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Does It

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EVERY GIRL DOES IT

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*To my unsuspecting sister who spent countless hours reading
my work and encouraging me!*

Prologue

Oh no. This is not happening, not happening!

I wipe my hands over my pleated skirt, a nervous habit. Sweaty hands aren't attractive, or so Brad Macintosh said when he held them during couple's skate my seventh grade year.

It's my first choir solo ever. Why couldn't it be our fall concert instead of our Spring Spectacular? I feel ridiculous standing in front of the entire school with my mouth gaping open trying to find a middle C. Not to mention the fact that my mother, who is standing up in the front of the audience waving with video camera in hand, forced me to wear a pleated skirt. Thus the outfit is now screaming "uncool" on my lanky body.

Never am I this mean. But when I get nervous, I tend to snap at people. All week I've been at odds with my mom for taking pictures of me. She was literally documenting every day of my life up until the big solo or as she puts it, "my discovery!" Leave it to my mom to turn a junior high solo into the performance of a lifetime, which will not only get her daughter discovered, but will make her a best selling artist all before her eighteenth birthday. Somehow I don't think MTV is going to be knocking on our door anytime soon for the professional footage my mom shot in order to do a "diary" on my life before I was famous.

Nervous and sweating, I begin my solo, praying I remember the words. When I finish, I felt like I'd run the fifty-yard dash the way my heart is hammering, but then I realize everyone is clapping. They're all clapping for me. I did well!

In fact, people are beginning to stand up and clap. I actually feel famous, like I'm a pop star giving my first concert and people love me. **THEY LOVE ME!**

I bow and do a little curtsy just so they know I'm still humble then wave like Miss America all the way back to my seat with the rest of the choir. Blushing, I try to avoid eye contact with the rest of the choir as they whisper, "good job". I look humble, but I'm actually soaring because of how proud I am. I actually did it! Now if only my mom would turn off that dang camera and sit down. My dad gives me a thumbs up, and oh yes, my mom is wiping a stray tear from her eye. Looking at them you'd assume I've never done anything exciting in my entire life.

Our choir director grabs the microphone and clears his throat. The entire audience falls silent like he's the president of the United States about to make his State of the Union address.

Our town is small. Just because our choir director used to be a somewhat famous Christian artist doesn't mean he should be elected mayor or given the key to the town; however, few agree with my practical assessment. After all, he did give me my starring solo, so I should probably act a little more thankful. So I, like everyone else, put the stars in my eyes and listen intently for what he is about to say.

"Now, I know we normally end after the starring solo." He turns and winks at me while I feel my face turn hot as people start chanting my name. "But," he says, holding up his hand, "we have a little treat for all of you today. Preston, why don't you come down here?"

Preston? Weird, I didn't know he was in choir. Poor boy. He'd be more attractive if he traded in the Star Wars t-shirts for some button-ups. He's the only member of the local Star Wars fan club; he refuses to acknowledge that George Lucas did, in fact, make more films. He says it's blasphemy to even speak of it, thus why he's the only member of the club.

Rather than his usual uniform sporting R2D2 or Luke Skywalker, he's wearing an over large sweater vest and pants way too short for his height. As I'm assessing his wardrobe, my eyes land on Austin Macintosh, a pretty boy.

Good looks and talent on the basketball court don't hurt his popularity with the ladies either. Hopefully, he'll ask me to prom. I mean, it's only natural for the starting point guard to ask out the soloist of the year, right? Deciding to be bold, I wink at him and notice a faint blush stain his cheeks and his eyes shift downward in nervousness. When he looks up he lifts his hand in a friendly wave and winks. Yes!

"Amanda Lewis!"

I hear my name. Why do I hear my name? Turning, I see Preston staring at me, and the entire audience seems to be waiting in suspense.

"What?" I ask in hushed tones.

The girl next to me tells me Preston had asked me to approach the front. Strange, but maybe I won an award? Without further hesitation, I walk up and smile brightly as people clap. The temptation to wave again is overwhelming, and I succumb, beaming as I receive another round of applause. Wow, I could get use to this kind of attention. Finally I reach Preston, but there's no trophy. Bummer.

He grabs for my hand, and before I can pull it away, it's already stuck in his grasp. He's rubbing my thumb. This is awkward. "Will you go to prom with me?"

He's kidding. I'm getting pranked. This can't be real. Is this Candid Camera? Looking around, I notice that everyone in the audience is dead silent. Even my friends in the choir are sitting there with their mouths gaping open. This is social suicide.

As I take the microphone out of his hands, I feel the collective hush of people holding their breath. Somehow I manage to press on as gracefully as possible. "Wow, that's so sweet to offer," I say cheerfully. I see my mom has turned the video camera back on. We'll have words later.

"But," I say unsure, "I already promised I'd go with my cousin. Maybe if you had asked sooner..." This is my peace offering, a pathetic one.

"Prom's in two months," Preston replies, defeated.

“I know,” I say quickly. “But I wanted to get an early start. So sorry, Preston.”

He grabs the microphone and tries to smile. “It’s okay. You’re right. I should have asked sooner. Hey, let’s give another round of applause to the soloist of the night!” He backs up and claps for me, but I can see tears in his eyes. Humiliation, and it’s all my fault.

All I want right now is for the floor to swallow me alive. That isn’t an option, however, so I wave with little enthusiasm and find my seat.

A girl next to me nudges my knee. “That was close, huh?” Her eyes are laughing, like she’s making a joke, but I just want to cry. How cruel can a person be? People around me are muttering words like, *ouch*, *harsh*, *bummer*, and I fight the tears threatening to stream down my face. My throat constricts with a sudden onslaught of emotion as I watch Preston slowly move back to his seat and hang his head in his hands. I silently pray for him to lift his head and look in my direction. Instead all I see a single tear slide down his cheek then nausea overwhelms me. I just shot Bambi, and the worst part is, I can’t seem to find the strength to get up, walk over to his seat, and apologize.

Chapter One

Nine Years Later...

How I ended up here, I have no idea. Well actually, I take that back. I do. The whole thing started when my boyfriend of two weeks asked me to be his date to his best friend's wedding. Being the naïve idiot that I am, I said, "Well, of course," because naturally I'm in love with him after fourteen days and will do anything he asks (cue large sigh here).

So, you can imagine my surprise at the predicament I'm in – not that I shouldn't have seen it coming. A girl should have a sixth sense about some situations. He never let me see his place, nor did he take me out in public, nor did I ever actually meet any of his friends. It was a series of coffee dates and quick yet passionate kisses on the cheek, which led me to this church on this particular day. Desperate? No, I'm not, but perhaps I'm a little too hopeful.

Dear friends, who also happen to be happily married, are always reminding me I'm young enough to be independent, free, and I should enjoy this time in my life. Please. I'd roll my eyes and say choice words to them, if they could take their eyes off each other long enough to notice. Which brings me to why I'm too hopeful. I want what they have. However, that is no excuse for the sorry situation I find myself in today.

Oh, to leave this place! But I can't. My only ride is with my stupid (you guessed it) ex-boyfriend who is still in the corner sobbing his eyes out. And you may ask, "Amanda, that's odd. Why is your now ex-boyfriend sobbing his eyes out?" To which I will answer, "Because he's lost his mind." Literally tossed every brain cell in his possession into a trash can and set it on fire, no joke. Looking at him just makes me all the more sick to my stomach. As I said before, I should have known. Used, like some worthless replacement for what

he really wanted all along, that's what I feel right now, and it's the simple truth.

With all the snot running down his face and the tears, I find myself wondering what I ever saw in him. What's wrong with me? Normally I'm not this stupid. I go for the jocks, but because of bad experiences which we don't need to review, I decided to go for the nerdy guy. Sensitivity might be a nice change. Well, I got the sensitive part; not what I had in mind.

It would have been nice to know an important little detail. The best friend, whose wedding I just inadvertently destroyed, is a girl.

Furthermore, there was no way for me to know this girl was the love of his life, and I was actually going to a wedding to witness my date stand up in the middle of the ceremony – God, mayor, and everyone else I have known since high school—and say, “I object!”

I can't make this stuff up, not even if I tried. Naturally, the groom was a little ticked off. You could tell by the fact that his face and neck got so red his head looked like it was going to pop right off his body. Next thing I know, my ex-boyfriend was grabbing me, yes grabbing me, by my dress strap, I might add, and tugging me to stand up with him. Sorry, but my loyalty doesn't run that deep. I briefly contemplated slamming my head against a wall.

You can imagine the ruckus he caused, since the bride not only fainted, but took all six of her bridesmaids down with her, simultaneously knocking over the giant candelabrum which set part of the church on fire. The highlight of my day was watching the incredibly muscular fireman put the small blaze out. Sometimes my life is pathetic, I admit.

But back to my snotty-nosed ex-boyfriend, maybe if I sneak away quietly he won't notice I'm gone. Gathering my purse and coat, I walk toward the door. Sweet freedom. I can see it. I can smell it. And I can feel it.

“Amanda?”

Ugh, I knew I was lying to myself. I never made it out of my house in high school. Why would I be able to sneak out now?

Defeated, I turn around to see who had said my name and noticed an attractive fireman walking my way. Now I'm curious, but I see the ex-boyfriend slowly look my way as well. Oh no. This is not good. Doing what I do best, I smile at Mr. Hot-Fireman, and say, "Hi."

"You don't remember me, do you?" The deep voice sent shivers up my spine; it was like melted chocolate. The ex-boyfriend has a crazed look in his eyes and suddenly sprints toward me and Mr. Fireman. Next thing I know, Derek, still snotted and angry, is on top of the fireman throwing punches Ultimate Fighter style at the back of his head.

"Derek! Get off of him, what are you doing?"

"I'll fight for you, Amanda! Don't worry! I love you!"
Insert more crazy snotted induced sobs here. Men.

The poor hot fireman didn't even know what hit him. Lucky for him he was still wearing his helmet which blocked part of the blow from Derek. The unfortunate part was, although it did block the hit from Derek, the blow sent the hat flying off of the fireman's head into the giant cake, sending the bride, yet again, into hysterics and judgmental looks my way. I feel the need to shout, *This is not my fault!*

Derek is finally thrown off of the fireman, and I escort him outside amidst the entire town shaking their heads in disapproval. Thanks for the help guys! No one even bothered to get up from their seats, rude.

"Derek, what the heck are you doing?" He shoves his, now I realize, small hands into his pockets and sniffs, "Well, I just thought maybe since things didn't go well, you know, today, that we could try again."

Oh my goodness. This cannot be happening. He is actually serious. This is not his joking face. Is he drunk? He must be drunk off communion wine. It's the only explanation I can come up with at this point.

“Derek,” I try my stern voice, hoping he’ll get the hint without me having to slap him across the face. I don’t like criers. His tears must stop now. They must stop, I tell you! Okay, calm down and tell him how it is. “You’re an idiot.”

Maybe that was too harsh, make it better. “So, please stop crying! I won’t try again with you when there was nothing to try in the first place. You took me as a date to your best friend’s wedding, then tried to ditch me to hook up with the bride. And now that it didn’t work out as you planned, you want to try with me?” The shrillness of my voice was elevating, and getting louder, but I couldn’t control myself. Tremulously, I try to reclaim some shreds of dignity, so I add, “I’ll have you know there are guys who would kill for an opportunity to date me!” What, just because they aren’t lining up doesn’t mean it’s not true. “How dare you think you can have a second chance with me. You’re lucky you had a first.” My fists are clenched so tightly against my sides, I know if I breathe one more word I’ll release them all over his face.

The sobbing baby turns suddenly into a little monster and retorts, “Well, that’s not what I hear. Did you know they had to bribe me to even go out with you? I would be doing you a favor!”

Where did that come from? Where is ‘Mr. I Cry All the Time and Have Feelings Too’ man? My mouth drops open as I’m rendered speechless. Then out of nowhere – like a flash of lightning – Mr. Fireman storms up to us and punches Derek in the nose.

“What?” I yell at the strange, hot man and I lean down to see if Derek is okay. Wow, this guy is going to need therapy after today.

“He’s an idiot,” the fireman states as he rubs his large hands. Not even a scratch from that hit. Nice.

The claim is valid; there’s no way to argue that point. Nice to know I’m not the only sane one here at the wedding.

“Thanks,” I manage to mutter as I meet the craziest green eyes I’ve ever seen in my entire life. Oh good, the room

is spinning now. Perfect. Maybe I'll pass out on top of Derek, looking all kinds of inappropriate. The mayor would love that.

"You're welcome, Amanda." Mr. Fireman grins cleverly before he turns around and walks back into the church.

"Who is that?" Derek is still pathetically whimpering on the ground. I feel like kicking him, but I'm not the violent type. I'm outside, so it's easy to make an escape. I'm sure not going to wait around. On the way home, I keep wondering about Mr. Mystery Fireman. He looked so familiar. Do I know him? How does he know my name? Our town of Nampa, Idaho isn't very large, we only boast enough people for two high schools. Then again, he could have easily gone to school somewhere in Boise or Meridian. But he was definitely a Nampa fireman.

Google is wonderful; which could be construed as stalking, but my curiosity is eating me alive. Yes! Found it, Nampa Firehouse, *click*.

Oh be still my rapidly beating heart. They have a calendar for a suggested donation of only ten dollars! Plus, it's for charity! Who wouldn't buy the calendar? Of course, he's Mr. December. Merry Christmas, Amanda. My strict Nazarene grandma is probably rolling in her grave, not that I didn't give her enough reasons to be in that grave while she was living. What with my dancing and going to movies. She was a dear, sweet lady who I'm thankful now, is with her Lord. I'm silently praying to God that He is the only one who can actually hear my thoughts. Amen. And, girls, if you can see this, A-M-E-N.

You could do laundry on his abs. Is he airbrushed? How can abs look this way? His chest is perfectly chiseled, like God cut him out of a mountain. Those green eyes aren't even his best feature. His hair is so thick and glossy, it should have its own Facebook page, and I would easily be the number one fan.

I need to refocus. Where is his name? I scroll down to the bottom of the page and see "staff". I click and pray it will

be the correct information. Moving down the page again, I see his picture and click on it. They have stats right next to the names. Wait. No. Well, I just almost swallowed my tongue – didn't know it was possible, but here you see it documented. It almost happened to a perfectly healthy twenty-seven year old, and my parents would have found me in my apartment, asphyxiated on the floor with my computer screen opened up to a hot fireman. The shame would be unbearable. My poor parents would be humiliated and have to lie to everyone about how they found me.

There's no way it could actually be him. The irony would be too perfect. I have to look closer to confirm my eyes aren't deceiving me. With a sinking feeling, I remember him when he had braces, ugly sweater vests, and too thick glasses.

It's Preston, and the memories of egging his house more than once during high school hit me full force. I remember him holding my hand with those sweaty palms as he asked me to prom in front of the entire school. Right now the only one with sweaty palms is me! Oh, no. I turned him down. The sad part is, if he'd ask me now, I'd say yes.

At the time, it was more important for me to look cool. So I said, in front of everyone, "Thanks, but I'm already going with my cousin, Brad". I don't even have a cousin named Brad. Just wait. It gets worse. He showed up at prom with his sister, saw me dancing and kissing another guy, and, I'm sure, assumed I probably wasn't that close with my family.

Ladies, let this be a lesson. People always say you need to be nice to nerds, because you might end up working for them some day. The same goes for nerdy guys who ask you out. You should be nice to them, because one day they might be smoking hot.

Chapter Two

As women, I'm sure we can all agree that when we see a man whose gorgeous, cut, and confident, we automatically assume he's arrogant. So the natural road to take is search for the one that's slightly unfortunate looking with the hope that his personality makes up for any other deficiencies. We wouldn't have this assumption if we didn't have good reason. Few men are as attractive on the inside as the outside.

One time I dated a guy who, for anonymity's sake, we'll call Bob, and he was eye candy. We met at the gym. Bob and I were running next to each other on treadmills. His towel fell off the side of his treadmill, and I picked it up. It was love at first sight.

Feeling rather confident, I struck up a conversation. He asked for my number, and two nights later he called. We went to a fancy restaurant that weekend, and I fell in love for about five minutes. He ordered for both of us, without asking. "Yes, we'll get salad with no dressing, chicken with no gravy, and no bread, we don't do carbs."

If you ever want to get in an argument with me, just tell me that I shouldn't eat carbs. Be prepared, I'll spit in your face. Maybe not, but the whole low carb mentality is ridiculous, and for me, a deal breaker. When I heard him say that I shouted "But wait! I like carbs!"

He gave me a look I'm guessing he only reserves for fat people, and told the waiter that I was "confused" and "please proceed to hold the carbs".

Seething, I went to another table next to us, stole the bread and ate it right in front of him. Now in hindsight, I looked like an insane person. But for argument's sake, let's be clear; I was angry at the time. Bob smiled tightly and never called again.

Since Preston is hands down the hottest guy I've ever seen, I doubt he isn't aware of this fact and uses it with reckless abandon. Even though he was a good guy back in the day, how could he not know he's "got it" and knows how to "flaunt" it too? With all this revelation, I'm bursting with nervous energy, I need a good hard run. Eight o' clock pm usually means the gym is empty, and it's Saturday night. Who goes to the gym on a Saturday night? Me. I grab my workout stuff, not bothering to put on anything remotely cute, and run out the door.

The air of the valley hits me as I get out of the car. A mixture of rain and cold hit my nose. It reminds me of a fresh start, which is exactly what I need. I already feel better. Nampa may be small, but they have an awesome rec center. It's my haven, but not because of the TVs. They're great, but it's also right next to my favorite fast food restaurant. Walking through the doors, I inhale the sweet smell of sweat and chlorine and scan my card.

Yes, this is where I need to be. There's only one other person running, and I think he's going for some record. If he keeps this ridiculous pace, he might actually wear the treadmill out. But something about him seems familiar. No, I can't. Why would I go to the treadmill right next to him when there are twenty other ones open? We all know how things worked out with Bob. I don't want another man telling me I can't have bread.

But upon closer inspection, this man has the best legs I've ever seen. The formation of muscles that gather at his calf and linger up to his—whoops, he just glanced this way. Look busy. Why did I choose tonight to where my old, ratty high school cheerleading shirt? And why did I also choose to wear the yoga pants that I spilled paint on last year? I grumbled something out loud, not realizing it, and jumped onto my treadmill. Five miles, here I come.

As I run, the anxiety of the day turns into fuel, pushing me harder and faster. No, I don't need Derek, I don't need Bob, I don't—wait a second. While closing my eyes, I missed

something. Mr. Runner is coming over to me. Why? What do I do? Oh my goodness, he's getting on the machine next to me. Competition. Whether he realizes it or not, he's in for a race. Why? Because I can't help it. I must win. It's also why I never turn down dares, but that's a different story. He starts running, and again I feel the pressure to win. Please. He may be a fine male specimen, but I'm fast, ridiculously fast.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a subtle movement, but I still can't bring myself to look at his face.. Focusing on my running, my breathing, I keep my eyes trained ahead. His continuing glances feel like silent challenges, so I hit the up button on my speed and go to eight miles an hour, then ten. Now I'm sprinting, and he's sprinting. He's running faster, so I push mine up one more time before realizing that my balance is momentarily off. And yes, you guessed it, I fly off of the treadmill into the bench behind me.

“Amanda?”

So this is what happens when you get knocked out. You see hot men in your dreams. Through the haze, I see a pair of stormy green eyes looking down at me. Dazed, I reach up to touch the face of my ruggedly handsome rescuer and come into contact with warm skin. My fingers tingle as the man's face breaks into a gentle smile. Not trusting my own voice, I sit in silence as the fog begins to clear. The man reaches out to brush some hair from my face. The touch of his fingers sends my stomach whirling.

“Wow,” I whisper reverently. To my horror, I realize within five seconds of opening my mouth that I'm not unconscious. And the runner next to me is, in fact, Mr. Fireman Preston himself.

“Wow? What do you mean wow? Am I supposed to thank you for complimenting me after you raced me to your almost death?”

I didn't realize I was still staring at his chest until he cleared his throat. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. I don't see any blood.” Trying to cover my behavior, I say, “I don't know what happened.” Liar.

“Oh, you mean you don’t remember challenging me to that race just a few minutes ago? Or how about the part where you watched me punch your sorry boyfriend in the face, or maybe—”

I put my hand in the air between us to give him a signal to stop talking. I mean, come on now, he’s just being rude.

“I’ll have you know,” I interrupt with fists clenched, “that he is *not* my boyfriend.” I’m so close to him that I can smell the mixture of salty sweat and cologne radiating off his body. It takes every ounce of self-control I possessed not to lean in closer.

“Did you or did you not date him, though?” He crosses his bulky arms as if in challenge.

“Maybe...I mean...” No words. Since when do I have no words?

“You mean, you what?” He bites his lip, drawing my attention to his perfectly sensual mouth. It’s every girl’s dream of what a man’s lips should look like up close. Smooth and taunting. “Amanda, are you sure you’re okay? You can hardly focus right now. Sit down or something. You’re making me nervous.”

He leads me to the bench, as I outwardly mock him by copying his words. “You’re making me nervous.” Only I use a really whiny voice making me sound all the more pathetic with my comeback. “Stop acting like a five year old, Amanda. I’m not your dad. But I should punish you for dating such an idiot. Come on.” His eyes scan the basketball courts below before again resting on my face. Why can’t I act like a normal grown up?

“I’m sorry,” I mutter. “It’s just been a long day.” I shrug as I make eye contact for the first time since this afternoon.

His eyes were sparkling with mischief. “I bet. What with your boyfriend trying to steal the bride and all.” He isn’t even trying to hide his laugh as I punch him in the side.

“How do you even know that’s true?” I shriek not caring that people are now staring at us. Yelling wasn’t the wisest

choice, but this man is ridiculous. What gives him the right to judge me?

“Um, sorry to break it to you, but the entire town knows the story. He spilled it to everyone when he went back into the reception. Perhaps he was hoping for sympathy, it’s hard losing not one but two girls in one day.” His gaze turns sympathetic as he notices my obvious anger at the idea of Derek telling everyone that we dated.

“I’ll kill him.”

Preston’s eyes turn speculative as if he’s trying to see if I have it in me to be that violent. I twist away to hide my bluff. So I won’t kill him, but giving him a black eye sure sounds good.

“No you won’t. He’s just being a stupid guy.” Preston uses the towel in his hands to wipe his face then throws it onto the bench. “So, figure out who I am yet?”

Why is lying a sin? Desperate for any other option but the truth, I weigh the alternative, which of course is lying, but I’m terrible at it. My own cat can tell when I’m being dishonest. When I leave on vacation and promise to be right back, she just looks at me and growls. Any sort of irritated noise from Mrs. Butterworth is far worse than your average housecat. Since she’s a Sphinx, she has no hair which adds to her charm, or lack thereof. However, if she doesn’t believe me when I lie, why would Preston?

Gathering my courage, I raise my chin to even the odds, but fail miserably as my eyes lock on his chest. Since when did he get so tall? My chin juts out as my eyes slowly rise to meet his piercing gaze. “Yes, you’re Preston. I remember you from high school. Good to see you again. Well, I should be off. I could have a concussion, you know.” My body turns as I mentally tell my legs to pump faster, but to no avail. I sense his presence stalking close behind me, too close for my personal comfort. How is it that I can still smell him?

“So that’s it? No, ‘oh hey, Preston, what are you doing with your life’? Or, ‘sorry for lying to you in front of the entire school’. Or maybe this one, ‘thanks for punching the creep I

call a boyfriend in the face'? Seriously, go ahead, choose any one of those phrases. I'll wait."

He stops behind me. Annoyed, of course I had to turn around and face my now enemy. I can't believe I ever thought he was hot, him and his "wow" body, please. I want to ruin his body with my nails right now.

"Thanks." I grind my teeth and force a smile. "For punching him in the face. And yes, sorry about high school, but let's face it, that was ten years ago. And technically I didn't lie. Well I did, but I didn't want to make it worse by saying no in front of the entire school. And come on, you got your revenge on me and everyone else. I mean, look at you."

Stop talking, Amanda. But it was too late. When I get started, there's no alarm that goes off in my head that says, "hey, Amanda, maybe that's an over-share". I think Google or Apple should invent an app to put on cell phones so alarms go off when you've been talking too much or embarrassing yourself.

He leans in close enough for me to see the perfect trace of his irritating jaw. "What do you mean, 'I got my revenge'?"

Biting my lip and fighting the fluttering feelings his close proximity brings, I try to figure a graceful way out of this situation. This couldn't get much worse. I've now admitted twice to him that I think he's the hottest man on the planet, and he still doesn't have a clue. Could it be? Is he one of those guys whose actually humble?

"You know what I mean."

"Oh you mean this?" He flexes a bicep and leans down to kiss it. Oh no, he did not just do that. Of all the arrogant...I have no words to finish that thought.

"Amanda, I'm kidding. Geez, you need to lighten up, how much caffeine do you consume, anyway? It must be a lot with how high strung you are."

Glad we've moved on from embarrassment to just plain being offended. "I'll have you know that my caffeine levels are completely normal as are my BMI and IQ." Wait, maybe

the IQ comment made me sound dumb, because now he's trying not to laugh.

Frustrated, I stomp my foot on his and run down the stairs. Don't ask me why. His foot didn't suffer any long term damage. I know, because he followed me all the way outside.

"Did you just stomp your foot?" He's incredulous as he rests his hands on his hips. Preston's eyes widen in scrutiny as he waits for my answer.

"No," I lie, crossing my arms.

"You need sugar or something or maybe a stress pill. Ever try herbs? Or massages?"

He's mocking me now. I'm sure of it. So I walk up to him, as close as I can possibly get without kissing him, and smile. "Are you offering?"

His mood immediately turns serious as he leans in closer to my face. "Do you want me to be offering?" Oh, he's good. Way better than I am. See, I try to flirt, but people think I'm being funny. He flirts and makes me want to sell my parents just to be in his presence.

"Amanda! There you are. I've been calling you all night." The voice broke our moment as we both turned to see Derek hanging out his car window waving his cell phone at me. At this time in my life, I'm ready to yell at myself for telling Derek about my running addiction and gym membership.

"It looks to me like someone else has already scheduled time tonight, maybe later." He smiles and strolls off as I contemplated ways I could hide in a bush from Derek.

"Traitor!" I shout as I watch his feet carry him to an impressive black truck.

"Hey, is that the guy that punched me?" Derek asks as I will myself to look at him. If I were a betting woman I'd guess he was sporting a broken nose. It actually did him a favor in the looks department, giving him an all around tougher appearance than before.

“What do you want, Derek?” Does he have no shame or self-respect? Trying to get to my car as fast as possible, I contemplate if there’s any way this night can get worse.

“Well, I just thought that if I gave you a little time to forgive me, then we could, I don’t know, start dating again... soon.” His face looks hopeful. I, however, feel irritation seeping from my every pore.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you have another wedding you’d like to break up? Do you need to use me again? Derek, we hardly know each other. Stop being so....weird. Seriously, it’s over.” I open my car door and hear a sniffing sound. Uh oh. Please tell me he isn’t crying again.

“I just t-t-thought, that we had something...” He proceeds to pull out a hanky, yes a hanky, and blow his nose, or at least tried to, while tears streamed down his face.

Sympathy is not an emotion I can give Derek at this point. “Derek, have a good night.” With that, I slam my door, leaving a heart-broken Derek alone in the parking lot. Hope he didn’t lock his keys in the car, because I’m not staying to help him.

Turning up the radio, I begin to sing at the top of my lungs. It’s actually Christmas music; all the more reason to rock out. It’s only November, but Christmas has a tendency to sneak up on me; just like Derek, and Mr. Firefighter. What is it with men these days?

Parking my car and running up the stairs to my apartment, I slam the door behind me and breathe a huge sigh of relief. Yes, my apartment doesn’t look glamorous on the outside, but there’s nothing sketchy about hard wood floors and vaulted ceilings. Plus, Mrs. Butterworth is a good guard cat. As I walk into my front room, I see a blinking light on my answering machine. Ten messages! Who in the world is calling me? Did someone die? My chest constricts.

Beep. “Hi, Amanda. This is Derek...” *Erase.* “Hi, Amanda. It’s Derek again. Where are you?” *Erase.* “Amanda,

really. I mean, why don't you—" *Erase*. Are all of these from Derek? It wasn't until I got to message eight that the annoying voice on the other end wasn't that of Derek, but of my best friend and co-worker, Kristin.

"Hey, girl, I heard about the wedding. I'm so sorry. I had no idea he was such a creep. Call me, no matter how late. I just put the kids to bed, so make sure you call the cell, not the house phone. Love you."

Kristin is a gem. So what if she tried to set me up with Derek; it's my fault for being desperate and saying yes. A shower is necessary before calling her back, and I can't help but groan at the reflection looking back at me in the hallway mirror. Not only does my hair scream, "homeless", but my face is all blotchy from stress. I pull my long, dark hair from the ponytail and feel immediate relief. My hair is too thick to keep up for so long. It always ends up giving me headaches.

What was it about me that made Derek think I was easy prey? Vulnerable isn't how people would describe me. High strung, outspoken, unladylike, those are usually ones I'm familiar with, but vulnerable? Easy? Never. Re-evaluating my dating strategy is a necessary conversation I need to have with Kristin.

The shower did nothing to wash off my shame from earlier, but did make me feel a lot more positive about the following day where I was planning on spilling my entire guts to my bible study group. It usually consisted of my best friend Kristin, my other crazy friend Lexy, and her sister Raine.

Although I do love being clean, staying in the shower turns me into a prune, and that happens to be a pet peeve of mine. While I'm being honest, I'm not fond of water. It has many uses. I love to drink it, but being wet makes me angry. Mrs. Butterworth is maybe rubbing off on me, but she's all I could ever handle of the feline species.

Picking up my phone, I dial Kristin's cell number, ten o'clock shouldn't be too late. I hope. Ring, ring, voicemail. Her kids wake her up at the crack of dawn; sometimes I wonder if they're somehow related to roosters. I tried to

babysit them one time. It didn't go well. Leaving their house at noon, I got home and fell asleep on my couch until nine pm. That girl deserves a medal.

Why voicemail? Poor Kristin. I feel like yelling and she probably knows it. Since the whole town is aware of what transpired today, what I need is a good solid sleep and some time at church. I walked over to the computer to turn off the monitor and laid my hungry eyes onto Mr. December.

So what if I stomped his foot, he deserved it. Looking at the monitor again, I click on "order now". As I'm taken to the payment page, I justify actions, or try to. The money is going for a good cause. Our firemen are underpaid, and the donation to the local homeless shelter only sweetens the deal. Feeling fully justified, I groan as I see how long it will take to arrive. Two to four weeks!

Time for sleep. One last peak at Mr. December, and I shut down the computer. Tonight I'm testing the theory that people will dream of the last thing they thought of. Maybe in my dreams he won't talk as much. He *is* more attractive with his mouth shut.

Unfortunately for me, the last thing I remember as I go to sleep is Derek's pitiful face.

Chapter Three

Three am, four am, five am. Ring! Ring! Ring! Who in their right mind? Whoever they are will wish for death after I'm done with them. It's Sunday! Church doesn't even start until eleven. Who wakes up at this ungodly hour?

"Hi this is Amanda, leave a message." BEEP.

"Amanda." Silence. "This is Derek, I just wanted to tell you that I'm over you. You and your stupid cat. I hated your cat, by the way, it's the ugliest cat ever. And I didn't really mean it when I said I loved you. So there. Go, talk to that stupid fireman again. See if I care. You are so—"

The machine cut him off, which is lucky for him. Because I was about ready to get out of my bed, get in my car, drive to wherever this psycho lives, and cut his hand off so he'll stop dialing my number.

"When will it end?" I yell into my pillow.

Six am, seven am, and again the phone rings. "For the love of all that's holy!" I scream as loud as possible. But it's not the phone, and the doorbell continues to ring. Running to open the door, baseball bat in hand of course, I'm ready to show I'm in no mood for conversation.

"Easy, killer," Kristin says as she holds out a fresh Starbucks coffee. "I come in peace."

As I smell the steaming aroma of caffeine, I could kiss her.

"Where are the kids?" I ask as I take the coffee from her and quickly down the hot contents. "And Brad, where's Brad?" Waiting for her response, I sit down on the couch and continue my love affair with the grande latte.

"They had Sunday school remember? He teaches the three year old class once a month, so I decided to stop by and

see how you were holding up.” She winks and takes her scarf off, revealing a low cut V-Neck dress.

“Inappropriate,” I cough, not making eye contact.

She rolls her eyes. “Please. That’s why I had the scarf on. Stop being so dramatic.” She looks at me and waits for me to spill. My lips are sealed. I’m not going to relive yesterday’s events. She would have to kill me first, which I might welcome after yesterday and last night’s dramatic happenings.

“I said I was sorry,” she scolds while inspecting her perfectly polished fingernails.

Huffing in an unlady-like manner, I pretend to examine mine as well.

“So, was it as bad as I heard?” Her face holds no emotion as she waits for me to respond.

“Worse.”

“I’m so sorry, panda. I had no idea.”

That’s her pet name for me, panda. It makes me want to gouge my eyes out. Comparing me to a fat bear that sits and eats bamboo all day doesn’t boost my self esteem. She only uses it when she knows she’s in trouble, forcing me to feel even worse for making her feel bad. Manipulative friend.

I throw open my arms and welcome her hug, then laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation.

“In hindsight, it was a comical situation when you think about it; especially the part where Preston punched him in the face.”

“Preston?” Her eyes go wide. “You don’t mean the Preston from high school? Please don’t tell me it’s that Preston?”

“Okay, it’s not that Preston,” I say unconvincingly.

Her face goes red as she laughs then chokes on her own coffee. “The one you turned down in front of the entire school and lied to? That Preston?”

Nodding my head, I try to figure out a way to change the subject. This conversation could turn into dangerous territory quickly.

“Well, does he at least still have those glasses?” She takes a sip of coffee and smiles.

Shaking my head no, I lead her to the computer to see Mr. December. Her face goes pale as she looks at me then back at the computer then back at me.

“Oh, dear.” Her response says it all.

I nod my head in confirmation as she scrolls down the page. “Oh, Amanda, look. You can buy the calendar.”

“Oh, I didn’t see that. Look a bird.” I point out my window and quickly click off the web page.

“I don’t see a bird, Amanda. What are you talking about?”

Shrugging, I go into the bathroom to get ready. It was time for Bible study and for church; I needed both.

“Brad said they’re doing baptisms today. Isn’t that cool? I know how much you like watching those.” She calls from the living room.

It’s true. The only time my high-strung, totally in control demeanor crumbles is one, when watching baptisms; two, when seeing commercials for stray cats and dogs; and three, when Leo dies in *Titanic*. Other than that, I’m strong as steel. Sighing with anticipation, I have to admit the day is looking better. What a great way to start a week!

What a horrible day! This is the worst day ever. Wait for it. Just wait for it. The baptisms I was so excited about? They included none other than Mr. December. Trying not to cry when I hear him read his testimony about getting his life on track and joining the local church, I eventually cave. I use all the tricks in the book, waving at my eyes, staring at the light, thinking about funny jokes. Nothing works. In fact I was such an emotional wreck that I had to leave the service and go to

the bathroom. Not only was I embarrassed beyond belief, but upon exiting the bathroom, I ran into Preston. He was just getting ready to go into the men's restroom next door to change out of his wet clothes. Don't ask me why they do baptisms without swimsuits, must be a decency thing.

He asked if I was okay. He saw my tears, and bless his little infuriating heart, he wanted to know if I was sane. The poor guy saw me go from anger to pain to passing out to crying. I can't get away from this beast of a man.

Snorting, I wave him off, dismissing him in an inordinately impolite manner. He takes a step to follow me then stops. His eyes turn to steel before he rolls them and walks into the men's room.

I decide there'd be no harm in doing a double take as he passes through the doors, his shirt was glued to his body. The view was everything I wanted it to be and more. Then to my chagrin, he whips around and says, "You can stop staring at me now."

I want to die. Where is the chariot, Lord? Come get me! Instead, Preston left me, mouth open, in the middle of the foyer in a panic. I don't remember how I got back to my seat. Naturally, I went catatonic for a few seconds after his comment. Never had I met a man who could make me want to punch his face while kissing it. I hate him for it. I want to destroy him. I want to—

"Amanda?" Kristin's voice interrupts my thoughts.

"What," I whisper loud enough for the row in front of me to turn around with scowls on their faces.

"You're hurting my hand," she scolds.

Apologizing, I look down and release my grip. I fear I need therapy considering how much anger I'm feeling toward myself and Preston.

In theory, many of our pastor's sermons were life changing, and normally I listen attentively. But today my heart just isn't in it. Annoyingly, I keep seeing flashes of what Preston's wet clothes looked like as they pressed tightly to his

body. It didn't help that I was looking around for where Preston sat. Did he not return to service? Why would he not return? Why am I so worried? He's not even around, and I'm frustrated with him.

"Ahem." Some old man clears his throat behind me. I shake my head and try to concentrate on the pastor. He needs a haircut.

"Ahem." The man behind me really needs to get a cough drop. What is this person's problem? Looking in the direction of the offending person, I almost choke on my gum.

"Preston!" I say rather loudly as I realize Mr. Old Man is not Mr. Old Man at all, but my irritating fireman, clearing his throat, so I'd move my body, so he could sit.

Scooting over, while trying to keep my mouth shut, I give him ample space to sit down with room to spare. However, he doesn't take the hint to sit far away, but instead sits rather close. Too close. So there he is smirking, like he has something to be smirking about. So I decide, in true middle school fashion, to write him a note.

What are you doing?

Um, listening to the sermon? And seriously, why are you passing notes in church, we aren't ten anymore. Plus what makes you think I even want notes from you?

I hate you.

Doubtful.

You make me want to scream.

I'm sure I do.

Um, not in excitement, you moron.

Ouch, are you always this mean to the guys you like?

LIKE?!? Have you completely lost your mind? It's taking every ounce of self-control I have to not stab you with my pencil.

Like you could make it through my muscle.

I wouldn't know.

NO, I just have nothing good to say. Don't call me that, ever. I would never tell her, but I don't like being referred to as a panda. They're fat and lazy.

You're anything but that.

Gee thanks. I want my life back.

What?

You read me. I want my life back. My life before you started ruining it and being all Decemberish and swooping in punching things and running next to me and, you get the picture. I want it back. I'm taking it back. I'm ignoring you from now on!

Ok.

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

I thought you were ignoring me.

I break the pencil in half and put it into his warm and surprisingly large hands. This guy is big. Not only is his height impressive, but the size of his shoulders and hands dwarf me. It's quite intimidating, and attractive. At present, I don't appreciate feeling either emotion.

“Everyone stand for the benediction.”

I can feel the heat of his body and lean closer just in time to see him wink at me. So I look away as if I touched a hot oven and scowl. He must think he's so great, that all girls fall at his feet. Well, I'm not one of them. Being a successful Visual Merchandiser at Macy's is great for my confidence level. Kristin is the HR director and ended up hiring me to style the clothes. I also do other stores on the side. I don't need his approval or anyone else's. Nice pep talk, I feel better already. Those are always the best.

Looking around, I notice, to Preston's amusement, that I'm the only one left standing. The private pep talk had gone on too long. I sit down then yelp as the pencil I had broken earlier is pointed directly up onto my leg. The jerk! I've never thought of physically hurting a person more in my life than in

the past twenty-four hours that I've known Preston.
Correction, the new and improved Preston.

As if it wasn't bad enough, now I have little youth group girls turning around and giggling in our direction. Please take him! True entertainment would be to see him fight off a whole bunch of hormonal sixteen year olds. Oh shoot, did I actually say something about the calendar to him? I hope I didn't. I wouldn't want him thinking...

Church ended and I must admit it was the longest service I can remember. Kristin had to get the boys and Brad then she would meet me at the little café in church for bible study.

Running past Preston without saying goodbye, I find a seat in the café. Decaf isn't an option, so I get a double caramel Macchiato. Note writing, and all around immaturity, can be draining, plus the cinnamon rolls look good. Grabbing my latte and roll, I scan the room for a seat and spot Brad and Kristin.

"Hey!" they shout, a little loud for being so close.

I still have food in my mouth so I wave then open my mouth for the boys to see chewed food. They laugh. Then I hear another type of laughter. Man laughter, or let's just call it *maughter*.

My nemesis. Is he stalking me? And why am I kind of flattered? Mutinous emotions, I press the disturbing thoughts from my mind and try to behave maturely for a change.

"Amanda, you've met Preston, right?" Brad pushes him forward, obviously not reading my body language of "hate" well enough to understand that yes, I did, indeed, know Preston.

Preston is the first to interrupt the awkward silence. "I actually knew Amanda in high school. Isn't that right, Amanda?"

The cinnamon roll is like glue to my tongue, so I nod my head and smile with my mouth closed.

Brad laughs. “Well isn’t that something? Wow, did you guys ever date or anything?”

And that’s when the food flew out of my mouth onto Brad’s nice Armani shirt. I gasp and quickly grab napkins, while Brad keeps telling me not to worry and to “remember, I do have two kids under the age of three”. But still, I feel awful. Well, that and just angry that Preston seems to be enjoying himself so much at my expense.

“So,” Brad says as he puts the napkin down. “I guess that’s a touchy subject, I’m just glad you guys know each other so well, especially for what I have to tell you next.”

I look at them with genuine happiness that maybe Kristin is pregnant again. Maybe they want me to babysit. Oh no, no babysitting! In anticipation, I look between the two of them waiting for their secret to be revealed.

Preston looks equally pleased and sticks his tongue out at me while we wait. I stick mine out, too, then am rattled out by one of Kristin’s kids, the little traitor. Preston laughs lifting his hand in a thumbs-up sign as if to say, “good job getting caught by a three year old, genius”. The temptation to slap the smile off his face nearly overwhelms me.

“We won a trip to Hawaii!” Kristin squeals with delight as Brad kisses her on the mouth.

I couldn’t be more thrilled, except what does it have to do with me and Preston? No! They *are* going to ask us to babysit! Kristin knows how I feel about babysitting. I saw a shrink for two weeks after that incident. Oh no, then the thought occurs. I’m going to be an awful mother, and this solidifies that statement. I’ll be stuck with them for a week, and then I’ll rule out children forever. But I want kids. Life is so unfair.

Preston gives Brad a high five. Since when did they become best friends

“I’m so happy for you guys. How great is that?”

“Sorry to interrupt, but Brad, how do you and Preston even know each other?”

Preston blushes for the first time I can remember, rendering me, yet again, speechless and confused.

Brad answers, noticing Preston's sudden embarrassment "Well, the church has a series of meetings and counseling that each new member has to go through. It's all kept private, so I couldn't share it with Kristin. Preston was paired with me, and we hit it off. It might sound weird and maybe too feminine, but I'm glad to have a good guy friend."

"Aw shucks, mate." Preston replies, punching him playfully in the arm.

This is too much to swallow. I cannot handle them being best friends. Kristin is going to have to fix this. I look at her sternly and communicate with my eyes, via giving her the stare of death, "Fix this now!" And I think she heard me, because she nods her head and leans in as if to say something to the entire group.

"The reason we wanted to tell you both together is because we actually won two extra tickets." She looks between us and winks. "Brad and I thought it would be fun to take two of our closest friends. Isn't that great? Can you believe it? A free trip to Hawaii over Thanksgiving break! We leave the day after, on black Friday."

Air. I need air. Where is air? Is it hot in here? Why am I seeing black spots? I blink my eyes several times before the rest of the room regains its natural state.

"Swell." Sorry but that's all I have in my repertoire of words to say at the moment. That, and a word that shouldn't be repeated at church, which happens to start with the same letter.

"Guys, that is so generous of you, really." Preston gives Brad a high five and Kristin a hug. "But who's going to watch the kids while you're gone?"

"Oh, Brad's parents said they would love to! It's all working out so perfectly!" Kristin beams.

"Isn't it though?" I say through clenched teeth. "So, I guess we don't have much time to prepare. Isn't Thanksgiving

next week?" I ask.

"Yes, we would've told you guys sooner, but we just found out this morning. We entered one of those trip sweepstakes you get in the mail never thinking we'd actually win. But, surprise!" Kristin laughs again and throws her hands up in the air in a "surprised" manner.

Looking at Preston, I issue a challenge. There is no way I'll allow him to ruin a fantastic vacation. He's staying home. What's ironic is, he understands my unspoken challenge and grins. What I need is a game plan to get Mr. December to back out. Then I'll have the most perfect vacation of all. Insert menacing laugh here.

Preston meets my challenge with one of his own. His cocky face turns defiant. He bites his lip and nods his head as if trying to communicate, "It's on". He doesn't want me joining the trip either. Well you know what, Mr. I-can-have-any-girl-I-want? I'll destroy you from the inside out.

My eyes squint harder and harder until Kristin has to clap her hands in front of me to break the trance. Of course, I jump and spill my latte. As I got up to leave, I saw Preston pointing both fingers from his eyes to mine as if to say, "I'm watching you". If that's not creepy, nothing is. All I need to do is get through work this week. Then, before Friday, I'll plead my case to Preston, making him feel the need to stay home while I go vacation in Aloha land.

Chapter Four

I skipped Bible Study. It was wrong and I will accept punishment later. I had to escape, to get away and think, or more accurate, I left so I could plot. Preston does bring out the worst. However, I don't seem to bring out the worst in him. Wondering why, I begin to think of ways to make this vacation fireman-less.

What I need is to go for a run, but I feel guilty leaving Mrs. Butterworth at home by herself. She gets lonely and cranky, then she isn't the best guard cat. Therefore, I try to spoil her to keep her on her best behavior. My plan is this: go home, have a relaxing afternoon with my cat, feed her some tuna, then watch a movie. I feel better. The tightness in my chest has subsided, and I finally feel like I can breathe again.

I get home, put on my sweats, and wrap a sweater around Mrs. Butterworth. Her exposed skin leaves her quite cold during the wintertime. Most people wonder what I'm doing with a hairless cat, but the answer is simple. I have allergies so she was the only option. Once you get to know her, the whole hairless aspect fades into the background. Since she can't stay warm by herself, she cuddles often and has a jet engine purr that soothes my racked nerves. She was actually a gift from my parents when I graduated college. Some kids get cars, others get cool trips or watches. I, however, got a cat. Perhaps it was some sort of hidden message of "well she's never going to find anyone so we might as well get her a companion". In which case, it would have been terribly depressing, but I like to think my parents just wanted me to not be so lonely. However, the prospect that my parents might have thought it about me makes me want to defend myself. I've been on plenty of dates. Just to prove it, I decide to pull out my journal and write out all the names of my past boyfriends.

There was...

Derek. Psycho, and in love with someone else. Yet I still dated him, and so he remains on the list. Plus he hated Mrs. Butterworth. A guy who hates animals obviously has some unresolved issues.

Tyler, oh Tyler! Yes that's a good one. I do believe we dated for three months before I found out that he still lived with his parents. Or should I say *off* of his parents? The fact that his house was huge and that the furniture had a sort of familial feel to it should have been some sort of red flag. I finally clued in when his parents forgot he was taking me to their house and came home from work too early. It was awkward, and it got worse when his overly polite mom asked me to stay for dinner. When I saw his mom actually cut his steak into bite size pieces, then proceed to pat his head like a good boy, I almost threw up. Gross. I feel like crossing his name off. He definitely shouldn't count.

Jonathan, now there was a keeper. He could sing, he could dance, and he played basketball. He was actually quite a talented athlete. The only issue was the fact he knew he was all of those things. Meaning, I was one of three girls he was dating. He never used my real name, but instead things like "honey" or "sugar". Eventually I started to piece together the truth. However, revenge is sweet. When I dumped him, I also broke into his email account and sent a forward to all of his friends with an up-close and personal photo of him picking his nose. So what if it was photo-shopped? Only John knew, but nobody believed him.

And that leaves the one guy I actually did like, until the incident.

His name was Bobby. And no, I didn't meet him on the playground. Bobby was actually pretty cool. We met in college in a freshman English comp class. I fell hard. He had sandy brown hair and dimples. Every girl in my class was in love with him.

One day when we were walking to class, he asked if I liked Swedish fish, to which I enthusiastically replied, "Heck, yes! Do you have any?" I used my flirty voice, I might add. It

must have worked, because he told me he'd give me some if I studied with him, which I did.

We dated all the way through to my senior year of college, until on a cold, stormy night he broke things off.

"Amanda," he said. "I just think we're in different places. You want to go do fashion stuff, and I'm not saying that it's un-Christian to like fashion. But I just think that, well, I have a higher calling. I'm going to be a pastor."

And this is why I'm strong now. I let this boy in, and he ruined my life! He went on to say that not only does he think it is un-Christian to like clothes, but his parents also think I'm materialistic.

Needless to say, I went shopping after that event. Kristin helped me take back all the clothes I bought that day knowing a college student couldn't afford them. I haven't seen Bobby since. But I'm guessing he grew out of his stupidity and is now pastoring a thriving church somewhere in the Bible belt. Good riddance.

So that's it. That's my list. I decide to uncross Tyler because I should have dated more than four people in my lifetime. There's no way I'll count the dates that never went past the first meeting. Plus, it seems like a depressing endeavor to undergo on such a stressful day.

The phone ringing interrupts my thoughts, reeling me back into reality. "Hello?"

"Hi, Amanda, it's Jane." Jane is one of my managers at work. She's stupid; sweet, but stupid. You know the girls that seem to steal brain cells from you just by being in their presence? Her dad is our district manager, so she didn't have to climb the corporate ladder like everyone else.

"What's going on?" I ask, trying to sound polite, even though I'm annoyed by the interruption.

She giggles, and I roll my eyes, praying for the phone to disconnect. "Well, I just got the go ahead from Daddy to launch our new local ad campaign."

“Awesome.” I say dryly. Why is she calling me on a Sunday to tell me this?

“And,” she pauses for dramatic effect, “he also let me pick out the male models. And you know what’s so great, Amanda?”

“Nope, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” I joke, half kidding, half totally serious.

“One of them knows you.”

My heart stops. Someone call an ambulance; my heart just stopped. I know who it is. It has to be Preston. Because come on, if we’re honest this is how my life is going right now. It has to be him, how did he do this? Why is he weaseling his way into my life like this?

“His name is Preston, he’s one of the firefighters from the calen—”

“Right,” I cut her off. “Well, sounds great. See you Monday.”

“Wait!” She shrieks on the other end making me pull the phone away from my ear. “I have to send all of them to you this afternoon so we can get the measurements for the shoot tomorrow. That’s why I’m calling. You should expect them around two.”

I look at my clock and pale. It’s one forty-five.

“Jane!” I warn loudly not even bothering to hide my frustration. “Why didn’t you call sooner?”

“Sorry, I was busy. Plus, I thought you were one of those people who went to church. Geez, calm down.”

I’m hyperventilating into the phone. Must. Get. Air.

“So that’s all. Make sure you get all of their measurements. They have to take off their shirts, too, so we can see the correct fit of the muscle T’s. Makes me wish I had your job. Have fun.”

She hangs up, leaving me in a state of panic and disarray. I look down and moan. Yup, still in the sweat pants. I

hear my door bell and feel myself say in slow motion, “Just a sec!” Only it sounds low, like you see on TV when they do the really dramatic scenes. Luckily, my body is still moving at normal speed, so I dive into my room like a tornado and throw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, grab my measuring supplies, and return to unbolt the door.

February. It’s Mr. February. I remember because he has blue eyes you can get lost in, yet he looks way older than me, most likely in his fortys.

“Hey, sorry to barge in, but the girl at the store said—”

I cut him off with my hand. “No, it’s fine. Come on in.”

“Oh okay, thanks.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets and ducks, yes I did say *ducks*, into my family room. “Nice place.” He turns to smile at me, but his teeth were, well, let’s just say, not straight. Now I know why he didn’t smile in the calendar picture. He does have a good smolder, but a good smile? Not so much. I did his measurements and sent him on his way.

January was next, then March, April, June, May, September, November, July, and August.

All I had left was October and December. I was hoping that Mr. October would arrive before Mr. December, then maybe I could bolt my door closed and say something in a creepy accent. “She no here no more, she die.” Then Preston would be forced to leave and get his measurements done elsewhere, anywhere. I don’t even care. I’ll give references, or better yet, I’ll have my own personal seamstress call him.

The doorbell rings again. I take a deep breath, open it, and came face to face with my past.

“Bobby?”

I didn’t see that coming. He wasn’t in the calendar. Not once did I see him in the calendar. What’s he doing here? He couldn’t be one of the male models. Yeah, that would be ironic. He pushes his fingers through his curly still sandy brown hair and gives me the smile, dimples and all. Nope, I

know he's not in the calendar. I wouldn't have bought it had I known or seen him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask a little too rude for someone I hadn't seen in over five years.

His smile fades as his eyes scan me up and down.

"I thought this was where Jane said to come for the measurements?"

"For the male models," I say slowly. The poor guy, maybe he's confused, not that he couldn't be a male model.

"Yeah, um, I got that part. I'm Mr. October, Nampa Fire Department? All of us are doing the shoot?"

"I thought you were going to be a pastor?" I manage to say with heavy sarcasm as I widen the door for him to enter. What a weird twist of events.

"Yeah, about that," he looks sheepish almost.

What had happened to my Swedish fish loving ex-boyfriend who thought I was materialistic?

"It wasn't really for me. I quit after my first year in seminary and decided to become a fireman. In a way, it's still like being a pastor. You know, saving people from the fiery pits, just not the spiritual ones." He winks and shrugs his massive shoulders. Fire fighting had been good to his body; that much was obvious. But I didn't remember having seen him as Mr. October. However, I didn't want to admit to him I'd actually seen part of the calendar, so I'd have to wait until it came in the mail.

Nodding, I grab my measurement tape. "Okay, so if you could just take your shirt off now."

He looks at me as if I just ask him if he could please eat my cat, and pales as I wait for him to do what I ask. Sighing, I explain, "To get the measurements for the muscle T-shirts. I can't do that with your bulky sweater on. So if you'd be so kind as to take it off, I'll make this experience as painless as possible. It's okay. I'm a professional."

He hesitates slightly before taking off his shirt, revealing chiseled abs and a nice spray on tan. Trust me, I know. I begin measuring and notice that, not only is he extremely close to me, but his body is radiating heat, too much heat. Wanting to look up and see what his problem is, my brain kicks into gear and reminds me it wouldn't be wise. Wait a second, is that a Rolex watch? What in the world! And he called me materialistic. I snort out loud in disgust.

“Is something wrong?” He asks politely.

“Nope. You're good,” I reply still maintaining my no eye contact rule. “You can put your shirt back on now. Give me a moment to take the rest of the measurements and you can go.”

He puts his shirt back on and I allow myself to let go of the breath I had, apparently, been holding. It's not that I'm attracted to him. I mean, he's good looking, but he still broken my heart, and something about him just seemed off. All girls want the guy who dumped them to come crawling back, and I'm not saying I wouldn't welcome it. But I'm still recovering from the shock of it all. Wait, this means he and Preston work together. Odd.

The knock on the door interrupts my thoughts. I know who it is on the other side. “Hang on a sec, that's my last model, I think.” I indicate a chair for Bobby and stride slowly to open my door.

“Hey, little miss note writer, miss me?” Preston grins and brushes past me without an invitation. Well, this should be fun and totally not tense at all, nope. He doesn't notice Bobby sitting there. In Preston's defense, Bobby was strangely quiet.

“Are you going to back out of the trip, panda bear?” He's trying to break me. I can feel it, and I won't go down without a fight.

“I have no idea what you're talking about. I fully intend to go on the trip without you. My cat's going instead.” I put my nose in the air and cross my arms.

“Oh, wow. If that doesn’t scream desperate spinster, I don’t know what does.” His face is so smug I want to throw Mrs. Butterworth at him, claws first. I tried to tell her in my mind to attack him, but instead she walks right up to him and purrs! How dare she! Shouldn’t she be able to sense my anger? Plus, this is her territory, and he’s a mean man.

He picks her up and strokes her face, not at all thrown off by the odd way she looks. “How many cats do you have, Amanda?”

I roll my eyes and walk back to where Bobby is silently gaping. His face is twisted with some sort of hostility, and I can’t tell if it’s directed at me or at Preston.

“We’re almost done here,” I call back to Preston, but he doesn’t seem the least bit fazed. He just shrugs and continues petting Mrs. Butterworth. He either doesn’t notice Bobby glaring at him, or he doesn’t care. In Preston’s defense, it wouldn’t be a fair fight anyway. He could destroy Bobby. He would be declared the winner based on his height alone..

My list had missed that part, Bobby is vertically challenged, and I know I have no room to talk. In reality, he made me feel better about my lack of height. I accepted myself, because he accepted himself and he isn’t *that* short. If I were to guess, I’d say he’s around five-nine. But in comparison to Preston’s six foot four inch stature, Bobby looks like a child.

Bobby shakes his head, obviously annoyed at the interruption and lets me finish. He takes off without saying thank you and slammed the door behind him.

“Geez, you’re welcome,” I mumble under my breath.

“Don’t worry about Bobby. He’s always like that,” Preston says as he began taking off his shirt.

“What are you doing?” I shriek in annoyance, not able to take my eyes off his chest.

“Um, don’t you have to fit us for the muscle T-shirts?” His face is mildly amused. I, however, am not. He totally throws me off with his confidence.

“Yes, you’re right. Sorry I—“ Instead of finishing my sentence, I shake my head and begin measuring. It’s different having to see him this close up. His abs are real and he doesn’t need the spray tan to make them look better or more defined. They’re perfect. Upon closer inspection, I can see they too deserve their own fan page on Facebook. I want to touch them, to make sure I’m not seeing things.

It isn’t until I hear Preston clear his throat that I realize I’ve been holding the measuring tape across his abs without measuring. But I’m staring open mouthed at his six pack as if I expect it to speak to me. He chuckles to himself, and I let the measuring tape snap his bare skin, and then apologize when he yelps. He deserves much worse.

“Okay,” I say coldly. “You can put your shirt back on now. We’re almost done.” I try not to watch him put the shirt back on but fail. If your last boyfriend had been Derek, and you had no one but a cat to keep you company, you’d be staring as well. Especially, if the man in your house looks like he’s shooting a commercial for—Well, it wouldn’t matter because, as I look at him now, I realize I’m so buying.

I shake my head as I watch the shirt pull down over his tight chest and try to think about Grandma Ned, but it doesn’t work. Summoning my self-control, I think about Grandma Ned and how she got so mad that one time she caught me watching TV during Christmas break. Yes, that was a bad time. I believe her choice word was “heathen”. If Grandma Ned were here, she’d call me much worse.

“Are you done yet?” I plead, voice cracking.

“I’m not the one doing the measuring, seamstress lady.”

Oh, he did not just call me that. I feign a smile through clenched teeth, while I secretly hope the gym isn’t crowded so I can go running later this afternoon. If I don’t, I’ll spontaneously combust with all this tension.

Preston waits for me to finish with the last measurements. I escort him to the door in hopes he’ll leave quickly, before I either kill him or steal his virtue. Just as he crosses over the door frame, he turns to face me and says, “I

think you're afraid to go on a trip with me. You like me, admit it."

I smile sweetly while leaning in. His eyes take on a smoldering look of anticipation. Then, as I close the distance, I slam the door in his face.

It's official. I'm going to Hawaii. Yes, I know Preston will be there. But I won't back down from a challenge. Please, afraid of him?

There's no fear, but there's attraction, and it's like gravity. And if I'm being honest, that does scare me. Because I deserve to be hurt by him. The whole situation is the perfect revenge. If I have any fear it's that his sarcastic and arrogant presence will tempt me to end his life before we land in Hawaii.

As my chest heaves thinking about his smug grin, I start to feel my heart beat faster, and I begin to panic. Is this what it feels like to have a mental break down? What's happening to me? Without thinking, I run to my computer and WebMD comes up as my homepage. Kristin would kill me if she knew I still checked my favorite website. Searching my symptoms, I start to hyperventilate. And so I call Kristin, forgetting she'll be upset that I'm doing this, again.

"Hello?"

"Kristin!" I'm seriously loud at this point.

"Yes?" Poor dear is afraid of me.

"I'm going crazy." There, I said it.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am!" I argue. "I have all the symptoms. I—"

"Amanda," she scolds. "Did you go on WebMD again? I thought we discussed this, no more WebMD. Remember last time you did this?"

"No," I lie.

"Amanda." Now she's using her mom voice.

“Okay, fine, I remember.”

“Now, be a good girl, hang up the phone, and go for a run or something to expend all your energy. No coffee. What’s gotten in to you lately? How did it go with the measurements? Sorry for that, by the way. And you’re leaving in less than three days for vacation with your best friend. You need to calm down.”

She’s right, so I take a deep breath and hang up the phone. She isn’t just right about me needing to calm down and run, she’s also right about the whole WebMD thing. Last time I went online, I convinced myself that not only was I going to die from a paper cut, but also that I had some sort of flesh eating disorder that was going to shut down all of my internal organs. I spent a night in the hospital over the paper cut and freaked out not only my friends but my family that ended up driving three hours just to make sure I was going to survive.

It was bad, but it was four years ago. How dare she hold that against me. And it wasn’t even my fault. Even if I was watching a special on Dateline about germs and how if you’re too clean your body can’t fight off the germs anymore leaving you exposed to flesh eating viruses. So it’s Datelines fault for keeping America too informed. And how was I to know that paper cuts are sometimes more painful than normal cuts because they slice the skins surface; stupid nighttime television.

Sighing as I look at the clock, I see that it’s around eight pm so I still have time to make it to the gym. These next few days are going to be jam packed with work before we leave for the airport. As I think about Hawaii, I choose to buy an extra ticket for Mrs. Butterworth. I couldn’t bare the thought of her having to have some strange person cat sit. It sounds creepy to have someone come in and feed you, pet you, and leave again. Well, that’s what I get to look forward to when I die alone in a retirement home. Sigh.

This time I shall be prepared. Not for Preston, but in general. So I pack my cute work out clothes, yoga pants as well as my new hot pink racer back top. Just in case there’s

some new gym member that looks interesting. Heading to my car, I hop in and speed off to the REC center.

Chapter Five

I notice that the place looks just as dead as before, and oddly enough the front door is wide open. I close it behind me and run toward the stairs to get to my treadmill, then I'm attacked.

"Ahhhhh!" I let out the loudest shriek known to mankind.

"Get it off!" Screaming, I twist in a hundred different directions at once. There's some large black object flying around my head toward me in a menacing fashion. The movie *The Birds* flashes before my eyes before I crumple into a heap on the floor.

Someone runs down the stairs in the direction of my body, which is now in the fetal position, and chases away the crazed animal before coming to my aid. My knight in shining armor! My hero! My— "Oh." I say rather loudly.

"What do you mean 'oh'?" Preston retorts as he leans down to pick me up off the floor.

"What was that?" I try to keep my voice from shaking but can't because I'm so terrified.

"A bird." He holds back a smile.

"A bird! No way, I don't believe you. It couldn't have been a bird, it tried to kill me." My eyes are huge as I try to show him with my hands just how big the bird was.

He tells me to follow him with his little finger and leads me back outside near the trees that line the Rec center. "Do you see that?" He asks. Nodding, my throat goes dry as I look at a tree full of black birds.

"Somewhere in there is your bird. They sit around here a lot. The building is warm this time of year, so it makes sense they would invite themselves inside. You scared me back

there, I thought you were getting mugged, not mauled by a sparrow.” He scowls at me then turns to walk back in the gym.

“I could have been!” I yell after him as I follow him up the stairs.

He turns to look at me, not at all concerned.

“I’m scared of birds.” Admitting this requires the last shred of pride to die, so I follow him inside with my head hanging in shame.

“I’m sorry what?” He’s now walking toward me with an amused smirk on his face.

“I’m afraid of birds.” I say quieter this time not daring to look him in the eye.

“Birds,” he says plainly.

“Birds,” I confirm.

“All birds or just flying birds? If you were trapped at the zoo and an ostrich came running for you, would you scream? Or how about penguins, technically they’re birds.” He pauses for a minute waiting for my answer.

“You’re mocking me. I shouldn’t have said anything because everything is a giant joke to you.” I turn to walk away and trip over my own feet sending me sailing into the fake tree by the benches, knocking it over. “I meant to do that.” I huff as I stroll to my treadmill and begin running.

“It’s okay,” he says as he starts to run next to me. “I have things I’m afraid of, too.”

Slowing down, I turn so I can look at him. I ask, “Like what?”

“Hippos.” He shakes his head in disgust. “They terrify me.” He winks and continues running as I stand there with my mouth, yet again, hanging open for flies to stroll in to.

“They’re quite vicious, like polar bears,” I answer, getting my stride back. Is he trying to make me feel better? That’s surprising, and sweet. I feel myself start to smile.

“At least I’m afraid of something that actually makes sense,” he states before hitting the up button on his treadmill.

Forget what I said about him being sweet. He’ll never be sweet, just mean. And well, a terrible excuse for a human being.

“It makes sense if you know why!” I yell, trying to catch my breath from the sprint I am trying to overcome.

“Okay,” he says, pushing the red button on both our machines. “Humor me.”

The whole time running I didn’t break a sweat; but now, when he turns to face me with his body and green eyes, I start to perspire like I’m running the New York City marathon! Nervous, I shuffle my feet back and forth before preparing my story.

“When I was little—”

“Oh this should be good,” he interrupts.

“Hey! No interrupting. Do you want to hear the story or not?” I put my hands on my hips in frustration.

“Sorry.” He apologizes “Please continue.”

I do everything I can to not meet his eyes, considering they make me forget to breathe and all, and decide to concentrate on the seriousness of my story.

“When I was little.” I glare at him and continue “I went to the park with my parents and went to play on the swings. It was my favorite thing to do, but every time I walked near the swings, there would be hundreds of birds at the park just standing on the grass. My dad told me not to be afraid, so I believed him. One day I walked to my swings, carefully as to not scare the birds, and a dog came out of nowhere and started chasing them.” My hands started to sweat. “The birds were flying at me. I crashed to the ground and began crying. A few of the birds touched me. I even got scratched from one. It was so terrifying.” The experience was so scary that I’m now shaking as if I’m reliving the experience.

I look up to see Preston's face, knowing he'll probably say something sarcastic any time now, and see that he's actually compassionate.

"I'm sorry," he says as he puts his hand on my shoulder in a protective manner. "That sounds frightening, and I shouldn't make fun of you."

My heart starts fluttering as he leans over me and pulls me into a hug. I get ready to say thank you but am silenced by his talking.

"So this, um, incident, how old were you? Four or five years old, I'm guessing?" He pulls back from the hug looking touched.

"Fifteen," I answer quietly before turning the treadmill back on.

His eyes widen in surprise before he starts doubling over in laughter.

"Fifteen? You were fifteen?"

"It was scary!" I yell in his direction.

"Why were you swinging at fifteen anyway? You should have been, I don't know, out with your friends getting into trouble, not going with your daddy to the park."

"It was tradition," I snap. "Plus, my dad's dead," I add as I continue running, faster this time considering what I just said. I hadn't talked about my dad in a long time, and it wasn't Preston's fault. Sometimes memories were better left unremembered. He had been gone a while, but the pain sometimes still felt too fresh.

"I'm sorry, Amanda, I didn't know." He stops my machine again and genuinely looks upset.

"It's fine." I smile trying to hold my tears in. "Actually, I think I've had too much excitement for the night. I'm going to head home." I stop my machine and head down the stairs feeling Preston's close proximity behind me.

"Amanda." He pulls my arm from my side and holds onto my hand before I smile weakly and say goodbye.

It takes exactly three seconds for me to get from the door into my car.

Once I'm in my car, I can't help myself, the tears start and I cry my eyes out for about ten minutes before I notice that Preston has been standing outside my car door the entire time. He knocks gently on the window as I unlock the doors.

He sits and listens to me cry, hands me a tissue, and leaves.

So maybe he's not so bad.

But then again, he did get me to snap at him. I guess we will find out in a few days once we start our trip.

Chapter Six

Remember when I said we'd find out if Preston had a heart? He doesn't; he absolutely does not have a heart. He is at this moment flirting with the lady at the ticket counter. I think he's trying to get us bumped to first class, but she looks too smart to fall for it. After all, he's being rather obvious.

Rolling my eyes in irritation, I turn toward Kristin just before I see Preston return to us with a large grin on his face. "Good news. Got us all bumped up to first class."

"Super," I answer. At least I get to sit next to Kristin while the boys talk shop. Picking up my phone, I decide to check my email while we're waiting in line for security.

To fashionista2005@gmail

From: Firehottie2005@gmail

Hey Amanda,

It's Bobby. I hope you don't mind, I Facebooked you and got your email address off your page. I know we haven't talked in awhile, but I thought it would be cool for us to hang out, maybe grab a bite to eat or something?

Let me know.

Strange, why is he so interested? Shaking my head, I smile to myself as I reply that I'll contact him after my vacation in Hawaii.

"What are you smiling about?" Preston sneaks up behind me and peeks over my shoulder.

"Nothing," I snap. "Has anyone ever told you how annoying you can be?"

“I only annoy people that deserve it. I hope that wasn’t an email from Bobby, but it looks to be his email address. Want to know how I know?”

“Nope and it’s none of your business.” I grab my stuff and push forward without looking at him.

“He’s a womanizer,” Preston answers without my asking him.

Spinning around to face him, I’m momentarily taken aback. I hadn’t realized how close our faces now were. Whispering so no one can hear me, “What makes you think that? Are you jealous?”

“Hardly.” He huffs. His mouth smells like peppermint. I’m momentarily dazed by his lips before I answer.

“Well, it’s not a big deal. Plus I’ve been down that road and back, thank you. I don’t wish to re-visit it.”

I turn my head and put my stuff on the security belt before taking off my shoes. Preston does the same, but I can tell by the way he’s looking at me that this conversation is far from over.

“What do you mean re-visit it? Have you dated that tool before?” He looks disgusted with the idea.

“It was a long time ago and I’ve changed.” Stepping through the metal detectors, I sigh as I hear the beeping sound. I take off all my jewelry including my earrings and rings and step through again. Preston watches in amusement as the beeping still goes off. Emptying my pockets, I continue to beep, so now I’m called by the uniformed officer, and I brace myself to be searched.

Preston walks through clean as a whistle, while I’m getting patted down by a man named Jorge. I weakly smile as the beeper stops at my belly button and goes off telling everyone within a safe distance that I’m either smuggling a gun in my pants or I have a piercing. Praying they think it’s a gun, I whisper to Jorge in hushed tones that I have a bellybutton ring.

“You must take off belly ring, ma’am.” His accent sounds Spanish. He uses his hands to show me that I need to lift my shirt. This can’t be happening, but it is so I slowly lift my shirt revealing a tiny belly button piercing. As if my embarrassment isn’t enough, he pulls out the beeper stick again and runs it over the piercing “just to make sure”.

Glancing over at Preston, I see his eyes are locked on my piercing instead of my face. He’s judging me. I was only eighteen and it was a rite of passage. I still remember Grandma Ned’s face when she found out that her granddaughter had a hole in her belly button. She made me memorize the chapter in Proverbs that talks about the perfect woman as if to tell me that it was so far from what I was that it would do me some good to engrain it in my head.

Closing my eyes, I’m finally told I’m free to leave. Although Preston has an unreadable expression on his face, he has at least had the decency to grab all of my stuff. We waited for Kristin and Brad to go through then began heading to our gate.

“What an interesting piercing, Amanda,” Preston teases.

“I was eighteen.” It was useless to defend myself against this man.

“It’s funny; it shows you aren’t as controlled as you’d like people to think.” He leans down letting his peppermint breath fan my face and says, “I like it,” before catching up with Brad.

Kristin turns around noticing my discomfort and asks, too loud might I add, “Amanda why are you all red? Are you tired sweetie? Are you okay?” Why can’t women read each other’s minds? It would be so much easier on everyone. Preston’s laughing, I only know because though I’m behind him, I see his shoulders shake, translation, he’s barely able to contain his mirth. There’s no justice in the world, I hate that he knows how uncomfortable he makes me feel. It’s so inconvenient to wear your emotions on your sleeve.

We get to the gate in record time, meaning Brad was so obsessive about us getting to the airport two hours before our

flight that we literally got to our gate two hours before boarding. This is not a good thing, there is not much to do while you're in the Boise airport, except drink coffee and read magazines. If there were shops or at least bookstores I could find something to do. But a girl can only handle so many magazines and caffeine before a five hour flight.

Or can she? I notice that the coffee shop has already started selling their Christmas drinks. Well, one won't hurt. Getting up, I go to the nearest stand and order a peppermint latte from a barista who looks less than pleased to have to put down her People magazine and help a customer. There's something deathly wrong with society when people who are at work don't want to work. When she finishes, I leave her a fifty cent tip hoping to cheer her up, but instead I get a weak smile and a "please come again".

Rolling my eyes, I pass Preston who is thinking the same thing. Crossing my arms in frustration, I watch the barista jump up from her seat and ask him for his order. She twists her hair, yes twists her hair as if she is twelve, then tells him it's "no charge". Before she hands him the coffee, I see her writing on the cup, with disgust I see a name and number next to the drink name. What is it with women throwing themselves at men? Particularly at Preston. He, with a sudden pep in his step, turns around toward me.

"Could you be any more disgusting?" Bumping into him to show my frustration, I roll my eyes while taking my seat.

"Excuse me for wanting free coffee? If it makes you feel better, I left her enough tip to pay for it and then some, if you're thinking I'm a cheap person. Poor girl." He smiled as he sipped his grande peppermint latte. We have the same taste in coffee? "Plus, I'm guessing if it would've been a guy you would've gotten something free, too."

I think about this for a second then answer, "You're right, I would have." Feeling better, I sip my coffee and look away.

"Challenge accepted!" He exclaims getting up from his seat next to mine.

“What do you mean challenge accepted?” This can’t be good.

He starts to pull me toward the down escalator as I turn around to yell for help from Kristin. But as per usual, she can’t read my mind. Therefore, she just waves at me as if I’m getting ready to go on a ride at Disneyland and bumps Brad as if to say, “Oh, look how cute they are going down the escalator.” The last thing she sees is me making a cut it out motion with my hand as my head ducks below to the first level.

“Look, a dude.” Preston points toward a nerdy-looking barista whose reading *Theology Today* with an interest I can only describe as a little too intense.

“Piece of cake.” Smoke is about to pour from my ears like a cartoon. To make myself feel better, I make the bet sweeter, for me. “I get a free coffee and you don’t talk to me the entire trip on the airplane.” I challenge.

“Deal.” He shrugs.

Pulling out my lip gloss, I put some on and approach the counter wearing my most flirtatious smile. “Hi.” I wave. Oh my word, I’m going to lose. Why did I just wave at someone right in front of me? My stomach churns as I think of the plane ride that’s at stake.

The barista lifts his eyes for just a second before dropping the magazine in front of him and taking a cup in hand. “What would you like, miss?” His voice squeaks on the miss making me pity him all the more. This is all Preston’s fault.

Clearing my throat, I try to engage him in conversation so I can flirt, or try to. “So...” I look at his name tag “John, that magazine looks pretty interesting. Are you studying to be a pastor?” He nods his head yes and blushes as I mentally high five myself for such clever flirting.

His expression turns serious again as he asks, “Did you want coffee or not?”

Laughing, I twist my dark hair around my finger playfully flirting with the poor guy. “Of course silly, that’s why I’m here.” I make a pretend pushing motion with my hand as if to say “you are so funny!” But he’s not having any of it, and he looks bored. How can I be more boring than Theology Today?

No offense.

“Umm,” I stutter. “Just a small black coffee.” Taking out the money, I begin to think of ways to ignore Preston. The Barista accepts my money and gives me some change. This time, I do not tip. I should have, but Preston would have seen it.

Walking back toward Preston, I keep my head down waiting for the jokes to hit, but instead Preston just looks at me with prideful eyes and shrugs. “It’s not because you weren’t pretty enough, you just made him too nervous.” He and I walk side by side to the elevators before he says, “He was probably afraid of being rejected.”

“Nope.” Why am I defending the coffee guy? “He was just more interested in his stupid magazine. Did you see me wave at him?”

He turns toward me and winks. “My favorite part.”

“Fine! You win, I lose. I hope you’re happy.” I down the entire contents of my cup and throw it in the trash.

“Oh no, you don’t get away that easy. There’s one other coffee shop upstairs. I say we give it a try. That is, unless you’ve faced enough rejection for the day?”

“Challenge accepted.” I mutter as we, yet again, pass Kristin and Brad. this time, however, they’re both looking in our direction smiling and tilting their heads as if to say, “Oh, look now they’re going for a walk. How cute.” We’ll have words later, you can bet on it.

We approach the dreaded destination to find two male baristas behind the counter. This should be fun.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Preston teased. “I promise I won’t tell anyone that theology boy rejected you.”

I hit him in his muscular shoulder, probably hurting my hand more than his body, and turn to face the music.

“Just be yourself!” Preston shouts after me as my face heats with sudden embarrassment.

Both baristas look up as I approach. By now you must have guessed that I’m extremely keyed up on caffeine. I’ve had one full cup of coffee along with two shots of espresso. The wise choice would be to order a snack or bread to soak up the sugar or I’ll be totally out of control in about ten minutes. There’s a valid reason for not drinking too much caffeine and pop. I have trouble shutting up when it’s in my system. You’re thinking, “Wow, Amanda, you already have that problem. How could it get worse?” To which I’m guessing you’ll soon find out that it can, indeed, get worse.

“What would you like, miss?” The first one asks. He’s quite good looking for a sixteen year old. There’s no way I should have ever thought that. I inwardly groan. I am so glad nobody can hear my thoughts. It reminds me of the time I went to the mall and saw a sign for Abercrombie and went “ooo he’s cute!” Not realizing that the sign was for the little kid Abercrombie, for kids under the age of eighteen. I was mortified, and of course, Grandma Ned was with me.

You can only imagine her response. If I remember correctly, my mouth got washed out with soap while I read the Old Testament section about sexual immorality. If you ever doubted it before, I got to know my Bible around Grandma Ned.

The cute underage barista is patiently waiting for my order. Clearing my throat, I order a bagel and decaf coffee, with cream. The first one types in my order while the other goes to work.

“Oh no!” The second barista yells. I quickly look in his direction, fully anticipating a scarring coffee burn.

“What’s wrong?” I ask trying to keep my voice even.

“Oh, I just used regular rather than decaf and already put it together, guess I’ll have to redo it.” He shrugs.

“No!” I yell using my outside voice. “It’s fine. I’ll take it.”

The baristas look between each other as if I just ask them if they could spit in my drink, and then tell me nicely, “You don’t have to pay for the Americano then, it’s our fault.”

Walking away, I feel a confident grin begin on my face just as the first barista yells after me. “Miss! Miss! Sorry, but you still have to pay for your bagel!” My face tightens as Preston tries to unsuccessfully hide his laughter from me with his coffee.

Turning around, I walk back to the counter and slam two dollars onto the surface top telling them to keep the change. Then I strut past Preston with my head held high and bagel full in my mouth. He better not ask me to share. Trying not to focus on the fact that I’ve lost a bet to Preston, I sit down next to Kristin in a huff.

“So how was your walk or whatever or wait a second...” Her eyes lock onto my coffee then back at me, “How many of those have you had?”

Preston plops down next to me and laughs. “Three. Actually she’s had four shots of espresso and one cup of coffee, to be exact.” Amused he flips open the newspaper and smiles as Kristin stares at me with ice in her eyes.

“You know what caffeine does to you.” She hits Brad to involve him in the conversation sealing my fate.

“You did what?” He yells jumping out of his seat. “You know what caffeine does to you!”

“Preston dared me!” I protest in true teenage fashion while Preston looks innocently at both of our friends as if to say, “I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

“Just out of curiosity, what does Amanda do when she has too much caffeine?” Preston has now put down his newspaper. He’s staring at Kristin and Brad in anticipation of the story he knows they’ll probably blab.

“At least let me tell it so I know there are no exaggerations or falsifications.” I look Brad’s way causing

him to look down in shame. He has a tendency to exaggerate everything.

“So it’s not that big of a deal. It only happened one time, and I’ve since learned my lesson.” Preston needs to understand that it isn’t a regular occurrence for me.

“You know what?” I say with heavy sarcasm. “I’m not going to tell and neither are you!” Pointing at both of my friends, I dare them with a silent glare. “True friends keep secrets; just know that you have nothing to worry about.”

Kristin eyes me as she turns back to Brad. “Okay, blue pants.”

“Shhhh,” I say patting her on the knee.

“Did you just call her blue pants?” Preston wants to know.

“Yeah, on account of the blue pants she rocked during her last caffeine surge. Those poor kids didn’t even see her coming.” Brad takes off his baseball cap and holds it to his chest as if the children died or something, and I feel my resolve weaken as I look again toward Preston.

“Fine, I drank a lot of caffeine then wanted to go play laser tag, wore blue pants to blend in to the blue walls in the laser tag place and stayed for three hours while I attacked small children with my laser gun.” I tried to let the words flow as fast as possible, hoping he wouldn’t catch all of it.

“She wouldn’t let us leave until she won.” Brad admits, re-living the event.

“We were so hungry.” Kristin holds Brad’s hand as they both lean in to touch heads.

“It was dark. Cold, so very cold.” Brad continues as he closes his eyes as if he’s traumatized.

“Ok. We’re done.” I say as I leave all of them and sit by myself to pout.

They’re laughing, and I try to keep the smile off my face.

It's hard to stay mad at people who are so funny. With reluctance, I have to admit it has been the most fun vacation I have had in awhile, even if it's been with Preston. But as I think this, I have a sickening feeling that I have a lot more "fun" to look forward to. I groan a little as I realize the caffeine is now hitting my stomach full force. I need the bathroom. Now.

As quick as possible, in efforts to not bring attention to myself, I get up then sprint toward the bathroom. See? Being a runner is useful and applicable in many situations. While in there, I decide to put on some more lip gloss then strut out finally feeling comfortable and able to carry on a descent conversation. It looks like the plane is already boarding. To be honest, I was a bit excited to be riding in first class, but you aren't going to hear me say that to Preston. No, it would go straight to his head, and that's the last thing this world needs.

Chapter Seven

We shuffle to the front of the plane, each of us buzzing with excitement. I nearly choke when I see that all of the seats have personal TVs as well as blankets and pillows. Wow, this could be my heaven, complete with a glass full of water with lime. Inhaling, I look at my seat number only to trip over my bag and face plant into the seat next to me.

“Straight lines, Amanda, straight lines.” Preston whispers behind me as he sidesteps and takes his seat in front of mine. I mutter something unintelligent as I crawl to my seat. At this time I’m unaware as to why I thought it would be a good idea for me to sit by the window. I’m terrified of heights. What am I thinking? Turning to ask Kristin to switch me places, I see her face and go pale. She’s going to ask me to move. That’s her pouty face. I know it’s her pouty face. Oh no, don’t do it, Kristin. Do not do it!

“Panda?” She pleads as she takes my hand in her own and leans in to a whisper, “I know this sounds silly, but Brad and I haven’t had much alone time lately, and what with the five hour plane ride and all, we thought it might be fun to sit together. Would you be mad?”

Of course I’ll be mad. But I can’t say this, not when I want to be a good friend. Plus it’s because of them that I’m even on this trip. Okay it’s not a big deal, I’ll just “fake sleep” the entire time Preston sits by me. It shouldn’t be hard. Wait, I’ve had lots of caffeine today. Why is this happening? Sure my eyes are twitching with frustration, I start to panic thinking I’ll develop a nervous tick from all the stress.

But I’m stuck, so I agree and let Kristin switch with Preston and I resign myself to my fate. “Hey, buddy,” Preston jokes playfully as he sets his messenger bag underneath the seat in front of him. I, however, do not feel like being a

“buddy”. I find myself reaching over to unlock his tray just as he is about to bring his head back up. *Crack!*

It hits his head hard. He glares at me just in time for Kristin and Brad to turn around, concern written all over their faces. “Is everything okay?” Brad asks as he eyes Preston rubbing his sore head.

“It’s awesome,” he answers in an irritating manor.

I make a thumbs-up sign then stick my tongue out at him when they turned back around. He tried to grab it before I put it back in my mouth, but I snap my teeth at him like a piranha. Am I acting childish? Yes, but it’s self-defense; this guy is dangerous.

You can tell by the way he wears his pants. What type of guy wears pants that expensive? Don’t think I didn’t notice. He’s wearing Rock and Republic jeans. Even I don’t own a pair of Rock and Republic jeans. I tend to go toward Lucky brand, which I know sounds funny considering that was cool in High School, but they’re super comfortable.

I let my gaze wander up and stop at his belt. See? Another sign I missed. He wears a belt. Men who wear belts are overcompensating. It’s like they have to show to the world they’re men and masculine and buff. I trail up to his tight T-shirt and wince as my eyes meet his.

His smile turns cocky as he asks, “Looking for something, Amanda?”

I squint my eyes until I look like a Korean supermodel then turn to face the front of the plane. Revenge. Kristin will pay for this; just you wait and see it will be war. Leaning down, I tuck everything underneath Brad’s seat and gaze out the window.

Traveling in the winter always makes me nervous. Are the people de-icing the plane all classified to be doing that job? Have you seen how sketchy some of those workers are? Most of them are out there laughing and joking around as they spray the de-icer on the plane while we could be plummeting to our death in mere hours because of their inability to pay

attention to detail. I start to feel myself hyperventilate as I watch a guy who appears to be no older than Mr. Theology laugh and do a “check” of the hydraulics. Oh, good, check buddy, did you strain yourself bending over that far? Never mind, you didn’t even look! He just gives a thumbs-up to the guy in front of him who then gives a thumbs up to the pilot who comes over the loud speaker to say, “All clear”.

Closing my eyes, I feel the plane start to taxi to the runway. Preston’s eyes bore into my skin as I peek around my black eyelashes. “What?” I ask in annoyance knowing if I say anymore my voice might start shaking.

“Are you ok?” He looks shocked as if he thinks I’m not scared of anything except for irrational things like birds and caffeine.

I shrug. “I just don’t like heights.”

Before I know it Kristin turns around in the seat and gives a brief history of my flight experiences to Preston, the puke bag and all. I hide my head in my hands hoping that the plane does crash then I feel us start to take off.

There’s no way I could have helped myself, and I don’t think what I did next should be held against me.

Panic rises in my chest and before I know it, I’m clinging onto Preston like a crazy person and breathing heavily into his chest all the while gripping his hands so hard that I lose feeling in all fingers.

After about five minutes, I pull back realizing that I just attacked the poor man but see no hint of smugness on his face, which confuses me. I mean one minute he’s...well, you know and the next he’s....This!

I’m mortified. At least in other plane rides I held on to complete strangers or weird old men who oddly liked the embrace. I would’ve welcomed anything but this. And he doesn’t even seem the least bit affected by my presence! How is it fair that I find myself staring at him like some love sick teenager while my presence does nothing but make him want to be more irritating?

Ducking down to get my carry-on, I get a book and start to read. If there ever was good advice Grandma Ned gave me it was to take funny books on plane trips. She said it helped calm her down and keep her from getting mad at grandpa's incessant snoring. If it can get rid of grandpa's snoring, it can get rid of the annoying person next to me, and my humiliation.

To my surprise, I find myself enthralled in the book until I smell that all too familiar peppermint smell.

"What are you reading?" His eyes sparkle with interest.

"Please don't talk to me," I grumble.

He looks momentarily hurt then smiles and says okay. The next thing I know, he's passing me a note. I should have known.

So, what are you reading?

Oh just a book about this plane ride where a girl beats this annoying man to death for talking to her too much.

Fun.

Yeah, I'm thinking of using it as an example.

I think I'd like that.

You would.

Was that a statement or a question?

If it was a question, I would have used a question mark.

Just checking.....You look pretty when you read.

Is this a trick to try to get me to be uncomfortable?

Nope just honesty. You want to look at me right now, don't you?

No...

Yes, you do. I can tell. You want to look at my face and see if I'm kidding. Don't worry though, I'm not.

Interesting.

Isn't it though?

What?

That such a simple compliment would have the power to make you blush.

It doesn't take much to make a girl blush if you put meaning behind words.....then again a guy like you should know that.

What do you mean a guy like me?

An attractive man like you should know the power he has over women.

Hmm...just like an attractive woman like yourself should know the power she has over men.

And then I break summoning up the courage to look up into his gaze. Our eyes lock in a moment of pure electric tension. It's shortened by the flight attendant stopping to see if we needed anything to drink.

I ask for water as does he then sit there in silence with my book still in hand.

"Hey, do you want to watch a movie?" Preston asks taking out his headphones.

"How?" My eyebrows furrow in confusion.

"Well it's cool, see they have these things called TVs and if you plug in the—"

"Ughh I knew it was too good to be true," I whine.

"What?" He smiles.

"You being nice and..." I couldn't find the words.

"And?" He prompts flashing a wicked grin.

"Nothing, let's just watch the stinking movie." Tugging at the headphones in my bag, I duck as they break free after the final tug.

"Ouch," Preston yelps. They struck him in the face, but this time it wasn't on purpose, promise!

"And I should have known." He rubs his head.

“Known what?”

“That you’d try to threaten my life yet again. Do you even realize how many times you’ve hit me with either your own hand or other flying objects?”

At this I giggle, I know giggling is girly but it cracked me up, he was so right! He had to think I was some sort of violent lunatic!

“Sorry,” I mumble as I look at his strikingly handsome face. It could take girl’s breath away. His dark hair, green eyes, tan skin, strong jaw, and perfectly straight white teeth all melted together to make a masterpiece of God. He noticed me daydreaming again and raised an eyebrow in question. So I turned toward the screen to watch the movie he picked.

Chapter Eight

I don't remember when or why, but somehow about halfway through the flight my body decided it was exhausted and fell asleep on me. The last thing I remember is slurring my words as I asked Preston about the Disney movie we were watching.

I'm fully awake now, but I don't want to move. There's something hard underneath my head, and I'm scared to open my eyes. My nose wakes up as well and I smell something that I can only describe as pure man; a mixture of aftershave and some sort of spicy cologne next to me. Think, I command myself. Did I fall asleep on the window or on him? Oh my gosh! If I fell asleep on him, that means I could have drooled on him. I tend to do that when I sleep. When I was at church camp in Jr. High, the girls would call me water works because of all the drool that came out of my mouth when I slept.

Okay, Amanda, it's not a big deal. Just open one eye. You don't even have to open two. Just take a sneak peek. I open one eye and look. Preston is happily reading and I am, in fact, leaning on his shoulder, and might I add that I look rather awkward. I've pulled my legs up into the seat and am leaning my entire body on his side.

"Hey, you're up!" Kristin turns around and is irritatingly chipper.

"Uh, yeah." My voice is hoarse from my nap, and I can't stop the yawn that is about to swallow the plane is darkness. Being quick yet discreet, I push away from Preston's shoulder praying no one notices or will comment that I've just been using him as a pillow.

"Why were you just laying there with your eyes open, it looked kind of freaky, Amanda," Kristin teases. I want to stuff my pillow in her mouth. Does she not get it? I feel shaking next to me and turn to face the music.

Preston is staring at me with a calculating glance as if to say, “I know that you know that I know that you fell asleep on me; and I’m holding it over your head for eternity”.

“I must admit,” Preston says as he looks between me and Kristin. “Never have I seen a girl drool quite as much as Amanda. Are you dehydrated?”

At this Brad turns around and gives Preston a high five who then in turn winks at Kristin who gives me an apologetic, “Sorry, do you want me to defend you?” look.

I roll my eyes and pretend to be grumpy, that is until I smell. “Hey is that...” Pointing at the bread sitting in front of Preston I feel my mouth begin to water. Be still my heart. Carbs!

Then everything happens in slow motion, and I can’t be blamed for any of my actions. I’m just recovering from a nap and still out of it. Fast as possible, I slap Preston on the back of the head while simultaneously grab his bread and proceed to stuff it in my mouth.

He turns, mouth open, to face me. “Spit it out.”

At the moment I have an entire roll in my mouth and I can’t speak, so I shake my head no.

“Spit it out,” he says again, this time holding out his hand in front of my mouth. He’s at least smiling.

This time I make a noise with my head shaking.

Then he lunges toward me to grab my head with his hands. I shake and start spitting bits and pieces out to please him. Then he does something that I swear, and you’ve heard it here first, I will never forgive him for.

He licks his hand and wipes it across my face.

“Okay, you can have it,” he says as he sits back down in his seat.

My face is now wet, but at least I have the bread. I swallow before I punch him in the arm and ask, “What was that for?”

He doesn't meet my gaze. "Well, I figured it was only fair. Since you drooled on me so much and stole my snack. Did you like that?" He turns to smile then sees my face and laughs instead. "I think I bring out violence in you." I feel water dripping down my chin and want to scream.

"Didn't you say you had a thing about water?" He leans in a little too close for comfort "Does that include bodily fluids, too? Like spit?"

He stops inches from my face and smirks. "How do you even kiss a guy if you can't handle a little spit, huh?"

Wanting to spit on him for saying such a thing, I take evasive action and grab the water bottle on his tray and pour it over his head. It was well deserved for such a cruel comment.

"Oh my," I say as I put my little finger to my chin. "I guess I'm not so scared of water after all. Towel?"

Just then Brad turns around to ask Preston a question. He burst into laughter when he sees little water droplets cascading from Preston's hair. The little rat, he even looks good all wet. If he had done the same thing to me, I'd look like a caged raccoon. How is it fair that he looks like he just got done shooting a commercial underneath a waterfall?

"Dude, you okay?" Brad asks as he nudges Kristin to turn around. She puts her hand over her mouth and chuckles then shoots me daggers as if to ask, "Did you do this?"

I look away quickly as I try to avoid any sort of eye contact from her. The whole mom radar makes me feel guilty. Now I wonder if I pushed it too far. What's wrong with me? He must work hard thinking of ways to bring out the worst in me.

Preston wipes his face with the towel I threw at him and grunts. "I'm okay, just needed a little refreshing, isn't that right, Amanda?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny his accusations," I say, putting my hand over my heart, forcing myself not to blink as three sets of judgmental eyes point my way.

“Are we there yet?” I ask as I pull out my new magazine. Maybe if I change the subject everyone will forget my little water incident.

Preston looks at me and scowls before asking Kristin if she has a sedative she can give me for my irritability, at which I then openly mock him by repeating what he asked in a whiny voice. Maybe I do need a sedative or something.

“She doesn’t do well in small spaces,” Kristin answers as she gives me a pitiful look.

“Oh my gosh, Mrs. Butterworth!” Jumping out of my seat forgetting that my seatbelt is still attached, I notice people are staring.

“Easy, tiger,” Preston says as he helps unbuckle me. “And why are you yelling your cats name in first class? People are staring.” He whispers too close to my face if you ask me.

“I forgot to leave her food and water. She has to be going crazy on this flight. Do you think they’ll let me run down there and slip her something?” Asking this question must seal Preston’s assessment of my mental, or lack there of, stability. Preston’s expression is calculating, and I wonder if he thinks I actually am crazy.

“Um sure, Amanda, why don’t we just ask the pilot if you can go into the cargo storage while the plane is moving and feed your cat, sounds totally reasonable?” Sarcasm drips off his every word.

“I think I hate you.” I re-buckle my seatbelt.

“You do not. You just hate me for what I bring out of you.”

“Which is?” I snort.

“Honesty,” he answers smugly.

“I was honest enough before you came along,” I fire back.

He leans over the arm rest towards me making my heart feel like it’s going to jump out of my chest. Surely he can hear it. “You get frustrated easily.” He picks up his hand as if to

brush my hair from my face and wipes next to my mouth leaving where he touched permanently tingly. “You had a little leftover bread.”

I then took the liberty of punching him square in the chest before turning toward the window in frustration. The pilot then came over the loud speaker letting everyone know we’d be landing within the next hour. Hold on, Mrs. Butterworth.

Chapter Nine

To say the plane ride was the longest of my life would be a gross understatement. I have two years worth of restless energy just waiting to explode, but I have no time to think of such things, especially since Mrs. Butterworth needs me.

I run to claim my small animal and nearly cry when I see her little crate. With great emotion, I pull it off the conveyor belt and set her free! Only wait, that's not my cat. What the—I have just opened up the cage to a giant iguana. Where is Mrs. Butterworth?

“Mom, someone's stealing Izzy!”

Spinning around to look at the little boy who was ratting me out, I find a large Hawaiian woman with a miu miu on glaring at me. “Give the boy his iguana and I won't press charges.” The mom is now in my face. Beads of sweat pouring from her forehead as she leans in closer.

“Um.” I'm stammering. “I thought it was my cat, I'm so sorry I didn't know. Here.” My words tumble out as I hand them the cage and continue to apologize as the little boy bursts into tears.

“She hurt him! Look he's bleeding!” The boy is pointing at the iguana's foot and tugging at his mom's dress at the same time.

Oh. My. Gosh. I'm going to prison.

“Trouble?” I didn't know Preston was that close to me until now. What does he think he's going to do? Charm her to death?

“Mr. December!” The woman yells as she throws a camera at her small child and paws her way toward Preston. “Is it really you?”

Preston's chuckles as he shoots me a "you're welcome" glance and answers, "Why of course it is!"

The lady asks for his autograph, apologizes for the confusion when Preston explains to her that "yes, I'm sorry about my friend you see, she's sick, she forgot to take her pills this morning and thinks every animal is her long lost cat".

Then they both look at me with sad eyes before she answers, "Oh the poor dear, well here for your troubles." And proceeds to hand him a box of chocolate covered macadamia nuts.

"Thank you, Sue,"

Oh great now they're on a first name basis.

"It's just hard sometimes when you love someone so much but they don't know it." Oh awesome, and now he's fake crying. Perfect, shoot me now. She embraces him as he fake cries on her shoulder all the while giving me a thumbs up behind her back.

Sue, as he called her, leaves just in time for me to stomp up to him and raise my fist.

"Whoa there, careful where you bust those things out at," he says pulling my hands down to my sides. Apparently, my hands are now weapons.

"Unbelievable," I say pushing past him.

"What is?" He catches up to me.

"Your ability to sweet-talk anything wearing a skirt," I say exasperated.

"So..." He steps in front of me, blocking my view of the conveyor belt. "Does that mean we're excluding men? Because I've sweet talked my fair share of the male species, not that it's something to brag about." His smile is all together way too alluring for his own good.

"Curse you and your stupid fireman good looks," I say, pointing my finger into his face.

He takes my finger and pulls me into a freakishly tight embrace. “Admit it, you kind of like me.” His lips are now inches from mine, causing me to do the double take between his eyes and his lips. Let’s be honest, every girl does it. It’s like the dance before the kiss happens the time when the eye contact goes from “hey I might kiss you” to “hey I’m going to kiss you”.

“I’m not going to kiss you,” Preston answers, interrupting my daydreaming.

“Did I ask you to?” I push him away so I can watch for Mrs. Butterworth.

“If that wasn’t you asking, I don’t know what is.” He leans over the conveyor belt and lifts Mrs. Butterworth’s cage into the air to examine the damage. “It appears Mrs. Butterworth has escaped.”

I feel faint. “What?”

“Look.” He points to the lock for the cage. I notice with absolute horror that he’s correct in his assumption. Not only is the lock broken, but Mrs. Butterworth isn’t inside.

Panic rises up within my throat as I look around the outside airport for any sign of a cat-napper. “We have to call the police,” I say, tugging his shirt for him to follow me.

“What?” He stops in his tracks and looks at me as if I’ve just told him I plan on murdering him and burying him in my back yard.

“We need to call the police.” I say it slower, irritated he didn’t catch it the first time.

His look turns pensive as he answers, “It’s not that I didn’t hear you, I just don’t understand why we need to call the police and inform them that your naked cat has escaped. She could be anywhere.” He lifts his arms in the air.

My throat starts to close as tears threaten to fall down my face. Not again, I can’t cry in front of this man again. It’s not just a cat, though, and everyone knows it. Well, only Kristin and I know it. I continued to nod my head in

understanding, but feel myself weaken as I see Kristin and Brad walk our way.

“You guys ready?” Brad calls as he nears us.

Kristin looks at me with mixed confusion then Preston fills her in. She rushes to my side. “It’s not just a cat, Preston. We need to call the police.”

Preston rolls his eyes again. “What am I missing? Does this cat possess diamonds in its belly or something? Some sort of national security secret?” He’s trying to tease me, but I’ve had enough. I cry as Kristin pulls me into a hug and tries to console me.

Brad whispers to Preston, “The cat, it was a gift from her dad. He gave it to her for graduation. It was the last present she got from him before he died.”

Preston’s face pales at the news. He mutters that he’ll be right back before I break into sobs again. Why was I so stupid? Why would I bring my cat? I could have left her home where she’d be safe, and now it’s my fault that she’s gone. We aren’t going to search the entire island of Maui for her, it wouldn’t be fair. And she doesn’t even know how to find her way back home, considering it’s across the ocean.

Kristin leads me to a chair where I sit. Brad brings me some bottled water and Pepsi to get my sugar levels normal after all that crying.

“Guys, this is silly.” My voice is now hoarse from all the crying. “We aren’t going to find her, let’s just cut our losses and go to the resort. Maybe she’s at the Boise airport and someone found her.”

We had searched the entire airport as well as notified security. There was nothing else we could do.

“Meow...Meow...Meow.” Now I hear her in my head; just perfect. “Meow...Meow.”

Wait, is that...

My heart stops as Preston walks up with Mrs. Butterworth in his arms amidst several fresh scratches. “She

was in the plane still. I had to pay the pilot to go back in and search for her in the cargo hold. She wouldn't come to him so I had to crawl in there and get her out. Thus the scratches. I think she's okay, just a little scared." My hero.

Running to him, I pull her from his arms and plant a kiss right on his lips in front of Kristin and Brad, not only shocking myself but Preston and Mrs. Butterworth, considering she let out a low hiss. I didn't expect it to feel like this. His lips are warm and oddly comforting, yet there's a controlled passion behind them. Abruptly, I pull away and clench my fists as his face smirks.

"Remind me to do you favors more often." Preston answers, wiping an escaped tear from my eye. And I know it's cheesy, but I start crying again. Not because I'm sad, but because he cares enough to climb back into a plane and find my lost cat. Unfortunately I'm still shaken by the kiss, enough to walk in the wrong direction for my luggage.

Kristin and Brad both lift up their eyebrows in surprise before exchanging smug glances between themselves. Please, as if they had anything to do with this, plus it's not like I'm marrying Preston. I'm just thankful and I wanted to show my thankfulness in a good way. But I'll admit his lips did feel good against mine, in a platonic way of course. It wasn't so great that I'd think about it the entire way to our resort, maybe.

"Holy cow!" I yell as we enter the town of Kaanapali. It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen. Honest, I want to live here, just think! Then Mrs. Butterworth wouldn't need sweaters anymore. Looking out the window, I take in the smell of fresh cut flowers and ocean. Does it always smell this nice here? I close my eyes in ecstasy as the car takes us around another corner down into the valley. The water is so blue it doesn't even look real. Though I've complained about having to share this vacation with Preston, that's the last thought in my head as I absorb the beauty of this place. Somehow it seems like a small sacrifice in comparison. Although I do wish I was with someone who wasn't so infuriating, that way I would have a friend to explore the island. The look of love

between Kristin and Brad tells me I won't be seeing them much. After all, they're in a penthouse suite, while Preston and I are in separate rooms. Hopefully, our rooms won't have connecting doors, and perhaps they'll be separated by a few stories as well.

Chapter Ten

We pull up to The Westin where we're staying, and I gasp, letting my hand cover my mouth. It's gorgeous. I don't think I've ever seen a resort this pretty in my entire life. And to top it off, there's a waterfall in the pool. My traitorous thoughts lead me to thinking about what Mr. December would look like swimming in the pool, and under the waterfall. I begin to overheat, compliments of my sinful thoughts, when I hear Brad start talking to the front desk manager.

"Brad and Kristin Holland checking in for four," Brad says as he and Kristin approach the giant desk in the lobby. My mouth is still open. Mrs. Butterworth is now back in her cage patiently waiting for me to free her in the room.

Preston comes up beside me and asks, "What do you think? Beautiful, right?"

I smile and get ready to answer, but instead of words all I can do is nod. How can he already be that tan? We've been here five minutes and he already looks more tan than me. Guys should not be allowed to be prettier than girls; it just isn't right, or fair.

My assumption about his good looks is confirmed as I watch several girls in swimsuits walk by and drop open their mouths. I even hear someone whisper "celebrities". They can't be talking about me, only him. The dark-hair-blue-eyed look I have is quite exotic, but that's all I have going for me considering I'm shorter than most kids in middle school. He, however, has a whole lot of everything going on, from his tall build to his perfect hair and teeth. He needs to be humbled. And I now feel the need to be the person through whom that humbling comes. Not that I haven't tried, mind you. It's just hard not to get sidetracked around him.

"So," Kristin says with a strained voice as she approaches us. Uh-oh, something is definitely wrong. "They

double booked everything, which is fine.” She puts up her hands so I don’t panic, “It’s fine. It’s just that you guys didn’t get the rooms you wanted. Actually, none of us did.”

I look to Brad for some sort of hint as to what is going on, but he just shrugs and smiles; figures.

“Where are we staying then?” I ask.

Brad and Kristin laugh awkwardly before giving us our room keys. Kristin hands me mine then says, “You’re both staying in their resort huts outside. Well, have fun. Meet us for dinner at five. Bye.”

And then, just like that, they’re gone, leaving me and Preston with Mrs. Butterworth.

“What exactly,” Preston muses while opening his pamphlet with the key card, “is a resort hut?”

“Well, I guess we’re about to find out.” Pointing at the little sign that says, “Resort Huts this way”, I motion to him and grab my stuff. As long as there are no bugs, I’ll be fine.

Upon arriving at our little hut, I realize I’m more than fine. It’s beautiful! Except... “Preston?” I ask, trying not to sound scared. “What number does your hut key have?”

“Five. Why?” He asks leading me down the pathway.

I’m going to kill them. I’ll absolutely kill them.

“Oh, no reason...well, except mine says five, too.”

“We can’t stay in the same hut, Amanda. It’ll look bad,” he says shrugging, as if to say, “Find somewhere else to stay. I’m taking the hut.”

“I agree.” I catch up to him. “But she said it’s overbooked.”

“Let’s at least go inside before we jump to conclusions,” Preston answers while unlocking the door.

And I know it’s silly to hear music when you see things as if you’re in a good movie, but I could swear at this moment, I hear music.

It isn't just hut number five. It is *honeymoon* hut number five. Awesome. This could not get any worse. My only saving grace is the fact that there are two bedrooms in the hut, meaning I can lock my door every night. The entire living room is open to the outside, but there are nets you could pull down at night. It also leads directly to the pool, giving us a fantastic view of the waterfalls.

"This—" "I start to say.

"—is awesome," Preston finishes. "We have to stay here," He adds as he throws his stuff into the main room.

"Um, excuse me," I say, putting my hands on my hips.

"What?" He asks truly not getting my sarcasm.

"What makes you think you get the big room?"

He shrugs. "Easy, because I'm bigger."

He has a point. I'm not going to back down without a fight. "Okay fine," I say, throwing my stuff onto the couch. "Let's paper rock scissor for it."

"You're on." He puts his hand into position then glares at me with those green eyes.

"Paper, Rock, Scissor," we say at the same time.

"Hah! Scissor." I yell as I cut through his paper. We go two more rounds, and I win. Then he does the most uncharacteristic thing I've ever seen him do. He takes my hands in his and gives me puppy dog eyes. He makes himself cry one single tear then leans in close and says, "Please, Amanda, pretty please may I have the room."

My heart has stopped. Somebody call a paramedic; blood is no longer pumping through my system. "You irritate me," I say breathless, willing the blood to return to my face and legs. My legs go weak and I collapse. Unbelievable, I can't believe I just did that.

His body is so warm so inviting and strong. I hate myself for wanting to be held by him. Instead he steadies me onto my feet and winks. "I was just kidding but maybe I

should try that trick more often on you. It seemed to work considering you were putty in my oh so capable hands.”

He should be slapped. I lift my hand to slap him just as he grabs it in his own. Then before I know it, he’s kissing me, and not a friendly kiss either. It’s a fireman kiss. A big girl kiss, if you will. The kind that leaves you breathless and aching for more. His lips are hot and possessive as he cups the back of my head with his hands. I should be pulling away, but I can’t seem to find the will power to do anything except return his intoxicating kiss. The pent up tension from the plane ride threatens to escape as he deepens the kiss. Alarms are going off in my head, yet I’m finding it difficult to remember my own name. The thought hazily occurs to me that he’s kissing me to provoke me.

I force my lips to pull from his, even though my entire body screams in protest, and successfully slap him across the face.

He’s breathing heavily as he answers, “That didn’t hurt.” He turns to walk into the small bedroom then laughs to himself. “I told you so.”

“What do you mean you told me so?” I yell after him.

“I knew you wanted to kiss me.” With that, he closes the door leaving me still stinging from the touch of his lips on mine. What was that?

Growling out of frustration, I slam the door to my bedroom. Once there I decide that now is as good of time as any to put on my bathing suit and soak up some sun. I put on my brand new green swimsuit from *Guess* and wrap my towel around my waist. Then I grab my sunglasses and stroll from my room only to stop dead in my tracks. In the living room is a very bare-chested man waiting for me.

“There you are,” Preston says, putting his Armani sunglasses on. What is it with this guy and name brand everything? I scowl as I notice that he’s dressed to go swimming as well. “I thought we should go swimming before dinner. Get a little bit of that aggression out, if you know what I mean.”

I nod my head and follow before he turns around to face me. “Plus, I think there’s a lot of tension between us. It might be good for us to swim for a while, unless you had other activities in mind.” His smile deepens as my face turns crimson.

“Nope. Swimming’s fine,” I answer and stride out toward the pool as fast as possible.

“Where’s the fire?” He calls, trying to catch up to me.

“Ha, ha. So funny.” I put on my large black sunglasses, looking to hold on to a little of my dignity.

He winks in return and leads me to a few lounge chairs. The air is thick like honey making it pleasurable to breathe. It feels good to relax. As I check my phone for messages, I notice Bobby has emailed me again, but after the infuriating kiss from Preston my heart just isn’t in it. It occurs to me that this is one path better left untaken, again.

As if on cue, Preston turns to bestow on me the most sensual smile known to mankind. The man should really come with a warning label plastered across his forehead before he gives some poor old lady a stroke.

“Sir?” A high pitched voice interrupts my thoughts as I squint to see whose is addressing Preston as “sir”. Wincing, I see it’s one of the girls from the lobby. She has on a bikini which looks like it’s been shrunk three times before being worn, and her eyes are hidden by too big sunglasses. She’s chewing her gum so hard that *my* jaw hurts, and to top it all off, she’s looking at Preston like he is Brad Pitt. Which, maybe according to this girl, he is.

“Yes?” Preston asks dumbfounded.

“Can I have your autograph?”

“My autograph?” He asks, looking back at her.

She nods her head and smiles, “Well, both of you guys’ autographs. I swear, nobody is going to believe me when I tell them!”

“Tell them what, exactly?” I ask. Now I’m curious. Who does she think we are?

She shrugs and answers as if we’re the slow ones. “That I met Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie on vacation. So where are your kids? Are they, like, back in the states?” We are *in* the states, is what I want to say, but I can’t, because that would make Angelina Jolie look bad, not me.

“You think we’re—” I begin to say, but Preston cuts me off.

“Sure thing! Do you have a marker, pen, or something?” Preston asks looking at the girl with indulgent eyes.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it. This is like so cool.” She pops her gum as she pulls out a sharpie then hands us headshots of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Now I see why she thought he was Brad Pitt. The picture is one from his last movie where he dyed his hair dark, no wonder she thinks he looks like Brad Pitt, the resemblance is almost creepy. While I’m not built like Angelina Jolie, a girl could get used to being compared to her.

Signing my—or rather Angelina’s name, I say a silent prayer that I’m not doing anything illegal. Preston smiles as she runs away, probably rushing to tell her friends. Then to my horror I realize she’s pointing at us and talking rather loudly to the hotel staff. Well, maybe they’ll upgrade us.

I shake my head in disbelief as I look to Preston. He just smiles and nods as if to say, “yeah I get that a lot”. Wow, humility is his strong suit; or not.

“You need to be brought down a few levels.” Snorting, I open up my magazine and try not to be violent toward his arrogant smirk.

Preston leans over close to my chair. “Are you offering?”

I meet his gaze, yet all I can think is how he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen up close.

“Did you have plastic surgery? Because you know you can only do so much to the outside, it’s what’s on the inside

that counts.” Wow, if that isn’t me channeling Grandma Ned. I feel like a Sunday school teacher.

“Aw, you’re too sweet. You mean you’d like me just based on my personality?”

“No!” I yell a little too loud. “Your personality is narcissistic and selfish.” I shake my head and wonder when this guy will get a clue.

He grabs my hand and begins caressing the top of it. I tell my body to pull my hand away, but instead it just stays there; even my own body is a traitor. “Challenge—”

“If you say accepted, I’m throwing you in the pool,” I snap.

“Okay.” He shrugs.

Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes then I feel the sun being blocked from my body. As I pull off my sunglasses, I see Preston hovering over me like a lion does to a zebra before it pounces.

He leans in too close for comfort and whispers, “Accepted.”

I throw down my magazine and lunge for him. Unfortunately, I’m quite small, and compared to him, I never stood a chance. But being the good sport he is, he decides to jump in after he pushes me into the pool. Then I notice a few cameras go off, and to my ultimate embarrassment, I realize people still think we’re stupid celebrities. Please, Lord, help this not make the papers.

Bringing myself back to reality, I grab a towel before lying down again. “Exactly what,” I ask as I towel dry my hair, “have you accepted as a challenge?”

“To woo you.” Preston answers without looking in my direction.

“Woo me?” I repeat. This ought to be good.

“Yes woo, as in I’m going to knock you off your feet. I can tell this whole witty banter thing going on between us isn’t

enough for you. My, my, you are needy. So I'll also woo you. You'll be begging for me to kiss you by the end of this trip."

"Overconfident?" I laugh.

"Not at all." He smiles.

"There you guys are!" A female voice exclaims.

I look up to see Brad and Kristin approaching. Giving them a weak wave, I take off my sunglasses to fully glare at my best friend. She owes me coffee for life, then again I do get to stare at Mr. December for the rest of the week, so it won't be too bad. Except he infuriates me and makes me want to cut off parts of him and feed them to Mrs. Butterworth. At least I didn't say that out loud.

Kristin mouths a "Sorry" my way before sitting next to me. "You'll never believe what we heard." Her voice is high pitched and airy, it's obviously good news.

"What?" I ask equally excited.

"Get this!" Her hands are in front of my face as she tries to show me with her body just how big of a deal this news is. "Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are staying at our hotel." She puts her hands over her mouth in shock as my eyes widen in something entirely different.

Preston is the first to break the silence. "You don't say? How do you know?" He's now looking directly at me with a smugness that is so irritating I need to push him in the pool, again.

"Well," Brad interrupts. "We heard they were out here just a bit ago signing autographs. Some teenage girl is running around the hotel showing everyone. I think she might've even called the local news, I can't be sure though. She was talking way too fast."

Almost choking on my spit, I try to digest the information. "So, reporters might be coming?" I croak out as I glare at Preston again. He shrugs his shoulders as if to say "no big deal."

“Yeah, but I mean, I’m sure they are going to hear about it and switch hotels. We just thought we could catch a glimpse of them before they took off.” Brad puts his hand on Kristin’s knee and smiles.

“Hey.” he looks back toward us. “You guys didn’t happen to see them, did you?”

Just as I open my mouth to reply, Preston covers it with his hand.

“Nope,” Preston lies. “I did hear they were going to make an appearance at the same restaurant as us tonight though.”

My breathing becomes rapid as the understanding of what he’s saying becomes painfully clear. We aren’t going to dinner as Preston and Amanda. We’re going as Brad and Angelina.

Kristin and Brad exchange shocked looks as I mumble under my breath, “Challenge accepted.” And to my surprise I see Preston’s face light up into the most gorgeous smile I’ve ever seen. Maybe this isn’t such a bad idea after all.

Chapter Eleven

No way, I'm not wearing that! This I'm thinking to myself as my hand trails down the rough fabric of the dress. Preston had gone shopping earlier, and unbeknownst to me bought an Angelina lookalike dress. He did a pretty good job. The black leather dress somehow looks classy, and the neckline isn't too low, but the slit up the side isn't as modest. People could almost see up my dress.

"You ready yet?" Preston calls as he knocks on my bedroom door. My heart is pounding out of my chest. We lied to Kristin and Brad. We told them we were too tired to go to dinner, and they were more than excited to have a dinner date on their own. The plan is to wear sunglasses throughout the night so nobody suspects anything different. It should work, considering we're eating so early.

I put on the dress and look in the mirror. It's shocking how much I can resemble Angelina. She's a lot taller, she also has tattoos, which Preston is convinced he can draw on me with a sharpie, we'll see about that. But I could easily pass for her shorter twin. Oddly, this is something I've never noticed before today.

All in all, I feel like I look all right. I do my makeup as best I can and put on the strappy high heels Preston bought with the dress. As I open my bedroom door, I gasp. I'm face to face with Brad Pitt, and I don't mean he kind of resembles Brad Pitt. No, he's full on channeling celebrity right now. He's done his hair in a sloppy fashion, let his five o'clock shadow grow a little on his face, and don't even get me started on the tan. He's wearing a khaki suit resembling something I saw on *Ocean's Eleven* and is now holding his hand out for me.

Why am I shaking? There's no way I'm going to be able to do this, let alone look at him all evening without letting my jaw drop. He has me do a little twirl before he smiles and

kisses me on the cheek. My tongue goes numb, therefore speech isn't an option right now.

He breaks the silence "You look absolutely stunning." And I think he means it because there's no smugness behind his eyes, but there's something else I can't identify.

"Stop overanalyzing me and sit down," Preston says, breaking the moment.

I roll my eyes and sit. "What are you doing?" I ask as he pulls out a sharpie. There's a brief glimmer of hope that perhaps he had forgotten about the tattoos I needed to carry off the disguise.

"She," he says as the sharpie touches my skin, "only has two visible tattoos when she wears dresses like this."

I roll my eyes. "How would you know?"

"TMZ," he answers before finishing off the first tattoo.

"I think I underestimated you." I shake my head.

"You always have," he says wistfully before starting on the next tattoo. Although I hate to admit it, this does feel kind of fun. He puts the sharpie down and looks at my slit. He lets out a big sigh before letting his hand run on the inside part of my knee. It makes me want to jump on him, and I don't know why. Sometimes he has that effect on me; either I want to kill him, or I want to steal his virtue. That can't be a good sign.

"What's wrong?" Assuming he must think I look terrible or he wouldn't have such an upset look on his face.

Preston leaves the room then returns within seconds with my heart.

Kidding, it's actually a needle and thread, but close enough.

"We can't have you walking around like that," he points to the slit and begins sewing the top part of it down to make it less revealing.

"What do you mean?" My words sound a little choppy since his touch makes me so nervous.

“I mean.” His voice is now more intense. “I don’t want other men lusting after you tonight, or undressing you with their eyes, so I’m going to remedy the situation.” He finishes the last stitch and ties a knot.

“Where in the world did you learn to sew?” I ask flabbergasted.

“Prison.” He winks. There’s the guy I’ve grown to love.

Wait a second, did I just say love? Ha! Not a possibility. At least I didn’t say it out loud.

He pulls me to my feet to inspect me. “Perfect,” he says and I feel that way. “Grab your sunglasses, Mrs. Pitt.”

“Why thank you, Mr. Pitt.” I laugh as he leads me out into the night.

We walk arm in arm toward the restaurant. Keeping my breathing even, that’s my focus, but I fail. First off, I’m convinced that if we’re caught we’re going straight to prison no passing go no collecting two hundred dollars. Second, I’m walking too close to Brad Pitt’s actual twin. Any girl would feel nervous right now, except for he is kind of cocky and rude sometimes. *Remember*, I tell myself, *it’s still Preston*.

People stop eating as we enter the restaurant. I lock eyes with Kristin before looking down. Oh no. I know she notices me, she can tell. My face feels on fire as I look up again. But this time Kristin’s face is hiding excitement and pure celebrity awe. If my best friend can’t tell it’s me, we’re safe.

Preston asks the waiter if we can please sit outside. We’re led by a few tables of people who either pull out their camera phones or choke on their food. I hold in a chuckle as we sit at the table outside. The waiter is visibly shaking as he pours us each a glass of the “best red wine in Maui”, as he so humbly put it and hands us our menus.

“This is weird,” I say through my smile to Preston.

“Right?” He replies taking a sip of his wine. “Wow, he wasn’t kidding about this being the best red wine in Maui.”

“We should do this the rest of the week.” His eyes darken. He puts down his wine and the gauntlet, watching me the entire time as I nearly choke with laughter.

“We’ll get caught!” I say.

“You mean to tell me this hasn’t been the most exciting night of your life?”

Rolling my eyes I reply, “Okay, fine it’s been fun, but I’m too small for prison. They’ll eat me alive in there.”

“I would,” Preston answers as he motions for the waiter.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I seethe.

“You’ll see,” he says rather gruffly before ordering for us. We decided before we left to let him do the talking since my voice would be a dead giveaway.

Dinner is quite pleasant and uneventful. That is until, “Hi! Um, like I saw you guys out at the pool. Do you, like, remember me from before?”

“Oh, how could we forget?” Preston answers annoyed. “You’re the one who doesn’t know geography.”

I choke on my water.

“Oh, well,” she says twisting her hair around her finger. “It’s like, why would I even care when I have GSP?”

“You mean GPS?” Preston asks.

“Yeah, whatever. So look...” The girl is now rather close to us and let’s her voice go down into a whisper. “I know you guys are, like, famous and all and whatever, but we’re having this, like, party at our room, and it would be super awesome if you could stop by.” She drops a piece of paper on the table with her room number and saunters off.

“I fear for America,” I say as he picks up the piece of paper.

“To our future.” Preston laughs as he lifts his wine glass to mine in a toast. Grinning, I think back on the odd day we’ve just experienced.

“Um, sorry to bother you,” the waiter says as he approaches our table. “But these were sent over for you, compliments of them.” He points to Kristin and Brad as he takes two glasses of champagne off his tray.

“There’s also a card.”

I look at Preston and stifle a smile as he reads the card aloud, “From your biggest fans.”

I burst into laughter, but quickly feel bad as I see the hurt expression on Kristin’s face. So I pick up my champagne glass and make a toast to her. She returns the toast with a giant smile.

“They’re going to kill us when they find out, “I say through clenched teeth.

“Who says we’re going to tell?” Preston smiles as he pays the bill. He has cash on him so we didn’t have to worry about debit cards with the wrong names. That would be a fun headline: Brad Pitt – Identity Thief.

All of a sudden I hear clanking around the restaurant and turn to see everyone hitting their drinks with pieces of silverware and looking towards us.

“They want us to kiss,” Preston says, laughing.

“What do you mean? Why?” I’m now in a full state of panic.

“I don’t know, but that’s what the clanking means. Are you going to let down your fans or accept the challenge, Miss Angelina?”

“Watch this,” I say with bravery I never knew I possessed. I throw down my napkin, march over where Preston is sitting, and pull him by his shirt toward my face. I don’t hesitate before crushing my lips across his, using all the experience I have to make this the best kiss he’s ever received. I was ready for my own reaction. I mean, the boy can kiss, but what I’m ready for is his response to my little public display.

Instead of letting me go and releasing the kiss early, Preston pulls me into his lap and kisses me harder than I’ve

ever been kissed in my entire life. And every part of me wants to hate it, but instead I find I feel warm and tingly all over. It has to be the champagne; although, now that I think about it, I only had a sip.

He releases me, his green eyes smolder, and he whispers into my ear, “Told you so.”

“What?” I’m breathless.

“I told you so. That you’d kiss me before the end of the vacation.”

“That doesn’t count,” I say, trying to keep the smile on my face.

“Does to,” he argues.

“Does not!” I say louder, and then realize everyone is still staring. Leaning forward, I kiss him again on the cheek and then saunter back over to my side of the table. “It was for the people. Not for you.”

“Weird. Because that kiss felt like it was for you.” He clasps my hand within his and leads me down the stairs onto the beach.

“Nope. I’m a good actress, remember? Golden Globe nominated.”

“Are you sure about that?”

No, I’m not quite sure. Did she win? I shake my head and sit down in the sand. I need these painful shoes off now.

Preston sighs and helps me with the strap, which is caught on my dress. He pulls off both shoes and then hands them to me. I snatch them from his clutches and watch as the waves loudly crash onto the shore.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, looking at the majestic ocean.

“I agree,” Preston answers as I turn to meet his face, only he isn’t staring at the ocean.

“Smooth,” I say, lifting an eyebrow. “Exactly how many movies have I seen the male lead do that? Oh, let me think. All of them.” I’m now pointing at him with my finger.

“Says the girl whose being wooed,” Preston replies as he scoots closer to me.

“That,” I say, continuing my judgmental point. “Wasn’t wooing. That was stealing. Be original.” I cross my arms. Wait, it sounds like I just ask him to pursue me.

“Your wish is my command.” Preston jumps to his feet and trots toward the wetter sand.

“What are you doing?” I yell. Apparently, I’m going to have to chase after him if I want to know.

“I’m going to build you a castle,” he answers as if it’s a normal response.

“No, you’re not,” I say panicking.

“Yes, I think I am. I just need to find a good place. Though, I can’t start on it now what with me not having a bucket and all, but don’t you worry. By the end of the trip you’ll have your castle.” He looks pleased with this idea. A tear spills down my cheek. I turn to walk away, but he catches me.

“Amanda, I was kidding. I don’t have to build you a castle.” He looks concerned as he notices my tears.

Embarrassed, I turn my head and try to hide the emotion now ravaging my face. “It’s not your fault. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I sit in a huff on the sand.

“Castles make you cry?” Preston interjects. “No. That’s normal for a girl, right?” He nudges me with his elbow making me laugh.

“It’s just,” I start to explain. “My dad used to call me his little princess. We went to the beach every year. Seaside Oregon was the spot,” I say laughing at the memory. Preston listens intently as I continue. “We had lots of traditions, but one of them while we were at the beach was to build a sandcastle. I’d look forward to it every year. Not just because of the castle, though he rocked it.” I laughed. “But it was special to have time with him. He always told me that the man I marry better know how to build sandcastles or else.” I roll my eyes in remembrance. “When he died, the trip was already

booked. My mom thought it would be good for us to go in honor of him.”

I push myself off the ground and begin to walk, knowing Preston will follow. “I built him a sandcastle.” Shrugging, I turn to Preston. “I build him one every year. I want to think he can see it from Heaven. So, that’s why sandcastles make me cry. You must think I’m emotionally unstable. You can say it.” My eyes rise to meet his gaze, and I notice he has tears in his eyes.

Preston pulls me into his chest and let’s me cry. It’s not until I open my eyes that I realize he’s led me all the way back to our room. Without a word, he draws a warm bath for me in the tub and leaves. I force myself to remember that he annoys me, but it’s hard to feel irritated when he’s so good at comforting me.

Who is this guy? There’s no way I can figure him out, but at this moment there’s nowhere I’d rather be than with him.

After a long bath, I sink into bed with dreams of sandcastles floating around in my head. Sandcastles and a certain someone who offered to build me one. Someone who is both the most irritating and the most handsome man on the planet.

Chapter Twelve

I wake up the following morning with a pounding headache that is not remedied by the loud coffee grinding going on in the kitchen. I open my door and growl as I see Preston making coffee and pulling pastries out of the oven. What so he cooks, too?

“Morning, sunshine! Get in a fight with a semi truck?” Preston says as I sink into the bar stool. I let out a low grunt before holding my hand out for coffee.

“Bite me,” I say before I take my first sip.

“That can be arranged.” He smiles as he hands me a hot pastry.

“You’re like Diet Pepsi,” I say.

“Um, I prefer being compared to things like wine, but okay, Diet Pepsi it is,” he says sitting down next to me. I can’t help that my voice is extremely low in the morning, so I just go for it.

“Fine wine means you get better with age, Diet Pepsi is the beverage that pretends to be something else, but actually it’s just pop,” I say, meeting his gaze.

“I’m sorry, do you always talk theology in the morning?” He shakes his head. “We’ll have to fix that when we get married.”

My eyes bug out as if he’s just said my coffee had poison in it. “We aren’t getting married!” I yell a little too loud for my headache.

“Ooo, this is fun. See, I’ve decided that I like bothering you. I am attaching myself to you forever. Like a leech.” He looks bemused as I continue to glare at him.

“Leeches suck the life out of people,” I state dryly.

“Yes, I believe they do,” he answers. “So, why diet? Why can’t I be normal Pepsi?”

At least he can keep up with me this much. “Because,” I say while grabbing the pastry with one hand and my coffee with the other, “Diet makes people think it’s better for you when actually the fake sugar causes cancer. So in reality, it’s just as bad as the real thing. Only people don’t know it, because on the outside it says zero calories.” I’m shaking my head. Why doesn’t he get this? I walk out toward the patio and sit with my breakfast.

“So wait,” he says following me. “Are you saying I’m a fake? Not as good as the real thing, even though I pretend to be?” He asks innocently. He puts his hand over his heart with a wounded look then shrugs. “I think you’re projecting,” He takes the newspaper off the chair and sits down.

“Wow, thanks, Doctor,” I answer with sarcasm.

“No, seriously. I think you want me to be fake so you don’t have to like me. It would just be easier for you. You wouldn’t have to put yourself out there and be vulnerable.” He looks at me critically, before going on. “Like I said before, you’re afraid of me. But it’s okay. I’ll get you through it.” Then he suddenly gets up and goes back into the kitchen. How in the world did this conversation turn on me so fast?

I’m scowling after him when I hear a knock on the door. Preston rushes to open it, and in walks Kristin and Brad. Kristin immediately walks to where I am sitting and grabs a seat, taking my coffee and pastry in the process.

“Whoa, rough night?” Brad asks as he joins us on the patio.

“You have no idea,” I say squinting my eyes at Preston, who gives me the I-have-no-idea-what-you’re-talking-about look as I pull my coffee from Kristin’s hands.

Kristin appears as animated as ever. “You will never guess what happened last night,” she says, looking back and forth between us.

“I’m sure I could,” Preston coughs to himself, masking the words while I hide a chuckle.

“We saw them!” Kristin exclaims, throwing her hands in the air. “And they were so nice, and we bought them champagne, and they toasted to us!” She’s now yelling, making my headache all the worse.

“You don’t say.” Preston plays along, making me smile even harder.

“Yes!” Kristin says, totally not getting Preston’s sarcasm. “And you know what’s so great?” She turns back to me. “I hear they’re going to be staying the rest of the week.”

“They are?” I say through clenched teeth, glaring at Preston.

“Yes!” Kristin does a little fist pump. I never knew she was so in to celebrities. Must be the new mom thing. She definitely needs to get out more, poor thing.

“So, you guys ready to go or what?” Brad asks, looking directly at me and my train wreck face and just-rolled-out-of-bed clothes.

“Ready for?” I ask.

“Snorkeling,” Brad says, standing up. “I thought Preston told you. The boat leaves in like a half hour.”

I bite my lip so I won’t lunge for Preston’s face, then smile. “Of course, I’ll go grab my stuff.”

I hurry into the bathroom, throw on my swimsuit, brush my teeth, put on waterproof mascara, and am out the door. I’m wearing my new swimsuit cover up as well as my giant sunglasses to hide my swollen eyes.

“For later,” Preston whispers and drops something into my beach bag. I can’t seem to be able to keep my stomach from doing a flip flop as my eyes scan his kissable lips. And okay, I know I’m supposed to hate him, but it’s hard not to feel totally 007 right now with us sneaking around together. I mean, it’s fun pretending to be someone else, and it’s not like I’m going to marry the guy. Clearly he’s not marriage

material. Plus, he's probably just stringing me along until he can embarrass me like I did him. Although, in his defense, he's had many opportunities to do so already.

Today he's wearing long board shorts and a tight muscle T. His skin is more bronzed than mine, making me all the more pathetic-looking next to him. We drive our rental car to the spot where the boat is waiting and get out. Preston and I are the last to leave the car, but only because Brad has to chase down Kristin as she charges the boat. Like I said, she needs to get out more.

"I think you're wine," Preston says and takes my bag from the trunk.

"What do you mean?" I fall into step with him, and we head in Kristin's direction.

"I mean," he says. Wait, is he turning red? "You're anything but diet." It was as if the mask which was once in place—the mask dripping with selfish pride and sarcasm—had fallen away, and it's just us. Me and Preston. I stop and look him square in the face and grin. His eyes light up, and before I know it, he leans over and kisses my cheek.

"But don't go around telling people about this side of me. It might ruin my reputation," he says, then he playfully trips me as we walk onto the dock.

"That's the last thing you should be worried about," I say, returning the trip and causing his flip flop to sail into the water.

"Go get it," he says seriously.

"No, you get it."

"Children?" Kristin comes up to us. "A problem?"

"Yes." I point at Preston. "He just called me stupid and tripped me. When he tripped me, his flip flop fell into the water, and now he wants me to go get it. And you know how much I hate the water." I stomp my foot for effect and shed a fake tear, all the while Preston stares at me, mouth open in shock.

“Preston! Be nice to her! She has a legitimate fear. Now stop being a bully, and get your shoe out of the water. We’re going to be late for our snorkeling appointment.” She pulls me into her side and escorts me safely to the boat. I turn quickly to stick my tongue out at Preston. He smirks, then wades through the shallow water to retrieve his flip flop.

Two can play that game, buddy, I think.

I should have never underestimated him. I don’t know how I get myself into these situations. Honestly, I don’t. I mean, sometimes in hindsight, I can see myself make the choice, and I want to yell at myself to stop. *You don’t know what you’re doing!* But it’s always too late, and, seriously, how was I supposed to know the boat actually had a high dive?

Stupid Preston and his dares. He knows how much I hate water, yet here I am, standing on what I would like to refer to as the “plank of death”, waiting to jump into the dark abyss. “Jump! Jump! Jump!” I hear the voices chant, but all I feel like doing is passing out. Heights and water do not mix. This is at least thirty feet, and I feel like I might be sick.

“You know you don’t have to do this,” Preston teases and leans over the edge next to me.

“Shut up!” I squeak. “I’m doing this.”

“Smart girl.” He jumps in before me.

You see, it happened like this. Preston dared me to fit a whole chip into my mouth at the snack bar, which, let’s be honest, was a stupid dare. I did it, then proceeded to dare him to take a swig of Tabasco sauce. We went around the boat daring each other to do things until we reached the top, where he noticed the high dive. He immediately suckered me into it before I had the chance to say no. I mean, I was winning the game. It was Preston who didn’t have enough guts to down the whole bottle of Tabasco. I’m the one who proved it and did it myself. I was winning... until the high dive incident. Now

here I am, shaking at the top of this giant boat, listening to complete strangers chant my name.

Far below me, I can see Preston treading water and joining in the chant. I immediately start to pray for a thunderstorm. Maybe lightning will strike his smug little face. The visual brings a smile to my lips. Okay, I can do this. I can do this. I close my eyes and jump. I feel my stomach heave as I hit the water, forgetting to pencil my legs and making a big slap. The sting runs all the way down my now throbbing red legs. I swim up gasping for air and see Preston swimming toward me like he's fighting for a role in *Bay Watch*.

"Nice," he says breathlessly, as he notes my shaking body.

"I—"

"Hate me, I know. Save it for later though. We should get you and your bruised body back on the boat. I thought I told you to pencil it?" He laughs and swims ahead so he can pull me onto the back of the boat.

"I think you're hazardous to her health, buddy," Brad says while Preston pulls me onto the boat. I feel like a beached whale.

My legs aren't just red anymore. They're now swelling to the size of...well, I don't want to give you that visual. It's too depressing.

"Hey, at least you did it!" Preston tries to sound encouraging. I give him the look of death reserved for only the worst of mankind.

"So not the point," I say, teeth chattering. Suddenly, I don't feel so well.

"Let's go inside and get you dry." He helps me to my feet. We move inside to the covered part of the boat and sit. I watch in awe as Preston winks at the snack bar lady who then brings us free snacks.

"Sure you aren't a wizard?" I ask. Must be the trauma of the fall talking.

“A wizard? As in Harry Potter? I feel like I should be offended.” He hands me my drink.

“You could be, but he is the best magician at Hogwarts,” I say defensively.

“Please don’t tell me you’ve read the entire series of Harry Potter.” He laughs and shoots me a look reserved for small children who’ve been naughty.

“Fine, I have not read the entire series...only parts.” I sip my ginger ale. At least he had enough common sense to bring me something to calm my stomach.

“So, why would I be a wizard anyway?”

“The magical powers you have over people. It’s wizardy,” I say.

“Wizardy is not a word.”

“It’s in my dictionary.”

“Doubtful you’ve ever even seen one,” he counters.

“Whatever.” I cross my arms.

“What are you? Five?” he says, noticing my body language.

“Six, now go away.”

“Is that any way to treat your future husband?” He leans closer, and I fight to quiet my thumping heart as his breath caresses my face. Like a moth to the flame, I lean in before answering.

“I’d never marry you.” I look down at my hands. My voice sounds surprisingly convincing.

“But you’d at least go out with me?” He leans closer to my lips.

“When pigs fly.” I say, glaring at him.

“Good to know.” He gets up from his seat and clasps his hands together. “Now for our plan.”

I’m confused. I look around as if to ask “What exactly is our plan?” But he’s already digging through my bag.

“Ah ha!” He pulls out a black bathing suit with rhinestones. “Go put this on, with the sunglasses and high heels, and meet me out here.”

“We’re not doing this now,” I say flatly and stare at the gorgeous swimsuit.

“Yes we are. Remember? You promised? Plus, Brad and Angelina are staying the whole week. I figure we can change quick, then make an appearance as we’re leaving the boat in about ten minutes.” He checks his watch. “Make that nine minutes. You in?”

I bite my lip. He’s right. It was fun last night. “Fine.” I snatch the swimsuit out of his hand. “But no kissing this time.”

He pulls my body back toward his and whispers into my hair, “I won’t kiss you unless you ask.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.” I pull away and walk off to the girls’ bathroom acutely aware of his gaze on my form as I feel my body burning from his momentary touch.

Chapter Thirteen

Our boat arrives within the next nine minutes. I can't believe I'm actually doing this again. I don't know what it is about Preston, but I can't bring myself to say no to him. And the more I get to know him, the more I think he might actually be just a good guy with a bad guy habit. I look in the mirror and smile. Okay, so maybe I won't marry him, but one date won't hurt.

I open up the bathroom door and scurry to the meeting place to find Brad Pitt—I mean, Preston waiting for me. We link arms and traipse off the boat as if we own the place. People are watching and taking pictures. Then I see Kristin squint at me questioningly as if to ask, “Do I know you?” I quickly duck my head into Preston's arm and walk faster toward the other side of the dock.

“Did you tell them?” I ask Preston as we near the next corner.

He's still smiling. “Of course. They think you weren't feeling well, and we're going to stay behind to talk with the on-call doctor. They have no idea. Trust me.”

I nod my head and smile as we pass a few more star struck teenagers on the dock. “Beach?” He asks leading me down to the docks. My stomach growls in complaint.

“Actually?” I say stopping him. “I want food.”

“A girl after my own heart,” he teases and he pulls me back from the dock and into the first restaurant on the boardwalk. It's one of those little restaurants with sand as a floor, and I love it.

“Spill,” I say, taking a sip of water. I'm actually enjoying all the weird stares and camera phones pointed our way. I think I could get used to this.

“What?” He asks confused.

“Why are you being nice to me when all you actually want to do is get back at me for what I did to you in high school?” There. I said it.

“Wow. You still thinking about that? Because it was such a long time ago.” He smiles.

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” I mock.

“Amanda, you need to learn how to trust people. My plan is not to date you then dump you in front of the entire school. That would just be weird. Plus, we aren’t even in school anymore, and it would be a lot of work to get all of those people together again for a reunion.”

The man has a point. “Sure. Okay, if you say so.” I grab a tortilla chip from the basket. Mexican food in Hawaii? That’s just weird. As I dip into the salsa, the table begins to vibrate strangely. “Oh my gosh! It’s an earthquake!” I shriek.

His look is anything but panicked. “Um, try a cell phone?” He picks up his phone and waves it in the air at me.

“Oh, right.” I sit back in my seat.

“Decaf, Amanda. You should try it. Might change your life,” he smirks and checks his phone. His look turns dark as he tosses it back onto the table.

“What?” I ask curiously

“Nothing. Just work.”

“What? They have a fire they can’t put out without you?” I tease.

“Something like that,” he looks away and stuffs a chip into his mouth.

Okay, I know I’m not supposed to like him or anything, but I can tell something is bothering him; although, he won’t tell me anything. I mean, I don’t know. It just seems like he’s totally bummed out all of a sudden, so I decide to do something about it.

“Follow me,” I say, holding out my hand after he pays the check. Okay, and here’s the other thing, he always pays.

Even if I have money, he pulls out his wallet and pays for it. Derek never paid. In fact, he would take out his cell phone and use the calculator app to make sure I was paying my fair share. The jerk.

“Where we going?” Preston asks as he falls into step beside me. People aren’t staring nearly as much now, which is what makes this all the more fun.

“You’ll see,” I reply. “But we have to be quiet, because we’re sneaking in.” I slip my finger to my lips to shush him.

“O-kay,” he whispers cautiously, raising one eyebrow at me. I can just see the hint of a smirk playing around his lips. I pull him into the theater next door and tell him to close his eyes while I pay for a couple tickets. I lead him into the back row hardly able to control my smile and guide him into a seat.

“Surprise,” I whisper.

He opens his eyes and his mouth drops open.

“It’s Star Wars,” he says in disbelief.

“Aw, I knew the little nerd was in there somewhere.” I pat him on the head. Instead of a smug remark like I’m expecting, Preston has this look of complete awe as he turns to face me.

“How did you remember? No, wait. How did you even know? Do I want to know how you know?” He asks leaning in towards me.

“Senior year. You had a Star Wars t-shirt on underneath your sweater-vest. I did some investigating later when I was planning to apologize and found out that you were the president of the fan club for our school.” I’m now beaming. I’ve finally one-upped him, and it feels awesome.

“I hate you for remembering that.” He looks down at his hands. He almost looks embarrassed. “You were going to apologize?” He meets my eyes again.

“Of course,” I shrug. “I felt terrible, plus the guy I went with ended up cheating on me with Betsy Lou,” I say with venom tipped words.

“Dang that Betsy Lou always stealing boyfriends,” he agrees as he pulls my hand into his lap.

“She was my nemesis back in the day,” I say matter of factly.

“She couldn’t hold a candle to you if she wanted to,” Preston replies as he pushes his fingers through my still damp hair.

“This is what we would have done,” I say breaking the moment.

“What do you mean?” He gets the picture, because in that instant he backs away from me.

“Our date. Had I said yes to prom, I’m sure you would have taken me on a date, and I would have wanted to do this.” I lean in close and kiss him on the cheek.

“Does that mean we can make out now?” Preston asks huskily.

“Um no, this means I’m sorry.” I laugh and punch his arm.

“Shoot, I always wanted to make out at the movies, especially in the back row.” He crosses his arms completely dejected. I, however, don’t want to lose. Therefore, I decide not to lean in and kiss him, even though the tension is so thick between us you can cut it with a knife.

I finally look around to see who else is joining us in the theatre and notice several curious glances pointed our way. It dawns on me that we’re still in our “costumes”, making us look ridiculous. I mean, I highly doubt Brad and Angelina go to Star Wars while vacationing in Hawaii.

We both smile and wave as we excuse ourselves into the lobby and back out onto the street feeling, I might add, extremely light footed and fancy free.

“Where to?” I ask then hear my cell phone go off.

“Where are you guys?” The voice on the other end is Kristin and the only reason I know is because of caller ID. Other than that, she sounds like a mental hospital escapee.

“Whoa,” I respond.

“Do not ‘whoa’ me. We’ve been looking for you forever. Did Preston kidnap you or something? And why do you disappear every time we see celebrities?” Her voice has now returned to normal.

“Bad luck?” I answer innocently.

“Well...maybe...Look, Brad got kind of sea sick. We’re back at the room now. We’re probably going to call it a day and hang out, so you and Preston are on your own again.” Her words immediately cause my heart to flutter. What’s wrong with me?

“Okay,” I answer, trying to hide excitement from my voice. “We’ll manage I’m sure—”

“Panda,” she interrupts. “I know you’re mad because I keep forcing you and Preston together, and I promise I wouldn’t have done it except...well except...” She pauses on the other end of the phone.

“Except what?” I ask, curious. I stop in my tracks.

“Except, well, Brad made me promise not to tell. And he only just found out, and now I feel like a terrible friend. And I promise Preston’s safe and all, I just didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“About what?” I ask again, frustrated.

“Ask him about his ex-wife.”

Chapter Fourteen

And then she said she had to go, leaving me totally dizzy with rage. “Your wife!” I shout at Preston as I throw my phone at his head.

“What?” he asks totally stunned by my revelation.

“When were you going to tell me, huh? Do you just run around and propose to every girl you meet? Get them trapped in that little fireman web of love then tell them you believe in polygamy!” My voice is so loud that people are staring.

Preston is still gaping at me with registered shock on his face “We need to talk,” He says as he pulls me underneath the waterfall.

I begin to talk again before he covers my mouth with his hand.

“I don’t even want to know how you got such information, but I can tell you one thing. Before you jump to conclusions, you should just ask.” He releases his hand from my mouth as I start to protest.

“But that isn’t something I think about asking when you don’t wear a ring and when you kiss me at every chance you get.” My voice rises as the emotion becomes unbearable.

Preston’s eyes light up with fire before his lips crush down hard on mine. His warmth cascades over my body in waves, making me melt into his arms all the more. I wrap my arms around his neck as he pulls me closer and let out a small moan as he releases me.

“Stop talking so much,” he says breathless as he pushes me against the rock wall and kisses me again. I want to scream assault, but again I’m betrayed by my body as my arms wrap around his neck. The pressure from his lips sets me into a daze as I hungrily push for more.

“You’re not forgiven.” I manage to say as I push him away and begin to walk anywhere I can to remove myself from his intoxicating presence.

“Not so fast.” He pulls my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“I *was* married,” he says, but he holds up a finger in protest. “She cheated on me.” He leans casually against the rocks. “Actually, it was more of a mutual cheating, but we can talk about that later.” He wraps his hand around mine and leads me silently back to our hut.

“She was always selfish, but then again, I always was, too,” he says, sitting on the couch, while I take a seat in the fluffy chair. “She wanted things I couldn’t give her. I started working at the fire department about two years ago, when I finally found out.” He gives me a smirk then continues, “Never trust your best friends. Especially around your pretty wife.”

I want to ask him who he’s referring to, but it’s none of my business. “She left me for him, not that he married her or anything. I tried to fix things, but we had grown apart in more ways than one. It’s actually what turned me to God. And in an odd way, it brought me back to Him.” He stands up to get a drink of water.

“But you said you cheated, too?” I ask shyly.

“I did, in my heart. I never really loved and cherished her. I just liked what I saw on the outside and the pleasure she brought me. I sure didn’t honor her with my actions or my thoughts, nor did I fight for her when she chose to go the other way. I should have fought.” He looks down at the sink and shrugs as he fills up his glass with water.

“She finalized the divorce, and I did nothing. Once I got my life back on track, I tried to make things right. It doesn’t help that my ex-best friend still works at the same station. I’ve been trying to get on at other ones, but it’s kinda hard with how competitive my job is.”

I look at him and try not to cry, but it's hard. I feel so sorry for him. And yes, I still want to kill Kristin for setting me up with a broken man, but I can't blame her for thinking we could help each other. I still can't help but think she knows more than she's willing to say. I'll have to ask her later but for now...

"I owe you an apology," I say quietly.

"No, you don't. I should've said something about the ex-wife to the new wife. It only makes sense." He smiles widely at me, while I roll my eyes.

"I'm not marrying you," I say again, this time even more unconvincingly.

"You will, we're perfect for each other." He then leans in and plants a soft and gentle kiss on my forehead.

"So who's the ex best friend?" I ask curiously. "Anyone I know?"

Preston's jaw clenches, he shakes his head, and abruptly looks away, clearly giving the message that he doesn't want to talk about it. "Don't worry about it, panda."

"Stupid fat bears," I say, punching the pillow next to me.

"You're not stupid and you're not fat, we've been over this. Pandas are cute. Have you ever heard the panda story?" He asks curiously

"It makes me cry, so if you tell it, I'll have to punch you in the face," I say, smiling back at him.

"Deal," he says as he swallows some more water.

I look at his lips and immediately feel dizzy as I remember the kiss under the waterfall. It was kind of romantic minus all that ex-wife and cheating talk. I sigh and flip on the TV.

"No," Preston says, pulling the remote from my hands. "It's basically a punishable crime to watch any sort of television in Hawaii." Preston turns the TV off.

“Fine, what’s your idea?” I say, feeling a little exhausted.

“Midnight swim, of course,” he says, jumping off the sofa and running toward his room.

I slowly get up and change into a different suit before following him out to the pool. It’s kind of nice. We’re the only two in the pool. Well, us and two old people who, I fear, might have strokes if they keep kissing like that.

“Gross,” Preston says as we swim past them.

“Come on, it’s kind of cute.” I smile sheepishly as I stare at them. I mean, it’s a little gross they are all over each other, but how great is that? They still have that little spark.”

“Oh, I think it’s great. It’s the public display of affection I don’t like. Get a room!” he yells before I laugh and shush him into the corner of the pool where you enter the hot tub.

I punch him in the arm and wade into the boiling water. The only time you can get into these things in Hawaii is when it’s night time, and even then it’s sometimes a little sketchy.

I sit down on the nearest step and let out a relaxing sigh, That is, until I see something dark in the corner of my vision. Preston notices my panic as his eyes widen in realization as to what the object is.

“Amanda, don’t freak out. It’s okay just don’t freak out.” He’s leaning toward me slowly with a look on his face that I can only describe as pure terror. Oh my gosh, this is it. It has to be some sort of wild animal. It’s probably going to start gnawing on my neck any minute. Perfect. Well, at least I’ll die in Hawaii. So long, perfect world. I close my eyes as he quickly grabs the object and tosses it into the bushes. As soon as it’s gone, I jump into his arms shaking.

“What was that?” I ask in near hysterics.

“A leaf,” he answers, smiling.

I look at him expecting him to say, “haha I’m kidding”, when he just returns my stare with a blank one of his own. “Then why did you panic and get all big with your eyes?” I’m

now pointing at his eyes and making giant movements with my hands.

“I thought it would be funny to see your reaction, then I felt bad because I could feel your heart beating through the water. I nearly thought it was going to stop. Sorry about that.” He laughs, still holding onto me tightly.

“Let go.” I pout, struggling to let myself go free.

“No,” he says, holding me tighter.

“I don’t like you,” I say, looking away from him like a small child.

“Oh, come on, Amanda. We both know you’re a terrible liar,” he says as he leans down toward my face. “Marry me.”

I roll my eyes. “I think you should stop trying to kiss me. It sends me mixed signals,” I say breathily as his lips barely touch mine. “You should probably stop proposing marriage, too. It’s getting weird.”

He lets me down and sits across from me in the hot tub. “There, is that better?” He lifts an eyebrow in question. “Tell me, Amanda, why do you think I’m sending you mixed signals?” He doesn’t wait for my answer, instead, he keeps talking, “I feel like I’ve been more than upfront about my intentions to marry you. Have I not? Just say yes.” His tone sounds teasing but I can’t be sure, not when his eyes are piercing through me like they are at this moment.

“Please, it’s a smoke screen.” I say, challenging him. His look is altogether too cute. I know I’m going to regret this later, but what happens in Hawaii stays in Hawaii, right? Or wait, that’s Vegas. Still, I find myself saying, “Sure, I’ll marry you, happy now?”

“Yes.” He beams. “Speaking of desert,” he begins totally confusing me with his inability to stay on subject. “How about you and I have some ice cream out here in the hot tub? You know, to celebrate our upcoming nuptials?”

“Deal.” What can I say, I’m a sucker for junk food. “I’ll go back to the room and get the ice cream if you—“

“—get the chocolate sauce,” he finishes, winking.

I don't know why, but I get embarrassed at this remark. Geez it's not like it's going on me instead of the ice cream. The ice cream, Amanda, I yell at myself in my head. “Um sure, yeah, good idea,” I say, blushing.

Chapter Fifteen

I grab my towel and run back to the room. I begin searching for the ice cream in the freezer when I hear an odd buzzing noise, similar to the one on the boardwalk earlier. I turn to face the counter and see Preston's cell phone. It continues to buzz awhile longer before stopping. I shrug and grab the ice cream and a fresh towel. Then the buzzing starts again.

And okay, I know it's none of my business, but maybe it's important. Like someone is actually hurt or something. I mean, he is a fireman.

Right? And wouldn't it be so cool if I'm the one who discovers what's going on back home and then helps him solve it. It would be like we were saving people together. I mean, what if he would have never known had I not brought him his cell phone at this precise moment. I mean, lives are hanging in the balance here!

Okay, I've convinced myself. I put the ice cream carton down on the counter and carefully picked up his cell phone.

Wow, two missed calls and twelve missed text messages. This guy doesn't kid around with technology. I pick it up to stuff it in my pocket when it goes off again. Why is Bobby calling him? Well, actually, I guess it makes sense; they do work together. The phone goes off again as I near the pool.

Okay, maybe it wouldn't hurt if I just look at a few texts. I mean, how is he gonna know anyway? I can always delete them, or actually, I can see them if I just look at the heading.

I step into the shadow and take out the phone that's burning a hole in my pocket. I don't do well with secrecy, this much is obvious. I click on the last text. It says, "Congrats, you win!" Oh yay. Maybe he won a whole bunch of money or something! I get to be the first to say congrats! How exciting!

I click on the next text. It's from Bobby, just like the first one. "Time is up."

What? What does that mean? The next few texts had similar cryptic messages. "Did you do it? You have one more day. Ashlyn says hi. I'll back out if you back off. You always were a sucker for a challenge."

And then the one text to ruin them all. "Deal, if you can get her to fall for you, not only will I back off with Ashlyn, I'll move departments. You have five days. If you lose, well, you've been losing this whole time. It won't be any different for you."

I quickly check his outbox, please tell me this is all some huge joke and he's talking about someone else. The text to Bobby from Preston read, "It's done, now leave my wife alone."

I feel numb as I walk back to the hot tub.

"Wow, seriously, Amanda, did you make the ice cream?" Preston asks as I sit on a nearby chair.

"Here," I say, my voice thick with emotion as I hand him his phone.

He takes it from my hands and looks down at all the missed messages.

I left my favorite one open for him to read.

"Amanda!" He says as he quickly gets out of the water, but I'm already running back to the room. You better believe I'm taking the ice cream with me.

I slam my bedroom door in Preston's face as I lean against it and dig into the soggy ice cream.

"Amanda, seriously, it's not what you think. Actually, I don't even know what you're thinking right now. Just talk to me."

"No!" I yell, my mouth full of ice cream.

I hear Preston get on the phone, hoping he's calling the airline so he'll leave my presence. I mean come on, playing

me just to prove to my ex-boyfriend that he could “get me” and all so he could get his wife back? Who does that? How childish is it to make a bet that you can get a girl to date you or agree to marry you? And why do I have to be that girl?

“Just talk some sense into her!” I hear him yell, and then everything goes quiet. “Man, I’m so sorry, okay yeah, we’ll be waiting.”

“Amanda,” he calls me again. “It’s Brad and Kristin. Their parents got in a car accident, the kids were with them. Everyone’s okay, but they need to fly back tonight.”

“I’m going,” I say as tears stream down my face. I still haven’t gotten up enough nerve to open the door.

“You can’t.”

“Why?” I ask angrily.

“Because there are only two seats left on the plane. We can’t leave for two more days. They, however, are getting out tonight.” His voice sounds raspy as if he’s just as upset as I am. But what does he have to be upset about?

I hear a knock on the main door and bolt out of my room and into Kristin’s arms. She thinks I’m crying because of the accident, when actually my tears are selfishly more for myself. But I can’t tell her that now, not when her whole family is in the hospital, even if they are okay.

“We just wanted to drop by and say we love you guys.” Kristin says, her eyes watery. “We’ll see you back in Boise, okay?”

I nod my head and tell her I’ll be praying for her while the boys talk about the condition of the kids. Everyone seems to be doing okay just a little shaken. Apparently the roads had black ice. They’re just lucky the car didn’t roll.

I say goodbye then tearfully lay on the couch with my ice cream.

“Give me that,” Preston says trying to pry it away from my cold hands.

“Mine,” I say, using my death grip on the box.

“Easy,” he says, backing away. He grabs his phone and throws it against the fluffy chair before sitting down in a huff. “Can you at least let me explain?”

“Explain what?” I say, mouth full of ice cream. “That you made a bet that I would marry you in five days and if you win that you’d be free to pursue your ex-wife again in the comfort of your own firehouse without having Bobby breathing down your neck. He’s the best friend, isn’t he?”

Preston doesn’t say anything, and for some reason I can’t help myself.

I just keep talking, “Furthermore, I think it’s totally offensive that you would assume I’m that easy of a girl to get. I mean, seriously. I only said yes to you because you kept asking. And so what if I think about wearing a pretty wedding dress sometimes when I look at you. I mean, that’s completely normal.”

And even though that little red warning light is flashing in my head, I continue to speak. “I mean, yeah, you’re attractive and funny and a good Christian guy. You’re probably too normal for me. But honestly, if you have to use a bet to get your ex-wife to pay attention to you again, I feel sorry for you. Sorry for you!” I yell the last words even though my voice is already loud. “She’s an idiot if she thinks Bobby is better than you. An absolute idiot and if she was here I’d...I don’t know, punch her in the face.”

Preston is now smiling so big that I think his face is going to explode, which just fans my flame hotter. “And you know what? I don’t care that you want to build me a castle and that you’re the only guy I’ve ever told that story to, It doesn’t matter, because when I get home, I’m cutting you out of my life. I’m never falling for an attractive man again, they can’t be trusted they’re too slippery, they are.” Another tear escapes my face as I get up off the couch and point my finger at him. “Guess you win.”

I run into my room and lock the door. I’ve never been one to cry myself to sleep, but tonight I can’t seem to help it.

Because if I'm being totally honest with myself I have to admit I love him. And he doesn't love me back.

I wake up the following morning with yet another headache. Seems to be some sort of trend when I hang around Preston. I open my bedroom door to see fresh eggs, bacon, and sausage on a plate. I look up to meet Preston's face and notice he has something in his hands.

"What's that?" I ask annoyed.

"A stuffed pig," he answers nonchalantly, as if it's totally normal for grown men to carry around stuffed farm creatures.

"Cute," I say, grabbing the plate and wandering outside to the patio.

It's a humid day. It makes my head hurt even more. I take a bite of the eggs and feel Preston's presence behind me. I turn to look at him, not even caring how ugly I must look with my eyes all puffy and swollen, and notice the pig he's carrying has paper wings glued onto it.

"Clever," I say pointing to the pig.

"I thought so," he says handing me two aspirin and a coffee. I hate him for knowing me so well. It makes everything that much harder. Why are all the perfect men total jerks? I want to yell at the injustice of it all. I look down and see Mrs. Butterworth is dressed up, too. Only she's in what I can only describe as a cat bikini.

"What have you done to Mrs. Butterworth?" I gasp, picking her up from the ground. It's a teeny weenie yellow polka dot bikini, and she looks anything but pleased.

Preston shrugs. "I thought it would make you laugh."

I have to admit, it's actually priceless. Not that I'm ready to be on speaking terms with him, even though I guess, technically, I'm speaking. But I am asking questions, so it's totally different.

"So, we're leaving tomorrow?" I ask coldly.

“Nope. I changed our plane tickets. We’re here through the weekend.”

I could kill him right now. I seriously want to throw my cat at him. Forget everything I’ve said.

“What?” I feel panic rise up in my chest. “But Kristin and Brad and the kids...” My voice trails off.

“I talked with them this morning,” he says. “Everything’s fine. Plus, we might as well enjoy our vacation together, wife.”

I look at him with disgust in my eyes. “I’m not your wife.”

“Actually,” he says, pulling out a piece of paper I’ve never seen before. “It says here you will be in about three days.”

I look at the piece of paper and shrug. “You have no witnesses, and I’ll say no even if it’s a special license. And I still want to poke your eyes out with my fork. Are we done here?” I get up, but he catches my wrist.

“Do you ever stop talking enough to let people explain things to you? Or do you just assume you know everything?” He says rather hotly.

“I don’t assume. I know. Plus, words don’t lie,” I say, jerking my hand away.

I hear Preston laugh from outside. “No they don’t, Amanda. No they don’t.”

I throw my dishes in the sink and scowl when I notice I chipped one. Well, at least I can blame my rage on Preston. Of all the egotistical things... I want to jam my sausage up his nose. But at this point I’d have to get too close to him to pull it off, and I’m not quite sure I can control myself just yet in his presence.

I lean around the corner to see what he’s doing. He’s on his phone. Again. It’s like he’s rubbing it in front of my face. And now he’s laughing? I see his smile deepen as he chuckles then looks at his watch. Okay, wait. Now he’s writing

something down. I lean a little bit further over, then accidentally knock one of the Hawaiian pots off the table, shattering it on the floor.

I look up guiltily to see Preston staring at me with knowing eyes as if to say, “I know you’re spying on me and I think it’s hilarious”.

I can’t be blamed for what I do next. I grab my shoe off the floor and fling it at his face. He ducks just in time for my shoe to hit an old man walking toward the pool.

“Domestic dispute,” he huffs as he walks by not even picking up my shoe.

“Is that all, Amanda, or do you want to throw the other shoe too? It’s okay. This time I won’t move. You can hit me straight in the face. Although, later tonight you’re going to be begging me to kiss you, so it’s your move.”

You can guess what I did next.

The rubber part of the sole hit him straight in the eye, causing a purplish bruise to appear by lunch time. And okay, I know he said he wouldn’t move, but how was I to know he was actually being serious? I mean, come on! Who doesn’t move when flying objects come at your head?

His constant rubbing of his eye doesn’t make me feel any better either, but I’m pretty sure he’s just doing it to make me feel bad, which I won’t. Because he’s a cheating dirt bag and Grandma Ned is rolling in her grave as I contemplate worse words I could call him. I’m sure she’s begging God to be able to come back down, just so she can be the one to put soap in my mouth. I feel guilty enough for thinking it. Okay, Grandma Ned. For the love of all that’s holy, I’m yelling in my head at my dead grandma. I have issues.

“Amanda?” Preston asks as I glare at him through my sunglasses. I know, how brave of me.

“Yes?”

“Can you hand me that ice pack again? My head is throbbing.” He points to the ice pack, and I throw it at him aiming for the head. He winces as he catches it and ducks at

the same time. Poor guy's never going to be the same after meeting me. At least he'll have the bruises on the outside and the scars on the inside to remember me by.

"Shouldn't you be on the phone with Ashlyn?" I ask, peeved.

"That would be weird," he answers vaguely.

"What, because she doesn't know you're in Hawaii?" I look at him, and he just gives me this blank stare. "You cheater! She doesn't even know where you are? How could you leave her in Bobby's womanizing clutches? If he stole her from you in the first place and is threatening to do it again right now, you better be wooing her. Although, if we're being honest with each other—and I think we can be, considering I want to kill you right now—you aren't so good at the wooing," I say seriously. Wow. It's so easy not to worry about his hotness when I'm only thinking of doing violent things to him. It's not like I'm ever going to see him again after these next two days.

"And honestly," I begin again, taking off my sunglasses. "If I were her, I'd be so mad at you, it would be hard for me to take you back. Plus, who makes bets anymore? That's so high school melodramatic teen soap opera...-ish." I end my lament with a shoulder shrug.

"Your talking is giving me a headache," he replies, putting his ice pack over his swollen eye.

"Maybe you should duck next time, or maybe you should be honest, or maybe not cheat. Need I go on?" I drone sarcastically, turning away from him.

Preston begins to laugh, and I shoot him a stop-laughing-or-I'll-kill-you glare, and then retreats back into his chair. At least we're getting good tans today.

"You know what?" I say again. Okay, I know I should stop talking, but let's be honest; I'm kind of on a roll. "I'm not even attracted to you anymore. And you know why?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll tell me," he says sarcastically.

I give him an icy glare.

“Sorry. Yes, Amanda. Please. I want to know. I’m dying to know,” he begs with more enthusiasm this time.

“Because,” I say. “You’re just like everyone else. I can’t believe I fell for the witty banter and tan abs. I mean, I should have noticed just by the way you dress you have nothing going on in the heart department. But no, I wasn’t smart. I even told myself not to be drawn like a moth to the flame, but what do I do? I just fall anyways. I fall into the Mr. December trap just like everyone else. I can’t believe I bought a calendar.” And then I stop talking, hoping that in my ranting and raving he hadn’t caught the last part. Except by the look on his face, I can tell that he very much has.

“The calendar, huh?” He raises an eyebrow. “Well, well, my how the tables have turned. You bought a calendar, did you?” he says leaning toward my face.

“It was for charity,” I say.

“For your own personal charity,” he snaps back.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I yell.

“It wasn’t for charity, Amanda. Admit it.”

“No.”

“Amanda?” His voice is now low, making me dizzy. I hate it when he gets this close to me; it makes it hard for me to think straight.

“I won’t admit anything to you. I’m a grown woman, free to do as I please. Call Ashlyn and leave me alone.”

“Fine,” he says tightly. He pulls out his phone. “Put Ashlyn on. Don’t ask questions, just do it.”

I hear a long pause, then Preston talks in the most patronizing voice I have ever heard. “Hey, baby! How are you doing, little thing? Did you miss your daddy this week? Did you? Oh that’s a good girl, yeah!”

I think I’m going to be sick. I’m staring at him wide-eyed like he’s just swallowed a child whole. Is he really talking to his ex-wife like that? No wonder she left him. Wow,

no question about it. His elevator doesn't go all the way up, if he thinks that's the way to a woman's heart.

"Did you go out and play today?" He asks in the same high-pitched voice. "Oh fun! Is Uncle Bobby being good to you?"

I look at him and pale. He left her with Bobby? What is wrong with him? I snatch the phone from him and hear nothing but panting on the other end. "Gross!" I yell and throw his phone back at his chest.

"Thanks, B.J. I'll have to get back to you. My wife is acting crazy right now."

I shake my head in disgust.

"First off, I think you're the crazy one, talking to your wife like that. I mean, she's not a dog, for crying out loud. And second, have you lost your mind? You can't leave your wife with Bobby. And you can't put her down in front of him. Do you know nothing?" I'm beyond my realm of control, so the last words come out more like a scream. I mean, seriously. Are all men this stupid?

"Wow, you sure sound like you know what you're talking about," he says, folding his arms.

"I want to cut off your arms and beat you with them," I say a little too enthusiastically. He throws a glare my way. "So what's the plan for the rest of the day?" I ask feeling suddenly ravenous.

Preston gets up and folds his towel. "I was planning on grabbing some lunch, but I don't know if I'm good enough company for you, what with my lack of brain cells and relationship know-how." He shoots me a grin.

I roll my eyes in annoyance. "Fine. Where to?" I ask, gathering my things.

"Hard Rock Café," he states without looking back.

"But," I look around feeling suddenly whiny. "Isn't that all the way back towards the airport?"

“I’ll buy you a peppermint mocha,” he coaxes, turning around to face me.

“Deal.”

“You’re too easy,” he replies.

“That’s my problem,” I say wistfully, watching as he puts on his t-shirt and leads the way.

Chapter Sixteen

I shower as quickly as possible, then put on a cute sundress before presenting myself to the world. Or in this case, Mrs. Butterworth. It's depressing when you have nobody to show off to or to lust after. Well, not really lust. I guess in Preston's case it's extreme, like maybe even possibly love, but that's over with. I need to move on.

Mrs. Butterworth, still in her cat bikini, offers a quiet meow before I exit my room to look for Preston. He has on torn jeans and a white t-shirt. It makes my mouth water, but then again, I'm hungry. Yes, that must be it. I'm hungry. Ha ha. I laugh nervously to myself, and he leads me out. I mean, how terrible of a person must I be to be looking at Preston like he's still available? He used me to get his ex-wife back. Although, he never did admit it, now that I think about it. He hasn't admitted to anything. I must remind myself to stop talking from time to time; maybe he has some light to shed on the situation.

"So, I hope you don't mind," he says, interrupting my thoughts. "But I need to pick someone up from the airport tonight." He grabs my hand, and I try to pull away, but I'm helpless against his strength. He opens the door to the rental and smiles as I scowl at him then enter.

"You're in a fun mood tonight, aren't you?" he comments as he pulls out of the parking lot.

"I'm sorry, were you talking to me? It's hard to tell, considering you didn't use your special voice reserved for ex-wives and small woodland creatures," I retort.

"Have I ever told you how much fun you are? Because, I mean, hands down...best trip of my life." Preston smiles and leans over to turn off the music blaring in the background. "Are you going to at least let me explain to you, or are you going to assume you know everything?"

“I do know everything,” I say, nose in the air.

“Good to know,” he says. We drive the rest of the way to the restaurant in complete silence.

I’m sure to anyone, on the outside, we look like the perfect couple. When on the inside, I feel like I’m dying. How I wish this could be a real date. I mean, we’re in the most romantic place in the world, and here we are fighting.

“Can we just...” I shake my head in frustration and throw my hands up. “...pretend like everything’s normal before I think of more ways to kill you?”

“Your wish is my command.” Preston winks and reaches across the table to grab my hand. And in that moment, I close my eyes, willing myself to capture the memory of what it feels like to have his strong hands wrapped around mine.

“Good afternoon, welcome to Hard Rock Café Maui.” Our waiter is a balding man in his forties who looks like he’s surfed the wave a little too long, if you know what I mean. “And let me be the first to congratulate both of you on your engagement.”

I choke on my water as I stare at the insane man in front of me.

“I’m sorry,” I say leaning in. “What did you say?”

“Well, your engagement to this fine young fellow.” He points at Preston.

Preston looks at me so innocently I almost believe the act, except part of his mouth twists up into a mischievous smile, proving to me once and for all that he’s the guilty slime bag I imagine him to be.

“We aren’t...” I begin to talk but my mouth feels like it’s full of cotton. Is it hot in here? Because suddenly my body is reacting as if it’s been set on fire.

Preston puts his hands over mine and shushes me with his finger. “It’s okay, darling. Let’s let the poor waiter read us the specials.” He looks toward the waiter, and then elbows him

and whispers, “Foreign. She gets nervous in public places here in America.”

The waiter nods at me sympathetically before leaning down and, rather loudly might I add, reading the specials in my ear.

Horrified, I look at Preston, who can’t hold back the smile creeping across his lips now. I mean, come on! He said *foreign*, not *deaf*.

I decide to go along with it and nod my head as if to say, “Wow. How kind of you to read that in my native tongue”. Oh, wait a second. He didn’t, because it was still English, just loud English. Hello! Foreign people don’t have different hearing decibels.

“So,” I sigh, looking at a totally joyful Preston. “What country am I from?” I ask, rolling my eyes. I’ll so regret this.

“Yes!” he says, doing a small fist pump in the air. “Spain?” he asks.

“No, my skins not dark enough. Try again.”

“Morocco?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Oooo, fun. Yes, let’s do Morocco!” I clap my hands in excitement, then remember how angry I still am at Preston. Well, maybe one day we can be friends. A very long time from now. “I’m still mad at you,” I remind him, hoping he understands his little joke doesn’t make everything better.

“Of course you are, but do you know why you’re mad at me? Because I’m betting the reason you’re mad isn’t a reason at all.” He puts his menu down as if to challenge me.

“Well, I don’t see how I could be getting any of my assumptions wrong. Plus, like I said before, words don’t lie.”

“And what about intentions?” he asks.

“Are you ready to order?” The waiter bounces in front of us out of nowhere, causing me to spill my water all over the place. “It’s okay,” he shouts, looking at me sadly. “I’ll clean this up..”

People are now staring at us wondering why in the heck our waiter is speaking so loud. I want to smile and wave and tell everyone it's just a big joke, but instead I duck my head and cover my face with my hands.

The waiter bounces in front of us, and yes, I mean he actually does bounce from side to side, as if there is some sort of music we don't know about playing in the background. Poor guy. He then brings us coconut shrimp with dipping sauce. At one point, I contemplate stuffing everything in my mouth just so Preston can't have any. But I realize he'd probably just order more, and then I'd look like a glutton. And he'd make up some lame excuse to the waiter about how in our country we eat our food all at once. Then the waiter would throw me another sympathetic glance, while speaking rather loudly to Preston about how it won't do my figure any favors. Thanks, bud. Got it.

My mouth is full, but I don't care about being attractive right now. "So, who are we picking up?" I look down at the greasy mess and sigh. I better start running a few extra miles when I get home. I take a sip of water.

"Ashlyn." Preston says, but I don't hear him. I'm busy drinking my water so fast, I'm sure my stomach will explode, thinking it'll somehow kill the burning sensation in my chest.

"I'm sorry. I thought I heard you say Ashlyn." I choke.

"I did." He smirks.

I shoot him a look which can only be described as hazardous to his health, while he beams at me as if I just confessed my love.

"Um, I'm sorry, but did you ever stop to think how awkward that might be for me? Or how hurtful?" I'm ready to get up and leave, but he pulls me back into my seat.

"Do me a favor?" He's now looking at me with those smoldering green eyes. I hate him for it.

"What?" I groan.

"Don't make any rash decisions until after the airport. I give you full permission to beat me to death if you're unhappy.

Wait, actually, I take that back. I give you permission to beat me if, in fact, your assumptions are correct.” He tilts his head to the side and asks, “Deal?”

“Deal,” I say softly, taking another shrimp. I mean, I might as well eat my fill, if he’s going to sit there and tell me he’s flying his ex-wife to Hawaii. And why couldn’t he have let me go? I would have been much happier on a plane right now, even if I was alone.

Oh, and I’m sure the flight attendant, whatever country she’s from, would walk up to me and be like, “Why you cry?” To which I would reply, “Because the man I love doesn’t love me back.” And then she would say, “Oh, so sad,” and walk away, but not before telling everyone in first class how sad my situation is and not to bother me... Wow. Some great things to look forward to on the way home.

We finish dinner and dessert and a long walk before going to the airport. And I would bore you with the details, except the fact that my blood is boiling so much during said time I can’t even recall what we talked about, or if we even talked. I guess you could call it being lost in thought or lost in anger. I think I like the second one better.

Anyway, we get to the airport, and guess what? The flight is delayed.

Okay, I can’t lie. I ate way too many shrimp, and those little buggers are freakishly rich and making my stomach do this heave-ho type thing with every breath I take. I’m *sure* Preston can hear it. I mean, seriously. If he isn’t running for the trees already this would solidify it for me.

“You okay?” He asks as he gently puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Fine,” I reply, trying to keep the food in my stomach. I need the pink stuff bad.

“Are you sure? Because you don’t look too well. I’m sorry we’re stuck here for another hour or so. Do you think you’ll make it?” He looks genuinely concerned, which would

normally touch me, if I wasn't ready to blow half-digested shrimp all over his face.

If I don't stop burping up the sweet sauce from the coconut, I'm going to lose my mind. "I think I just need to go to the restroom."

"To throw up?" Preston asks smiling kindly. Why does he have to be so nice sometimes?

"Yes," I groan weakly, and honestly, I feel like I am going to pass out any minute.

"I have an idea," he says.

"Oh my gosh. Please, no more ideas. No more Angelina or Morocco or..." I can't finish my sentence.

"No, nothing like that," he says and within moments he's slowly walking me to the single family bathroom and opening the door.

I try to protest, but I feel too sick to open my mouth. He did this to me! He should know I tend to overeat when I'm nervous, or that I eat when I don't have nice things to say to people.

"You know, Amanda, you shouldn't eat to get back at me. It's mean to your body." He shakes his head, but I don't care if he's kidding around at this point. I just need to get rid of the excess rich food.

"Okay, so I'll hold your hair," he offers.

"You'll do no such thing!" I'm completely mortified.

"Yes, I will. I don't want old shrimp on your cute dress, or on your pretty face, or in your hair, okay?" He's being difficult, and I don't have time to argue, so I just nod my head and heave. Yeah, there it is. Everything I just ate at the restaurant makes its encore appearance in the shiny toilet.

The weird part is, he doesn't even say anything. He isn't mocking me, he isn't laughing, and he isn't even getting grossed out. Maybe it's a fireman thing? I don't know, but I do know one thing, and that is I'm ridiculously embarrassed right now. I just threw up shrimp in front of the hottest guy I know,

even if he's unavailable and a cheater. He's still good looking, and, well okay, I'll admit, deep down he's a good guy. I can't blame him for wanting his wife back or vice versa. I mean, I'd want him back if I was her.

I finish up and wash my tan face before finally working up enough guts (sorry, poor choice of words) to make eye contact. I look up to see Preston digging through his pockets. What in the world is he doing?

He pulls out two breath mints, one of those disposable toothbrushes, and some chap stick. And then I cry. I know, I know. I'm pathetic. But I'm just one of those girls who, once she doesn't feel well, ends up crying, holding her teddy bear and calling her mom to ask her to please drive four hours to take care of her baby. I mean, it's not that I'm not independent, I just hate not feeling well. And here's Preston in the bathroom with me, offering ways to make me feel better. Not only that, but he doesn't seem the least bit affected the way I just got rid of all of my lunch/dinner in the same room we're still standing in.

He kisses me, yes, *kisses* me on the forehead, before leaving. I sigh and cry to myself as I lean over the porcelain counter top. How did this happen? How did I fall in love with the most wonderful guy on the planet just to find out I can't have him? Where's the justice in this, God? I wait, but don't get an answer. Maybe my feelings will dissipate, and one day Preston will be like the brother I've never had.

I meditate on this for a while and shake my head. No way can I ever look at that man and think *brother*. Not even if he was was a terrible kisser, which he isn't. The man has a mouth on him, let me tell you. His kiss could get a girl pregnant. And I can't see that perfect smile and tight body and imagine, *Oh look, how nice. Preston and his wife are now having kids. and I'm still single.* Nope, not going to happen. Dang, I'm going to have to move. Or switch churches. I groan before trying to fix the mess I'm in the mirror.

Chapter Seventeen

I walk outside to sit, only to find Preston already sitting there reading *US Weekly*. Yeah, right. Like he just *happened* to pick it up from the seat?

“I got this for you,” he offers me the magazine and some 7-up.

“I thought your stomach might be upset. Hey, did you know it says here that Brad and Angelina are cooperating with the Maui authorities to try to find their impersonators? Apparently they’ve been on some sort of tour for World Hunger this whole week.” He shrugs as if it’s no big deal, but I snatch the magazine from his hands.

I begin searching the table of contents frantically until I hear laughing next to me. “You’re kidding, aren’t you?” I say in a panicked voice.

“Oh yeah.” He peeks around the magazine. “You should have seen your face though. Priceless.”

I roll my eyes and try to hide my smile as I look through the magazine.

“Is that a smile I see on that pretty face?” he says, leaning in.

Why is he torturing me?

“No,” I fight to hide my smile and turn away from his tempting face

“Oh good. I wouldn’t want you being happy or anything.” He pats my leg and then looks at his watch. “Time to go to the gate.”

I follow him numbly. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for. This is where I finally see who this mystery woman is. This is....wait a second...

“Hey, Bobby! Over here!”

I look to see who Preston is talking to and see a kid—well, okay, he’s probably around nineteen, a young — approaching us with some sort of crate. “Hey, brother. Long time no see.” They do some sort of ritualistic high five before looking at me.

“Amanda, I’d like you to meet Bobby, or BJ for short.”

BJ holds out his hand, and I take it. This isn’t the Bobby from my past. This is an entirely different person, and that means the text messages could have been from this Bobby.” I immediately feel sick again.

BJ looks back to Preston. “Sorry, dude, when you called to talk to Ashlyn, I was in the process of getting patted down by some foreign guy in the airport. Get this; he made me take off my shirt? Who does that?”

“Ah, so you’ve met Jorge,” I interrupt.

“Yeah! That was his name. Hey, how’d you know?” BJ asks.

“Oh, lucky guess.” I shrug.

Preston looks at me and smiles, then says, “Amanda, meet Ashlyn.” He opens up the crate and pulls out the tiniest, and honestly, the cutest little lab I’ve ever seen in my entire life. She’s chocolate with deep brown eyes. I nearly squeal from joy at the size of this little thing’s paw—wait.

“Ashlyn?” I swallow hard.

“Ashlyn,” he repeats positively pleased with himself.

“Ashlyn, as in, Ashlyn is a dog?” I gasp. “As in, your ex-wife is a dog?” I ask, confused and half hoping it’s true. Then I won’t look stupid.

“No. Ashlyn, as in, Ashlyn the firehouse dog I’ve been taking care of the past few months,” he says, lifting an eyebrow.

“But I thought your wife was named Ashlyn!” I blurt, because I’m panicking.

“Where would you get that idea?”

“Yeah,” BJ interrupt. “Her name is Sara, and she doesn’t even live around here anymore. Seriously, dude, if she was still dating Bobby, I’d bring physical harm to that dude. Ugh. They deserve each other.”

I’m listening to the conversation, but at the same time, I feel rather faint. This means the texts from Bobby were really from BJ, and Ashlyn was the puppy, and...oh wait, this also means the bet had to do with something else entirely.

“You bet you’d marry me so you could get a dog?” I shriek as my fists tighten.

“Um, no,” BJ interrupts again. “Actually, he bet he could marry you, so he could give you the dog as a present. Because, apparently, he thinks your cat, Mrs. Butterworth, is it?”

I nod.

“Yeah, your cat is like clinically depressed or something, because it has no hair. Which, if you ask me, is just weird. Anyway Preston here has been my mentor at the firehouse, and he gets annoyed with how many times I call him and make mistakes with the dog and with...other things. So, I told him that if he could get a girl as hot as you, I’d not only transfer to a different firehouse, but let him keep the dog. And well, he won. Because look at you. You look like you’re crazy in love, or maybe just crazy. I can’t tell. I blame my inability to commit.”

He finishes his little rant, and I take a seat at the gate. Oh. My. Gosh.

I’m going to kill Preston. I’m going to tell Mrs. Butterworth and Ashlyn to scratch his eyes out and feed them to the turtles in the pond by our hotel. I can’t help but smile evilly as I fantasize about my revenge and look toward Preston, whose starting to look a little worried.

“Don’t.” He holds up his finger, and then he takes off running.

I jump up and chase him around the airport screaming, “I’m going to kill you!”

I notice that he starts to sprint. Smart man. I mean, I’m fast and he knows it. I try to catch up to him but have to stop suddenly when he jerks someone else’s luggage between us to hinder my progress.

“Now, Amanda,” he says, holding his hands out in front of him. “Let’s try and be reasonable. You never gave me a chance to explain. You just ran your mouth over and over again about what you thought was going on and never once asked me about it.” His hands were still out in front of him. I gave him a polite smile before grabbing my purse and smacking him over the head with it.

“Um, guys,” BJ says, catching up to us. “Sorry to interrupt this bonding moment, but I gotta get on the next flight.”

“Wait,” I say, turning to him. “What do you mean, you’re getting on the next flight?”

“Well,” he says, handing the crate over to Preston. “My parents own some property in Kona. And since they wouldn’t let the dog travel alone, it was either go visit them or fly directly back to Boise, so...” He shakes my hand forcefully. “It was a pleasure meeting you, and I’m sure I’ll see a lot more of you now that you and Preston are getting married.”

I hear Preston snicker behind me before I give him another warning lunge with my bag. He backs off slowly and walks around to give BJ a high five.

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.” Preston winks.

“Actually,” BJ says. “It was totally worth it, seeing her chase you with her purse like that. Just wait until I tell the guys. We’ll see ya!” He waves and walks off, while I turn to glare at Preston again.

“Anything you wanna ask me,” he says, and then it hits me. All the shrimp, the throwing up, the talking incessantly about how hot he is to his face, the blaming, the embarrassment... I look at him and my eyes widen in

astonishment over all of the things I've said in his presence over the past day.

"Oh, so it's hitting you, is it?" He grabs my arm.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lie through my teeth.

"Well, let me refresh your memory. My hotness, my awesomeness, you saying you're not attracted to me anymore, the shrimp incident...Need I go on?" He's beaming, and I'm ready to throw up again. That is, if I had anything in my stomach besides 7up.

Suddenly, I feel two hands grab my arms and a low voice say, "Come with us, please, ma'am."

I mean, honestly, I don't even look like Angelina right now. Oh my gosh. This is how my life is going to end. I'm going to get kidnapped in Maui!

Preston's face pales slightly as a man in a police uniform asks him the same. We're escorted to the side of the building to a door which reads *Security Office*. You. Have. Got. To. Be. Kidding.

"Ma'am," the man in the uniform asks me. "Do you realize it's a federal offense to make death threats in an international airport?" I look up at him and lock eyes on his nametag. Jorge. Seriously, what are the odds? And come on, it's not like I said bomb. I then proceed to explain just that to Jorge, who looks at me like I just confessed to having a bomb.

Chapter Eighteen

So, word to the wise, never say bomb. Ever. Not even as a slang word, because apparently, it's like a free ticket to jail. Which I found out the hard way, since I'm currently sitting behind the bars of a Maui airport holding cell, looking out and wondering if I'll ever, in fact, see freedom. I mean, seriously. They didn't go over what you could and couldn't say on the stupid safety video on the plane. Oh sure, they tell you what to do if the plane crashes. Gee, thanks. But if the plane does, by some miracle, manage to stay in the air, you better be careful to say only kind words to other people, or else...

The office door opens, and I hear footsteps coming down the hall toward my cell. I strain against the bars in an effort to see who it is, until Preston appears with the smuggest of all smug grins on his face. Naturally, he didn't get arrested. He was the one being threatened, and he had the foresight not to say bomb like I did. I mean, he's not a complete idiot. Which I'm just now realizing as I see he hasn't come to laugh at me, but to free me from my prison.

He shakes his head and stuffs his hands in his pockets as he walks up to the bars and chuckles. "How you get yourself in situations like this, I'll never understand."

"Wow. Stating the obvious. You shouldn't have."

"Ha ha! I love it when you get so sentimental. It warms my heart."

"I'll warm your heart," I sneer.

"I'm counting on it."

Okay, and now I'm blushing and looking away. Why is he torturing me?

"You know," he says. "It's only fair I keep you in here a little bit longer after all the hitting and threatening. Plus, you aren't so good at listening when you're busy chasing me."

The man had a point, not that I was admitting anything in my current position.

“So, I’ve decided on a compromise.”

“How kind of you, good sir,” I say in my British accent that sounds more like Australian.

“Give me five minutes, and then I’ll free you. You can either get on a plane and never see me again, or...If you like what you hear, you can stay a few more days with me before we go back to Boise.”

It didn’t sound too bad. I mean, I can listen for five minutes if it indicates freedom. All I truly want to do is break through these metal bars superman style, but I’m pretty sure any effort to escape is frowned upon in these cases. So I’ll resign myself to the only choice I actually have.

“Deal.” I sit by the nearest wall and cross my legs. The metal bench might have been a good way to escape, minus the fact it’s literally chained to the wall.

“Good,” he says, then he starts to pace in front of my cell. Wow. There’s a sentence I never thought I’d hear come out of my own mouth. Awesome.

“Clock’s ticking, buddy,” I say impatiently. Immediately I realize the irony and hope he didn’t catch it. No such luck.

“Oh, pardon me. Do you have somewhere you need to be?” he asks, mocking me.

“Fine, sorry,” I mutter.

“Even though you’ve insulted me gravely, tried to maim and sometimes kill me, I find that I’ve fallen for you.” He looks up to meet my eyes with an intense gaze of his own, which sends my heart fluttering like it did during our first kiss. “You’re aggravating, insulting, brave, hilarious, menacing, and well, a little insane.”

“Point taken.”

“But,” he says holding up his finger. “You’re adventurous, loving, outgoing, caring, and hilarious. I mean, you’re in jail and all, because you threatened to kill me for

lying to you. Talk about keeping a guy accountable. I think about the adventures we've had over the past four days, and I can't imagine having a normal day ever again as long as I know you."

I'm trying to decide if he's insulting me or complimenting me. Either way, the fluttering is back, and all I want to do is kiss him. I want to kiss him because nobody has ever made me so angry and so happy all at once. The feelings are intoxicating, choking out any previous desire to maim him.

"So..." He looks so adorable and innocent. "Angelina," he laughs. "What do you think?"

Darn, I thought for sure he was going to propose. But then again, it would be awkward telling all my church friends my future husband and I got engaged in a Maui prison. Then again those who know me well would just be like, "Oh right, okay. That makes sense."

"I think...I want to stay," I find myself saying, and I actually mean it. I want to stay and I want to be with him forever. Only he already knows I'm in love with him on account of my incessant blabbing earlier this week when I thought he was leaving me. Perfect. How romantic of me.

"Great!" he says, clapping his hands together. "I was hoping you'd say that."

Oh my gosh. He loves me so much. I could tell by the way he was hoping I'd stay. I mean, come on—

"It would have been super expensive to reschedule our plane tickets for today," he says, interrupting my thoughts.

"Wow, you're the epitome of romance," I snarl at him, not realizing I have no room to talk, considering I somehow got myself arrested. But let's review, it *really* wasn't my fault. Just saying.

"Amanda, you're going to have to improve your attitude if you want me to spring you from this place," he teases, motioning for the officer to unlock the doors.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry, are you threatening me?" I ask, smiling innocently on the outside but sweating on the inside.

You know, if that was like...possible.

“Pretty sure if I threaten you, I’ll somehow offend you again, leaving you no choice but to take it further. Because, let’s face it, that’s just what you do. And somehow I feel we would, yet again, find ourselves in a prison, or getting kicked off a plane, or out of the country,” he says, looking up as if that was inevitable if he chooses a life with me.

“Yeah, I get it,” I snap, cutting him off and sticking my tongue out at him again.

The guard shakes his head, then opens the gate. “I’m free, I’m free!” I yell throwing my hands into the air. The problem with flailing like that is I wasn’t totally aware of the close proximity of the guard. So, naturally, I knocked him square in the face. His nose only bled for like five seconds, but it’s enough for Preston to shoot me a pensive if-you-get-yourself-thrown-back-into-jail-I’m-not-getting-you-out glare. I apologize several times before Preston has to physically lift me off the floor and carry me out. Again, so romantic. I punch him while he’s carrying me, but it’s no use. The man is solid, and I’m a pesky little girl fighting her way through pounds of muscle.

“Oh, wow, did you tucker out already?” He teases as he puts me down on my feet.

“I’m not a child,” I say loudly enough for a little boy and his mom to stare, then walk away fast. The mother also had her hands over the kid’s eyes. Please, like I’m more indecent than TV.

I lift my hand in protest, getting ready to argue my point to the hovering mother, when Preston puts his hand over my mouth.

“No.”

“But,” I argue.

“No.”

“But,” I say again. I mean, come on, at least let me explain myself.

Instead, he gives me one of Kristin's famous glares. I roll my eyes and grab his hand. "Where are we off to? The hotel? The beach? Food? OOOO let's get food!" I yell rather loudly. Apparently being locked up in a prison makes you want to yell. I wonder if this is how people feel when they spend the night in jail, like their whole lives have a renewed purpose. Well, actually, I don't have any new visions of the future. I just find prison makes my stomach feel empty.

Preston, still staring at me, smiles widely before answering, "I think it's best we go to the hotel to get you cleaned up, and possibly have a late, late, late dinner, considering it's around nine already."

"Oh, wow. It is late. Weird. I thought I'd been in there a whole day," I say dramatically shaking my head.

"Please, Amanda. It was like ten minutes, and it was only that long because I had to explain to them exactly why you were making death threats toward me."

I nodded my head in understanding, but couldn't hold back the laughter.

"Most interesting vacation ever?" I ask meeting his green eyes in amusement.

"Definitely," he says, stopping in the middle of the street.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Kissing you."

Before I know it, he's pushing my hair behind my ear and leaning down to my lips. I close my eyes just as he gently touches them with his own, then wrap my hands around his neck. I'm just getting used to the way it feels when he pushes me away and continues walking. A sinking feeling develops in the pit of my stomach. I can't help it. I mean, most of the kisses we've shared had been in anger, frustration, or just plain passion. This was a good kiss, but it was our first *honest* kiss, and I feel like I somehow messed it up. We hold hands all the way back to the hut. I watch him pour me some POG juice and take a giant sip before slipping into my room to freshen up. I

come back from the bathroom and notice a note on my bed. *Meet me here.* It was the beach; he wanted me to meet him at the beach?

I start sweating as I realize what this could mean. He's either leaving me, proposing, or playing a trick on me? Which one is it? I quickly get ready then run down to the beach, forgetting my room card in the process. I skip down to where he's pointing and am stopped by Preston himself. He smiles and blindfolds me, then carries me—yes, *carries* me to the sand, and puts me on a blanket. Let's face it, he's romantic. I'm smiling so big, if there were bugs in the air, they'd be stuck in my teeth. I mean, I'm elated. I wait for him to take off my blindfold, but instead of taking it off, he leans in close. I can tell because I feel his breath on my face. My heart suddenly starts fluttering, as I feel his lips touch mine. Wait, how is this fair? I'm blindfolded. Well, actually it does kind of make sense. I mean, people close their eyes when they kiss. Then a thought hits me. What if I'm the freaky girl who opens her eyes when she kisses, and he can't stand it, so he had to blindfold me! Oh my gosh, that's why! I immediately panic, making my kissing worse, considering I can't catch my breath. Only he takes it as an invitation to kiss me harder, making me more nervous, and well, that's when I make some sort of whimpering noise as if he's biting me. He stops and laughs, then begins talking.

"I love you... so much. I want to be the one." He stops talking then takes my hands in his. His hands feel a little clammy like he's nervous. My stomach does somersaults while I wait for him to say more. "But—" He just said *but*. This is it. Is he already breaking up with me? I can't be that bad. I can change.

"I won't open my eyes anymore," I blurt out before thinking, and then silence.

I wait and wait some more before he asks, "What?"

I then proceed to explain to him my theory until I hear him rumbling with laughter. "So not where I was going with that, but good to know you have that particular insecurity," he answers, still laughing.

I'm most likely red, why can't I ever stop talking? Why must I even speak. It would have been better for me to be mute.

"You were saying..." I urge him along.

"I was saying," he says, taking my cue. "That I love you. I can't imagine not being with you, even if you are bordering on insanity most days."

"And those are the good days," I interrupt jokingly.

"Sadly, I know," he says laughing. "But I also want you to know I'd never ask for forever if I didn't do it the right way first, and since your dad is no longer here, I thought the only way to prove to you that I want to honor him first, was to do this."

He pulls off my blind fold. Directly in front of me is a sandcastle. I can tell he used buckets because you can still see their indentations on the castle tops, but it's perfect. He's perfect. I start to cry, and he pulls me into his arms.

"I think he would've liked me," Preston says, smiling, as I continue to cry. I nod my head in agreement, because the words won't come. "Anyway, I want to start a new tradition with you. We build sandcastles together now. Is that okay? I want to be the missing piece. Amanda,, I want you forever."

I look at him dumbstruck. The guy was basically proposing, and he built me a sandcastle! I know, for some girls it's a little cheesy, but for me...well, it's perfect. I don't even know how to respond. So in pure Amanda fashion, I tackle him, knocking him over in the process, and kiss him passionately with my wet tears. He answers my kisses with a few of his own before pulling me into a hug.

"Forever," I say shyly.

"Maybe," he answers smugly then laughs and tries to grab my hand. I glare at him as he starts to run away. I hold out my foot and see him trip while I suppress the snickering.. Aggravating man.

Chapter Nineteen

We walked back to the room hand in hand, me with a ridiculously huge grin on my face, and Preston with a smug grin of his own plastered all over his handsome face. All in all, it felt like a pretty great trip. I mean, we went to prison together, stole some celebrity identities...you know, the typical American vacation.

I was just getting ready to lean into him and ask for a hug when one of the hotel security guards approached us. "Sir," he nodded toward Preston. "Ma'am," he tipped his head toward me. Oh no. This is where we go to federal prison for impersonating celebrities.

"Do you happen to own a, um, hairless cat?" The man seemed amused by the description, making me want to punch him in the face, how dare he insult my cat!

"Yes," I say timidly, not wanting to jump to any conclusions.

"Well, ma'am, the cat somehow escaped out of your room and is now in one of the nearby coconut trees. We tried to get her down, but none of us know her name. And well, we figured she was yours, since you're the only guest we have who actually brought a pet from home to the Island. You see, we need to get the cat down, because it's scaring the guests."

"Scaring the guests?" I laugh. "How is that possible?"

The security guard shifts his feet and looks down while he answers, "Our cats have hair, ma'am."

"That's not even a good excuse!" I seethe, looking to Preston for help, but I don't know why I rely on him for anything right now. He seems like he's about to double over in fits of laughter.

"Fine," I say loudly. "He'll get her down." I point to Preston and smile. "Won't you, sweetie?"

Preston shoots daggers at me then smiles weakly at the security guard. “Where’d you say the cat was?”

The security guard points back up to our hut then to the tree next to it. Sure enough, there’s a small spotlight on Mrs. Butterworth. She must be so scared!

I run over to the tree while simultaneously tugging Preston’s shirt. “Can’t you just shimmy up there?” I plead.

“Shimmy?” He sounds doubtful. “You want me to shimmy up a coconut tree? How do you suggest I do that?”

I look at him and throw my hands in the air. “You’re a fireman! You’re supposed to be able to shimmy!” I know it’s a lame accusation, but Mrs. Butterworth is suffering.

“Didn’t know firemen shimmied, lady,” the security guard pipes in. I shot him a searing look. He steps away from me. “Good boy,” I want to say, but instead I look to Preston and start pouting.

“Try calling her first,” he says obviously annoyed.

“Fine.” I say. I call her name, but alas, she doesn’t come down. Then I remember the song I made up for her. It’s the only thing she’ll come out of hiding for. But I can’t possibly sing it in front of everyone. Not with Preston here, he’ll recognize the tune.

I feel my face get hot as Preston eyes me suspiciously, then cup a hand over my mouth “Little kitty, little kitty, you are so pretty, pretty, little kitty, little kitty.” It’s definitely working. Mrs. Butterworth is climbing down. “Why are you so pretty, pretty?” I continue, this time louder, until Mrs. Butterworth is securely in my arms.

“I know that tune,” Preston says.

“No, you don’t,” I argue and walk away towards our room.

“Um, yeah, I do.”

“You don’t!” I’m full on yelling now.

Preston starts laughing so hard, I promise you he's going to get a hernia, then falls over. "You made up words to your only choir solo ever? That goes to the tune of your first solo."

I want to shoot him. "How do you even know?" I exclaim, stomping my foot.

"Um, I was there, remember?"

I cringe at the thought, of course I remember, I remember everything. The crowd, the applause, the turning down of the school nerd. It was painfully vivid, and I did already apologize to him.

"I don't want you to apologize to me again. Seriously, it's fine. I was a nerd, I get it." He's matching my stride, and suddenly I don't care about getting back to our room. I just want to hug him and tell him I'm sorry for yelling at him, but I don't want to show weakness, so instead I let out a huge sigh.

"You can make it up to me later," he says without stopping. "Trust me, you will, too." He winks and walks off, while I stop and analyze every word.

"Where are you going?" I yell after him.

He looks back and smirks. "Giving you some alone time with your cat. I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

I nod my head and walk to our room. It seems oddly lonely, as if a part of me is missing. Maybe I should marry Preston, and then I wouldn't have to go back to a lonely room ever again.

I put Mrs. Butterworth on the floor, and before I know it, fall asleep on the couch. The warm sun woke me. Well, that and the fact that Preston stood over me like a giant, grinning like an idiot.

"What?" I grumble, angry that my mouth tasted just as gross as I felt after sleeping on the couch.

"We're leaving tomorrow," he says happily.

I glare at him. "Thank you for the obvious. Now leave, I have to get ready." I point at the door, but he doesn't move. "What?" I ask almost afraid to hear the answer.

“I switched rooms for the night.” His tone sounds serious and low, making my brow furrow all the more.

“Why would you do that?” I ask. No wonder I felt lonely all night. I was lonely because nobody was here.

Preston licks his beautiful lips and smiles. “It’s just not smart to be in the same room, that’s all. Now stop analyzing me and get ready. We’re spending our last day in paradise together.”

I realize he brought the dog. I didn’t know what Mrs. Butterworth would do, but knowing her weird attraction to Preston, I could only imagine what would happen with the dog. Wonders never cease, I thought, as she curled up next to him and meowed. I need to find a better guard cat. This is bordering on ridiculous.

“Give me five minutes,” I call out as I run into my bedroom. One look in the mirror tells me it’ll take more than five minutes. “Or twenty,” I yell again before stepping into the shower.

Is it just me or do I hear him chuckling in the living room?

I smile and get in the shower, promising myself that today will be different. No more Angelina, no more pretending, no more reading other people’s texts. I feel great as I mentally decide on which outfit to wear for Preston. Who knew he would grow up to be such a fantastic guy? It’s my fault for doubting the male species. I think women tend to believe men stop maturing at the age of sixteen, which in some cases is painfully true.

I throw on some lip gloss and pull my hair into a tight pony tail. I’m not usually one for shorts, but today seems like a shorts and tank top day. I slide into my jean cut offs, which aren’t too short or too long, and take a glance at the mirror. I’m obviously tanner than when I arrived, which makes my eyes sparkle that much more. Or, I guess it could be love, too. I push the thought out of my mind the second I see my skin begin to turn an ugly red color.

“Ready!” I yell, pushing open my bedroom doors.

Preston is sitting on the couch with the dog, and Mrs. Butterworth in his lap as if he’s Dr. Doolittle. I smile and cross my arms. “You ready?”

He takes in my outfit and scowls.

“What?” I say backing into the room again.

“No, you look great.” He looks down. Is he embarrassed? “It’s just that—” He puts his fingers over his mouth giving the appearance that he is trying to keep from talking. “It’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair?” I ask, totally lost; yet still doubting my outfit, because his look is sending me red flags.

“You look so cute and...well...” He pushes the dog and cat off and takes two long strides toward me.

“Well, what?” Seriously, I’m dying with anticipation.

“I’m going to ruin it.”

“What? Ruin what? What are you talking about?”

He smiles mischievously, then tightens his grip around my waist and pulls me into his arms. He brushes his lips against my mouth, and I feel like attacking him. *Back down, girl*, I tell myself as I struggle to keep my hands firmly placed by my sides.

“We’re going to the sand dunes. You’re going to get dirty,” he whispers into my ear. It tickles my senses, making me want to agree with whatever he says.

I laugh weakly. “Oh, I’m sure I’ll be fine. I mean, how dirty could a person get?”

Chapter Twenty

How dirty indeed, I say to myself and yet again taste sand in my mouth. Sand is in places I didn't know sand could access, yet I am having the time of my life watching my soon-to-be husband (I know, I caved), drive like a madman down sandy dunes.

He looks like a little boy who just discovered a sandbox for the first time. I'll admit this is fun, minus the sand in every crevice of my body. I get back in my dune buggy and drive as fast as I can in his direction. He laughs as he aims his buggy toward mine then veers off at the last second. Note to self, when you're hot and sweaty, don't go to the sand dunes. Preston doesn't even look of American descent anymore.

Luckily, we packed food and water and decided to lay down on a blanket for a short picnic. I yawned loudly before taking a long swig of the cool liquid. "We should head back," I say, only my voice sounds slightly cracked from the dry air.

"Probably," he says smiling, only he doesn't seem present. Something must be bothering him.

"Are you okay?" I ask, trying to play the sweet, understanding girlfriend role. I even lean over and start caressing his hand.

He pulls it back instantly and looks down. "I have to tell you something."

I'm frozen. I can't breathe; I can't move. Something's wrong. My eyes widen as I wait for him to spill it all. Maybe this is a big joke. Maybe he is getting his revenge, maybe—

"—I've always wanted to kiss Princess Leah."

Not what I was expecting. I stare at him and am sorely tempted to punch him in the face, but he's acting serious, so I feel like I need to somehow tell him it's okay to have weird fantasies.

“Um, okay, that’s, well, good for you,” I say, patting his hand and looking away. Everything in me screams *Laugh. Laugh at him*. But I can’t do it, not again. It would feel like the choir concert, only this time it would really hurt him.

“Sometimes...”

Oh no. He’s talking again.

“Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to be Luke Skywalker, to have a light saber that glows, you know?”

Oh my gosh, he has tears in his eyes. He’s getting teary-eyed over Star Wars. I knew this was too good to be true. He’s still a nerd. Only this time, I love him. God, if you’re listening, you’re cruel. This is a mean joke. I may deserve it, but I don’t like it.

He’s now full on sobbing. Or at least it looks like it, because his head is moving and his hands are covering his face.

“There, there,” I whisper as I pat his back with the only ounce of sympathy I can muster. “It’ll be okay.”

“No, it won’t!” He yells through sobs. “I won’t ever get a chance to be Luke Skywalker, and I didn’t even know my father!” He’s full on yelling. “Curse you, George Lucas!” His fist to the sky.

My eyes are so wide right now that I swear people can see the whites of them from the mainland. My mouth is also hanging open in a frightfully unattractive way, and I’m stunned into silence. Just as I was about to say, “You’re crazy,” he turns to me.

“That...” he says with his voice back to normal, “was for turning me down for prom.” He puts his hands behind his head and leans back onto the blanket. “Revenge is sooooo sweet.”

I’m staggered to mere speechlessness. I can’t say anything. Nothing could make this moment of his revenge any sweeter, I already fell for it. I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I thought he was being serious, that he had snapped. No, instead he was playing me for an absolute fool. And to that there’s only one way to respond.

I take out my water bottle and pour it over his head before making a run for it back to my buggy. I feel him hot on my heels and leap towards the buggy before he tackles me into the sand.

“I can’t believe you actually fell for that,” he said, breathless.

I struggle to get free from his grasp, then give up, feeling the sand is, yet again, in places it shouldn’t be. “How was I supposed to know?” I yell. “Get off of me!” I’m laughing, but it’s an angry I’m-going-to-get-you-back laugh.

“I hate that you honestly think I’m that obsessed with Star Wars.” He looks absolutely astonished at my behavior.

I stick my tongue out and grimace as his sandy hands grasp it. “I’m not letting go unless you make me a promise.”

I shake my head no, but whimper as his grip tightens.

“Promise you’ll say yes.”

My eyes are now watering, so what choice do I have? I nod my head yes and bite him when he releases my hand.

Luckily, down where we had parked our rental car, there were showers, so we were able to get at least a pound of sand out of our clothes and other unmentionable places.

I was the first back to the car and squashed down into the seat. Preston soon followed but decided against full clothing. His abs were in full view of my face, making me suddenly feel light headed in the heat.

“Shouldn’t you put on clothes or something?” My shaky voice betrays me yet again as he notices the emotion that runs thick in my vocal strain. I feel defenseless against his physical beauty. It’s not rational, but then again, nobody’s ever tagged me as being a rational person.

He puts on his aviator sunglasses, making my heart leap that much more and smiles. “I want to get a good tan.”

Never mind that we aren’t in a convertible. He just likes making people suffer. *It’s working*, I say to myself as I buckle my seatbelt.

Chapter Twenty-one

The rest of the day was a blur, before I knew it we were flying back to the mainland. We were greeted by a smiling Kristin and Brad. Apparently, the kids were fine and asked them for presents the second they got to the hospital.

“Guess what?” Kristin says practically flying out of the car. I suddenly remember how much I miss her energy when she isn’t around.

“What?” Preston asks trying to act just as excited. Gotta love a guy who plays along even when he knows it’ll be a huge let down.

“I just heard that Brad and Angelina are visiting Boise this week! Isn’t that amazing?” She looks at both of us not understanding the expression on my face at all.

“Oh wow, you don’t say?” I make eye contact with Preston, but he just smiles back as if to say, “*Ha, Ha. Joke’s on you*”.

“Anyway, I just thought it was cool. You guys ready?” Kristin asks, grabbing one of our bags.

We follow her for a few minutes before I turn to Preston and ask, “What’s the plan?”

He winks and smiles, “Oh, just a quiet dinner downtown. Nothing huge.”

I nod my head.

“Oh,” he interjects quickly. “And your Angelina dress for the evening is already picked out. I went for black again. Hope you don’t mind.”

I rolled my eyes and smiled. “Challenge accepted,” I find myself saying as I grab his hand and head for the car.

Epilogue

“Get back here!” Preston yells loudly into my ear.

I’m now deaf, I think cheerfully to myself. He’s trying to catch Ashlyn as she runs around the firehouse for the tenth time. Unfortunately, she has the engagement ring tucked away in a box on her.

Preston thought it would be romantic to propose for real rather than constantly telling me I was going to marry him. Plus, I did threaten him within an inch of his life that if he didn’t do a real proposal, I would find the tape of our high school choir performance where he tried to ask me out for the first time.

Needless to say, this is why I’m waiting patiently at the fire house for Preston to chase around his dog. The same dog I mistook for his wife. Sometimes when I think about the whole fiasco, I contemplate medicine for insanity. I mean what was I thinking? I got all of that from a few text messages.

I shake my head and cross my arms, looking the part of annoyed girlfriend, when actually I wouldn’t want my life any other way.

“I can’t find her,” Preston pants next to me. “And if you say one thing about my cardio being low I’m going to tackle you.”

I snap my mouth shut because that was exactly what I was going to comment on. He’s faster, but I can run for longer amounts of time. Not that he ever lets me remind him of such things.

He turns quickly to look at me and smiles “Did I mess up the proposal?”

I smile back. “We’ll get the ring when she tuckers out.”

He laughs and gets down on one knee “Amanda?”

“Yes, Brad,” I answer seriously.

He laughs and corrects himself “Angelina?” My eyebrow raises in appreciation. “Would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

I wait as long as possible and watch him slowly become paler by the second. I finally pull him up, wrap my arms around him, and whisper yes into his neck.

He picks me up and twirls me Hollywood movie style then kisses me forcefully on the mouth. “Challenge accepted.” He mumbles against my lips.

“What?” I look at him puzzled. “What do you mean by that?”

“You’re a challenge...always challenging me, at least. I appreciate that. So I accept all future challenges from here on out!” He looks delightfully giddy.

I clap my hands together and smile. “Really? All challenges?”

He nods. Oh men, the weaker sex.

“Great!” I say jumping up and down “On your mark—”

“Amanda!” He’s looking at me with his mad eyes.

“Get set!” I plant my feet, knowing he’s going to lose because he’s been chasing the dog around the firehouse for the past hour. I love winning.

“Go!” I take off like a crazy person and fall just as fast. What in the world?

Preston sits on the floor with me and laughs, “I was trying to tell you. Your shoes are untied.”

I look at him and blush slightly before I lean over and kiss him on the mouth. “I love you.”

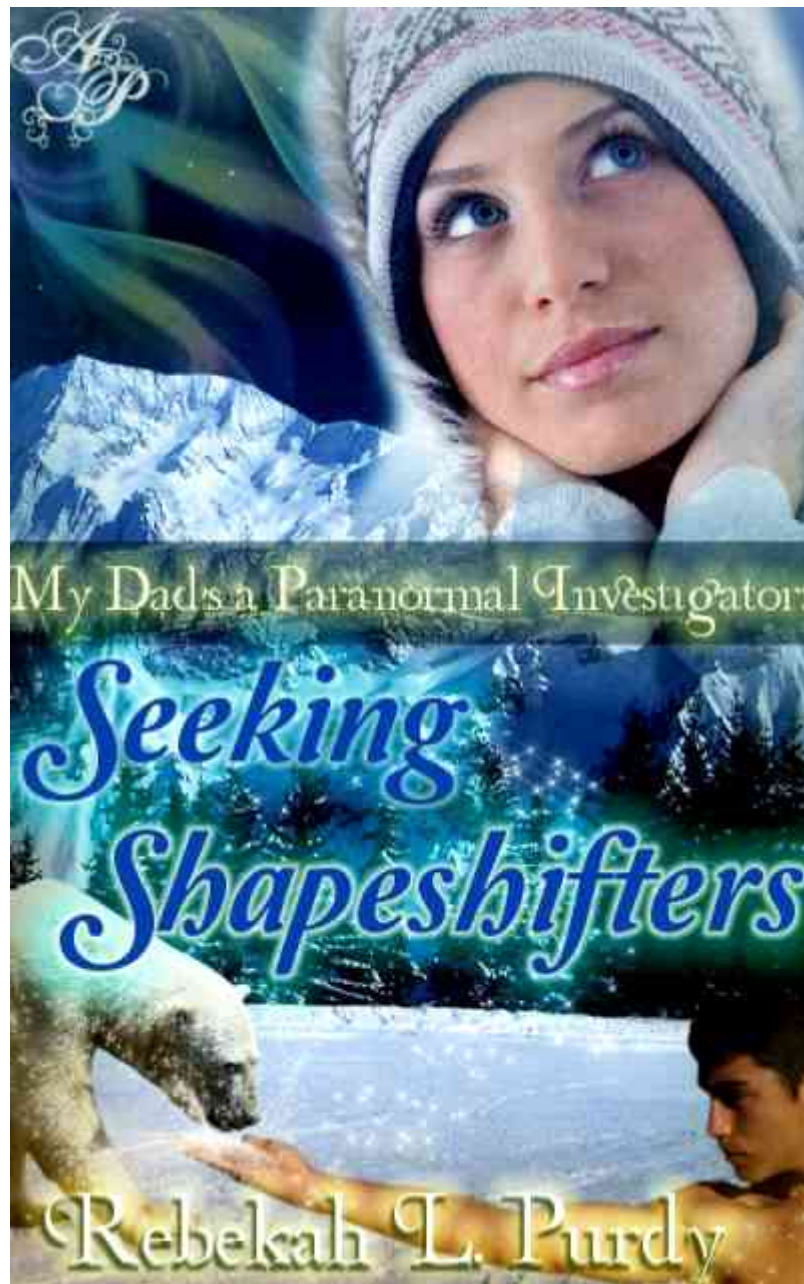
He chuckles. “Like I said before, you’re crazy, but I love you too.”

About the Author

Rachel Van Dyken is a Graduate of Northwest Nazarene University, with a degree in Social Sciences with an emphasis industrial psychology and a minor in Spanish. She is also a Post Graduate of California Coast University receiving a MBA with an emphasis in Human Resource Management. She resides in Nampa, Idaho and counsels children. Starbucks is a daily must, spiders make her scream, and she loves chocolate but is allergic, of course. Nate, her husband makes her laugh so hard she cries and they share their home with a very loud snoring boxer named Sir Winston Churchill.

Check out the excerpt below for another great read from
Astraea Press!

My Dad's a Paranormal Investigator: Seeking Shapeshifters



Sixteen-year-old Ima Berry (pronounced I'm a) leads anything but a normal life. For starters, the ridiculous name her eccentric dad gave her is always the opening for a goodjoke. Not to mention the fact he makes his living as a supernatural investigator, which has them moving around every few months. It's hard to hang out with new friends when she spends all her time trying to prove the existence of Bigfoot, ghosts, fairies and any other number of paranormal creatures. Unfortunately, the cases always end in disaster. That is until now.

On a whim, Ima's father decides to move them to Point Hope, Alaska. Here, he plans to investigate the possibility of shifters amongst the Inuit tribes. Ima isn't thrilled with the move, until she meets an Inuit guy named Carsen. Not only is he hot, but he's also a star basketball player, and he's interested in her. Too bad his best friend, Talon, doesn't like her and takes every opportunity he can to discourage the relationship. Ima has no idea what she's done to make him mad, but there's no denying the strange connection between them.

As things grow more serious with Carsen, Ima uncovers a secret about him and some of the residents of Point Hope. A secret that will force her to choose between her father's already dwindling career and her new found love. And with the knowledge of this secret comes danger...a danger that could cost them their lives.

Excerpt:

“Shh...do you hear that?” Dad said.

I could barely make out his form as I stumbled to a stop. We were in the Modoc National Forest surrounded by thick trees that blocked out most of the light. Even at midday, it was gloomy and creepy. I took a step closer to our cameraman, Matt, and the scent of bug spray assaulted my nose.

The last thing I wanted to do was get lost in the middle of a Bigfoot hunt.

Matt angled his camera toward my dad then panned over to me. All I saw was his dark shaggy hair over the camera, but I knew he was probably grinning like an excited idiot, too. I mean, this was the closest we'd been to seeing something significant all week.

The faint sound of wood banging on wood filtered through the silence, and I reached down to grab the thermal-imaging camera off my belt. As quiet as possible, I swept the area for evidence of the big, hairy sort.

“Dad,” I whispered, hurrying over to the shrubs. I bent down and examined a huge print in the dirt, easily the length of my arm, from wrist to armpit.

“It's a print,” I said, trying to keep my voice low but failing miserably. This was it!

My dad barked out orders to his colleagues while cameramen filmed the clearing. See, my dad is Lou Berry, the host of the show *Berry S.I.* (supernatural investigator). Tonight was the team's last night in the Modoc National Forest, not to mention the season's final episode.

He's a paranormal investigator/crypto-zoologist. Yeah, I know. No one takes him seriously because of his belief in the unexplainable. He's the laughing stock of the scientific

community, and it doesn't help that every one of his investigations gets botched in some way.

I swear he has the worst luck. How else could I explain the things that happened on set? Last season, we were so close to proving the existence of the Dogman, but the camera film and video footage ended up blurred and at one point disappeared all together. Then there were the DNA samples that got lost in the mail—on seven different occasions! And the cement casts we took? They ended up broken. It was like the forces of nature were against Dad proving his theories.

“Ima,” my dad called out. “Prepare the casting so we can get the print.”

Ima. That would be me. It's pronounced 'I'm A'. And yes, my last name *really* is Berry. It gets better; my middle name is Blue. So I officially have the most embarrassing name in the world. Ima Blue Berry.

But it could be worse. My middle name could've been Dingle instead. Thank goodness for small favors, eh?

I pulled out a pair of rubber gloves and dumped quick-set cement powder and water into a plastic bag, mixing them together.

“The casting's ready.” I poured the concoction into the large footprint.

“Make sure there isn't any debris to interfere with the cast,” Dad said over my shoulder.

I rolled my eyes. “I've been doing this since I was like two.”

I grew up on set with him, traveling to exotic locations for investigations. At sixteen, I'd already visited about half the countries around the world. It sounded glamorous, but I moved around a lot, which didn't give me a chance to make many friends. My school transcripts spent more time at any school than I did. Most girls my age worried about dances, boys, and clothes. Not me. I worried about tripping down mountains or being killed by mythical creatures.

The only guys around me were old enough to be my dad or even grandpa. Pretty much the entire crew of Berry S.I. was old. Well, other than Matt and Brady.

Needless to say, the idea of dating seemed impossible. And as far as dances went, there wasn't anyone around to take me to them. Well, there was that, and the small fact I never stayed at a school long enough for anyone to even ask.

Dad joined his fellow investigators to discuss the next move while I waited for the casting to dry.

"Smile," Matt said. He focused his digital camera on me then zoomed in to get a look at the print at my feet.

"Only if you smack the mosquito on the back of my neck," I said with a grin.

Slap! I watched Matt wipe his hand on his shorts, his bicep flexing beneath the tight t-shirt. "Now give me a big smile. Show America how much you love being in the woods."

I snorted. "So, it's our last night here. Do you think we'll find Bigfoot?"

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