to the edge of her seat. “I’m sorry, Aiden! I love you; I was scared! I—”

He cut her off. “You knew how I felt about you. Hell, I fucking *told* you, so there was no chance you didn’t know, and

yet it didn't matter. You were willing to throw it away because of a fucking 'vision,' you kept having." He made air quotes when he said *vision*.

"I screwed up."

"Yeah," he snorted. "Yeah, you did. Because I would have done *anything* for you. Anything. And you threw it away like it meant nothing."

"I'm sorry. I should have—"

"You should have fought for us, Dakota. You knew me, knew the kind of man I am. Instead, you shut me out—lumped me in with men like Chloe's dad; convinced of my sins based on a vision you *didn't even understand*. Who the fuck does that?"

She hung her head as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"All I can say is, you're right. I love you. I should have fought for us."

"Yeah. Yeah, you should have."

Dakota looked up, meeting his eyes when she whispered, "I'm sorry. Please give me another chance."

He stared back at her, his jaw clenched again as his nostrils flared. She half expected/hoped he'd reach across the desk, grab her face, and kiss her.

Instead, he slowly shook his head. "Your apology is accepted, but I can't do this again. What's to stop you from freezing me out when you have another vision that you don't understand?"

Dakota swallowed a sob. "I do learn my lesson, Aiden."

He coldly held her gaze when he replied, “So do I.”

She brushed the tears from her cheeks, but it was a wasted effort since they wouldn’t stop falling.

He seemed unaffected as he handed her a tissue then glanced at his watch again. “Look, I appreciate the apology and the pie, but I don’t want to be late for dinner, and I have to finish this report, so…”

She desperately needed to get through to him.

“I know you still care about me. You wouldn’t have been so kind to me last night if you didn’t. You canceled your date to take care of my dad.”

“Of course I care about you, but that doesn’t change our circumstances. I would have canceled my date to treat Susan’s dad, too. It doesn’t mean I’d ever get back together with her.”

It felt like her heart was lodged in her throat. So, he thought no better of her than he did his ex-wife who’d cheated on him in their home.

There was nothing more she could do but try to accept her fate and leave with a shred of dignity, which was hard to do with the never-ending waterworks.

Still, she stood and offered him a small smile through her tears. “I wish you all the happiness in the world, Aiden. You deserve it.” Then she quietly left his office and made a beeline for the bathroom, where she tried to muffle her sobs into a handful of paper towels as she sat in the stall.

The despair she’d buried six weeks ago finally washed over her in waves. Knowing she’d been *this* close to true happiness and thrown it away for no good reason brought her

to her knees. She needed to get out of there and curl up in her bed.

Utah had picked Phoenix up at the airport, so there were plenty of people to help her mom for the evening. Dakota fired off a text to her sister as she walked toward the doors leading to the parking garage.

**Dakota: I'm going to head home.**

She thought about offering an excuse as to why she needed to leave but decided to keep it simple.

**Utah: Okay, I'll let Mom know. Are you all right?**

No, she wasn't all right. She didn't know if she'd ever be all right again. After keeping her heart safe for almost twenty-three years, she'd let her guard down and fallen in love. Only to have it blow up spectacularly in her face. And she had no one to blame but herself.

Still, she replied.

**Dakota: Just tired. I'll be back in the morning.**

**Utah: Try to get some rest. Phoenix wants to have breakfast.**

**Dakota: I'll text everyone when I get up.**

**Utah: Not too early. Not all of us get up before the sun does.**

**Dakota: I won't. Give Dad a kiss and tell everyone I love them.**

Her sister didn't have to worry about her calling before the sun came up. Dakota couldn't see how the sun could possibly come up tomorrow, let alone ever again.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she stood at the driver's door of her Highlander and brushed a new batch of tears from her eyes as she searched through her purse for her fob. She bit back a frustrated sob when she couldn't find it.

Of course, she'd lose her keys today, because, why the fuck not pile onto her dumpster-fire life?

Hearing footsteps in the distance, it dawned on her that she should have looked for her keys before she walked into the parking garage alone.

She frantically shook her bag, hoping to stir the contents, only to have half of them end up on the cement ground. She slid down her door, landing on her butt with a thump, and buried her face in her knees as another round of tears wracked through her body.

Dakota heard the footsteps but didn't even bother to look up when she felt the person's presence. If someone was going to kill her now, have at it. They'd be doing her a favor. And if some good Samaritan wanted to offer assistance, she didn't want it.

She saw a pair of men's shiny black shoes through the opening of her knees and heard the rustling of clothes as the man squatted in front of her.

"Sunshine," he said at the same time he tugged on her arms.

Her head came up at what she thought was the sound of Aiden's voice. Surely, she was imagining that?

Yet there he was, and the embarrassment of him catching her sitting on the ground in the parking garage—bawling—

washed over her.

She quickly scrambled to her feet and swiped at her tear-stained cheeks as she tried to come up with a logical explanation for her pathetic state but came up empty. Before she could eek out a lame excuse, his hands cupped her face and he stared into her eyes.

“You had no right to come into my world and turn it upside down.”

He didn't wait for a reply before crashing his mouth onto hers. His lips were soft, his scent familiar, and it only took a fraction of a second before she surrendered and returned the kiss. Clinging to his shirt as if it were a lifeline, her tongue tangled with his until he broke away and dropped his forehead to hers, his hands still cupping her face. His voice was rough when he continued, “How dare you come into my office after *six* weeks of radio silence and tell me you love me—right before my date.”

She stared back into his eyes, her voice barely above a whisper when she replied, “I know, I'm sorry. But I do. And I thought you should know—in case you still love me, too.”

He scowled and shook his head before capturing her lips again in another punishing kiss. She wove her arms around his neck and pressed her chest against his, needing to be closer to him.

He abruptly broke the kiss again, his chest heaving when he asked, “What happens when you have another vision that you think means I'm going to hurt you?”

“I’ll listen to my heart. I know you’d never hurt me.” She bit back a smile before continuing. “Besides, all the other visions I’ve had of us are ones where we’re smiling and on the beach.”

“You couldn’t have focused on those?”

“I was scared, Aiden.”

“And you’re not now?”

“The only thing I’m scared of now is losing you.”

He bent down and picked up the items from her purse still scattered on the ground, then dropped them into her bag and grabbed her hand.

“Come on, baby.”

She scurried alongside him. “Where are we going?”

“My place. We have some things to discuss.”

## CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

*Aiden*

It had taken him less than sixty seconds after Dakota walked out of his office before he leapt from his seat and went after her. Except she was nowhere to be found in the halls, so he dropped into her dad's room under the guise of checking on Tim before he headed out for the evening.

She wasn't there either.

Fortunately, he hadn't left before her sister announced to the room, "Dakota's headed home. She'll text in the morning about breakfast."

Aiden exited quickly and made a beeline toward the parking garage, intending to drive to her house and make things right. Fortunately, the Universe intervened, and he noticed her SUV as he walked to his car, and she had been standing at the driver's door, only to slide to the ground a second later.

Now, she was in the Audi's passenger seat as he drove to his house.

With her head leaning against the head rest, she looked over at him.

"I thought you had a date tonight."

He took his eyes off the road to glance briefly at her.

"I did. I canceled it."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.



A chuckle escaped him. “No, you’re not.” He reached for her hand and squeezed it. “And neither am I.”

They pulled into his garage, and he shut the car off, then undid his seatbelt at the same time she unbuckled hers. Only he didn’t reach for the door handle, he reached across the console for her, and pulled her in for another kiss.

It seemed like every time his lips touched hers, his body relaxed even more.

He dropped his forehead to hers and whispered, “Tell me again that you love me.”

“I love you so much, Aiden Matthews. I’m sorry it took me this long to tell you.”

“I can’t do this again if you’re not all in this time.”

She stroked his cheek with the back of her fingertips. “I’m all in, baby.”

He liked her answer, but still felt it necessary to warn, “I’m talking, make room in my closet for you kind of all in.”

A smile spread across her face. “How about if I make room in my closet instead?”

At that point, he didn’t care, as long as they were together. But he had his daughters to consider and couldn’t agree to leaving his house without talking with them.

“Maybe we both just make room until we figure things out. The only thing I know for certain is I want to wake up every morning with you in my bed.”

“I like that idea.”

“Good.” He cupped her face in both hands. “I love you, so much, Sunshine. I’m never letting you go now; you realize that, right?”

“Good, because I never want to be let go.”

“It’s you and me.”

“It’s you and me,” she reiterated.

“Now, we have some making up to do,” he murmured before capturing her lips with his.

\*\*\*\*

### *Dakota*

The feel of his soft lips made butterflies take flight in her stomach, and she sighed as her entire body relaxed. She finally felt safe, for maybe the first time in her adult life.

He broke the kiss, his breathing heavy when he suggested, “Let’s go inside.”

She reached for the door handle and met him at the door leading to the house. He kissed her as they walked inside. The familiar scent of his cologne filled her senses, sending her pheromones into overdrive. Dakota pulled his shirt from his pants and reached underneath the hem to drag her nails down his back while arching against him. The feel of his warm skin against her fingers heightened her need to feel his bare skin on hers.

He directed them through the kitchen; his lips never leaving hers while she walked backward and blindly

unbuttoned his shirt.

When they reached the dining room, he broke the kiss and burrowed his face in her neck, murmuring, “I’ve missed you so fucking much,” against her skin as his hand slid under her blouse and up her side to palm her tit.

She wove her fingers in his hair and tilted her head back, giving him better access to her neck, while she pressed her hips against his erection.

“I’ve missed you, too, baby.”

By the time they reached the stairs, they were both shirt and shoeless, and breathing heavy.

He smirked as he gestured toward the stairs. “I can fuck you on the landing, but I think it’d be more comfortable in my—our—bed.”

*Our bed.*

Dakota liked the thought of that.

“Let’s go upstairs to our bed.”

## EPILOGUE

*Aiden*

He looked at his reflection as he looped his tie through the knot.

“It’s fine, Sunshine. I can go by myself, and I’ll duck out early.”

Today was supposed to be their first public outing together as a married couple. Then yesterday, the Massachusetts Massage Board of Registration of Massage Therapy decided to schedule their inspection of her new location.

She peeked her head around the corner, and his dick got hard at the sight of her wearing only a beige slip.

“You RSVP’d for both of us, Aiden. I can’t just not show up.”

Abandoning the task of making sure the knot of his tie was straight, he walked to where she was standing and pulled her into his arms. He ran his hands up and down her back, relishing the feel of the silky material under his fingertips and her warm body against hers.

“So, come late, Mrs. Matthews.”

“That’s a good idea. Hopefully this inspection won’t take long since I have an excellent record with my other locations.” Dakota tipped her head up to look at him with a wide grin. “And I love when you call me Mrs. Matthews.”

“I love saying it.”

He leaned down to kiss her, but after a few seconds, she pulled away, causing him to tighten his hold on her.

“Just one more kiss.”

She brushed the hair above his ears.

“Baby, you and I both know where one more kiss will lead: to both of us being late, which would make me even later for Olivia and Maverick’s reception.”

He dropped a kiss on her nose and released his hold so she could continue getting dressed.

“Speaking of receptions...” he followed as she returned to the closet. “Should we see if The Dragonfly has any openings?”

“I think that would be the perfect place.”

“Either that or Steven and Whitney’s house on the Cape. Where it all started.”

“That’d be asking a lot of our friends.”

“True. But I think they’d happily do it.”

“The Dragonfly would be able to accommodate more people.”

He threw his head back with a groan. “How many people?”

“Aiden Clarke Matthews! You promised!”

With a sigh, he conceded, “I know, Sunshine. And I’m a man of my word.”

Last weekend, she’d agreed to a hasty wedding on the beach with just their immediate family present as long as he

agreed to have a reception later.

They'd gotten married on the perfect June day. It was warm, with not a cloud in the sky and just the right amount of breeze. Because he'd sprung it on her, there'd been no planning, no worrying, no stress—just the two of them starting a life together as man and wife with the Atlantic Ocean as their backdrop. Both of their families witnessing it with smiles on their faces had been the cherry on top.

He didn't need a party with a bunch of other people to celebrate, but he knew she did. And there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to make her happy. So, if a big reception made her happy, she would get a big reception. He'd happily pay for it and show up with a smile.

“You also need to tell me when you can clear two weeks on your calendar for our honeymoon.”

She slipped her dress over her head, then turned in front of him so he could zip her up.

“I own the business—I have a lot more flexibility. I think it will really depend on *your* schedule at the hospital.”

“Well, let's see when the Dragonfly has availability, and we can work around that.”

She pecked him on the lips. “Sounds good. I've got to run. I'll see you this afternoon.”

He grabbed her hand and whispered, “I love you, Sunshine. Drive safely.”

\*\*

His colleague, Olivia, was having a second wedding with her billionaire baby-daddy. Apparently, their first one had been under duress or some shit—at least according to her twin brother, Evan. But she was all smiles as she held her groom's hand when they walked around the tables at their outdoor reception.

Aiden kissed Olivia's cheek when she greeted him and told her, "You look stunning."

She thanked him, then said, "Babe, this is Aiden Matthews. He's the guy to call if your heart stops working."

Her husband chuckled as he held out his hand. "Sounds like someone I definitely should know."

Aiden shook the man's hand, then looked at their surroundings.

"The wedding was beautiful. But I'm curious what your backup plan was if it rained?"

"Well, our guest list is small enough we could have done things inside, like they do when they have winter weddings. But Hope told me she and Yvette just purchased a massive tent. I guess they're going to try to get more into the wedding business."

"Yeah, I need to talk to Hope about that."

Olivia glanced down at his left hand and grabbed it when she noticed the gold band on his ring finger.

She held his hand up.

"This explains a lot."

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve actually seen you smile lately.”

Just then, he noticed his wife walking toward him and felt a grin spread across his face that he couldn’t contain if he tried.

“I guess I have plenty to smile about these days.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Want to read about Aiden and Dakota’s wedding? Click [here](#) for a special bonus scene!

Utah and Liam’s book, *Wicked Little Thief*, is next! Coming in 2024! <https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-little-thief>



## *Wicked Little Thief*

What happens when a hacker meets the man in charge of the hospital whose system she's hacked and erased hundreds of thousands of dollars in patient debt?

Why couldn't she have realized who he was before falling for him? Or getting arrested?

Preorder it here!

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## *Reading order for Boston's Elite series*

*Wicked Hot Silver Fox* (Parker and Xandra)

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*Wicked Hot Doctor* (Steven and Whitney)

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*Wicked Grumpy Heart Doc* (Dakota and Aiden)

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*Wicked Little Thief* (Liam and Utah)

<https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-little-thief>

## THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *Wicked Grumpy Heart Doc!*

I loved writing Aiden and Dakota's book. Although it took a while to get the story written, I had the premise in my head the whole time. It just took time to flesh out all the details. Not gonna lie... there were tears of frustration when I couldn't get the story just right, but eventually, it finally all came together.

If you enjoyed the story (and even if you didn't), would you mind leaving me a review wherever you purchased this book? And, if it's not too much trouble, Goodreads and/or Bookbub? Your review helps get my work seen by other readers, which lets me keep writing, so I would be grateful for anything you can do!

Don't forget to sign up for my newsletter to get a free full-size novel, plus all kinds of bonus content, and be the first to know about cover reveals, contests, excerpts, and more!

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xoxo,

Tess

## DEDICATION

In memory of my grandma, Rosemary—the sassiest woman I’ve ever known.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mr. Summers: Thank you for being such a wonderful support system, and for catering to me whenever I say I need a Puerto Vallarta trip. I love you and am grateful for everything you do.

Maggie Ryan: Thank you for everything you did to make this book better. I appreciate the love and care you gave Aiden and Dakota. You are a wonderful human being (and I still cherish my Maggie Bag!)

Renee Rose and Simone Gers: Thank you for being the inspiration behind Dakota. You both are beautiful souls and I’m so grateful to know you.

Sean Rae: Thank you for being the face of Aiden (and what a beautiful face it is!)

Golden Czermak with FuriosFotog: Thank you for such a great photo.

OliviaProDesigns: Another great cover. Thank you.

Megan Appelt: Your friendship for the last twenty years (holy shit, it's been twenty years!) is a gift. That I get to work beside you again is awesome. Thanks for coming on board.

Anna Lena Milo: I am so grateful to have you helping me every day. I appreciate all that you do for me.

My extended family: Thanks for still being so supportive of me—twenty-three books later. It means the world to me.

Lastly, to my readers: Sometimes I pinch myself when I realize I get to wake up and write about my characters every day. You make that possible, and I'm beyond humbled and eternally grateful.

# *Wicked Little Secret*

Boston's Elite

*It was supposed to be an anonymous, one-night stand.*

Dr. Olivia Lacroix wasn't proud that she went to the bar when she was ovulating, intending to get pregnant. No last names or phone numbers had to be exchanged—the guy never needed to know. No harm, no foul. Right?

Wrong.

When her one-night stand shows up at the hospital right after she's given birth demanding answers, he's no longer the nice guy she met in the bar. Not satisfied with her explanation, he insists she marry him or else he's going to sue her for full custody. Olivia has money, but not the kind of money her infant son's father apparently has. She had no idea she'd hooked up with a multi-millionaire.

What else can she do but marry him? Their prenup guarantees her joint custody if *he* divorces *her*. That should be easy enough to make happen. If she can keep from falling in love with the grouch first.

<https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-little-secret-1>

# *Wicked Bad Decisions*

Boston's Elite

*Don't hate the player, hate the game.*

*But what happens when the rules of the game change?*

Attorney Zach Rudolf gave up on love the day his girlfriend dumped him for someone who could give her children. Fortunately for Zach, being rich and handsome has its advantages. It wasn't hard to find women—yes, plural—to replace her and help lick... his wounds.

Then he meets *her*. The woman he'd change his ways for and settle down.

Feisty, beautiful, and rich, Zoe has also had her share of heartbreak, which is why she's perfected the art cougar-ing. (It's a verb, just ask her.) This means Zach's age puts him firmly in the friend-zone.

Something Zach finds completely agonizing and totally unacceptable. And he's going to show her just how unacceptable he thinks it is.

<https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-bad-decisions-1>

# *Wicked Hot Baby Daddy*

Boston's Elite

*The player doctor left behind more than a broken heart.*

Dr. James Rudolf made Yvette Sinclair believe in fairy tales, and he was her Prince Charming. Then, out of the blue, he stopped taking her calls. Blocked them would be a more accurate descriptor.

Devastated, Yvette had no idea why the man she thought was *the one* had ghosted her. Even harder, she was three thousand miles away, so she couldn't just show up at his house and demand an explanation. Then her best friend started seeing him around Boston—a different beautiful woman on his arm each time. She felt like such a fool.

She was determined to move on and forget all about the playboy. Until two pink lines made that impossible.

Get it here! <https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-hot-baby-daddy>.



# *Wicked Hot Medicine*

Boston's Elite

*Vengeance never tasted as sweet as it did on Hope Ericson's skin.*

Sleeping with his rival's wife was an opportunity Dr. Evan Lacroix couldn't refuse.

Except, it turned out, she wasn't his wife—she was his sister.

Oh, the irony. It made it that much sweeter.

Unfortunately, when Hope realized his intentions, she didn't appreciate being a pawn in his game, and the sassy spitfire turned the tables on him.

Evan never saw it coming.

And now he needs to decide which is more important—love or revenge.

This isn't a book about enemies *to* lovers. It's about enemies with benefits—until the line between enemy and lover gets blurred.

<https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-hot-medicine>

# *Wicked Hot Doctor*

Boston's Elite

*A single doctor and a single lawyer walk into a bar...*

Dr. Steven Ericson never thought a parking ticket would change his life, but that's exactly what happened the day he goes downtown to pay his forgotten ticket for an expired meter.

As the head of Boston General's ER, he doesn't have time for relationships, or at least he's never met a woman who made him want to make time.

That all changes when he meets Whitney Hayes. The dynamo attorney in high heels entices him to imagine carving out time for more than his usual one-night stand. Imagine his dismay to find out that she, too, doesn't do relationships—they're not in her 5-year plan.

Yeah, eff that. Her plan needs rewriting, and Steven's more than willing to supply the pen and ink to help with that.

<https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-hot-doctor-1>

# *Wicked Hot Silver Fox*

Boston's Elite

*It all started with a dirty photo in his text messages...*

Yeah, Dr. Parker Preston's intentions when he gave Alexandra Collins his phone number at the animal rescue gala were more personal than professional. But he'd never expected the sassy beauty with the blue streak in her hair to send him a picture of her perfect, perky boobs as enticement to adopt the dogs she was desperately trying to find a home for.

But dang if they weren't the ideal incentive for him to offer his home to more than just the dogs. In exchange for adopting the older, bonded pair, she'd need to move in with him for a month and get the dogs acclimated. Oh, and she wouldn't be sleeping in the guest room during her stay.

The deal is only for a month though. And she insisted they weren't going to fall in love, something he readily agreed with. They had the rules in place, what could possibly go wrong in four short weeks?

Get it here! <https://tesssummersauthor.com/wicked-hot-silver-fox-1>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tess Summers is a former businesswoman and teacher who always loved writing but never seemed to have time to sit down and write a short story, let alone a novel. Now battling MS, her life changed dramatically, and she has finally slowed down enough to start writing all the stories she's been wanting to tell, including the fun and sexy ones!

Married over twenty-six years with three grown children, Tess is a former dog foster mom who ended up failing and adopting them instead. She and her husband (and their three dogs) split their time between the desert of Arizona and the lakes of Michigan, so she's always in a climate that's not too hot and not too cold, but just right!

### *CONTACT ME!*

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